

River Runners: navy warriors train for Iraq battle on Cape Fear

Walter Taylor, Staff Writer

Wearing traditional Arab garb, the fisherman waves at the four boatloads of American sailors. All four vessels pack an assortment of light and heavy machine guns. Every crewman carries an M-16 or M-4 assault rifle, some with grenade launchers attached.

At this sandbar in the bend of the narrow river, two of the boats beach to quickly unload a contingent of armed sailors, with an interpreter along to question the smiling fisherman. In the river, the other two boats hold their positions, as gunners scan the shores for trouble. Acting on reliable intelligence, the sailors sweep the area for a reported weapons cache, until one of them hits a tripwire to set off an explosion.

That scenario actually occurred on the Euphrates River in Iraq. On Wednesday, instructors simulated that incident and used it to teach a new class of brown-water sailors how to wage the War On Terror on hostile rivers. The U.S. Marines used to handle the small boat program but they are handing it off to the Navy. For now Navy and Marine instructors share duties but the sailors will take over completely for the October class. According to lead instructor Josh Iversen, trainees with Riverine Squadron Two of the U.S. Navy drive to Elizabethtown from their base in Little Creek, Va., four times a year. They train in the Cape Fear River for a very simple reason.

“The Cape Fear is more like the Euphrates River in Iraq than any other place in the country,” he said. “We really need this training area to get our sailors ready for war. Just like the Euphrates, the Cape Fear is narrow and uncharted without navigation aids. There are a lot of obstacles in the water such as floating logs.”

He knows about the Euphrates. As a Marine he served two seven month tours on that embattled river, running small gunboats up and down the Euphrates on a variety of dangerous missions. He survived numerous firefights. Once, insurgents struck his boat with a rocket propelled grenade that killed a fellow Marine and wounded four others. During his career he also patrolled wild rivers in South America to support the Drug Enforcement Agency and troubled waters in the

Balkans. Now a civilian employee, Iversen shares his hard-won knowledge teaching sailors to be small-boat gunfighters.

Their 40-foot patrol boats are built for difficult water. The 800-horsepower diesel engines can push the boats to more than 40 knots in 9 inches of water when on plane. They use jet drives instead of props, enabling them to run in shallow water and turn quicker. Skippers run the boats in the dark with night-vision goggles.

“These boats are like big jet skis,” he said. “To accomplish missions and survive we depend on speed, maneuverability and overwhelming firepower.”

Though they resemble large inflatables, builders crafted these assault boats with metal hulls and gunwales of sturdy foam. Unlike inflatables, these boats can take rounds and stay afloat. For additional crew protection, the sailors add armor plates along the gunwales.

Thankfully, no real insurgents take pot shots at the sailors from the banks of the Cape Fear or set off improvised explosive devices. Other members of the squadron simulate opposition forces. During their seven days on the Cape Fear, the trainees run continuous missions and fight simulated gun battles with blank rounds. In so doing, they learn to work as a unit to accomplish any mission.

Gunners Mate Jim Wheeler said he learned to work with the team. He expects a tour in Iraq after he completes training.

“I am ready to go,” he said. “Other Americans went before me and I want to serve.”

Wheeler will serve a heaping helping of death and mayhem to anyone who shoots in his direction. At the bow of the boat he mans a machine gun with rotating barrels, similar to a Civil War Gatling gun. On this modern version, a fast electric motor replaces the slow crank handle on the old Gatlings.

“It will shoot 50 rounds per second,” he said.

River Runners: navy warriors train for Iraq battle on Cape Fear (pg 2 of 2)

Walter Taylor, Staff Writer

Wheeler learned that this job requires more work than just shooting. Before every mission, boat crews have to service and install all of their gear, everything from radios to rifles. On shore they sleep in air conditioned tents with folding cots and all the field rations they can eat. Minus the desert heat and incoming gun fire, the small tent village beside Lock and Dam 2 offers all the comforts of a tour in Iraq. They call it Forward Operating Base Parrello, to honor a fallen Marine, Lance Cpl. Brian Parrello who died bravely in Iraq.

On this recent exercise a Marine captain commanded the temporary training base. Captain Art Decotiis said it is his mission to instill an “operational mindset” in the trainees.

“These sailors must learn to make quick and informed decisions,” he said. “We put trainees in strenuous situations to give them opportunities to make tactical decisions under stress.”

Instructors ride along with students to assess their progress. Sergeant Jake Lucko rode on Dash-4, the last vessel in the four boat formation. As the boat wound through tight river bends, gunners watched the shoreline warily. In most places, the river was less than 200 feet wide, easy range for small arms. Lucko knows that. The Marine served a tour on Euphrates River patrol boats.

“There were some places where the river was so narrow they could hit us with rocks,” he said.

Here in the states, Iraq is rocking the airwaves as a war-weary public prepares for another presidential election cycle. Seeking votes, some politicians want to pull out and leave the country to fall, just like Vietnam.

Iversen, who twice fought in Iraq, offers a different take on the war than stateside pundits. Television cameras do not capture all of the important action, he said.

“Back in the states a lot of people do not get to see the women and children who come up and thank us for what we are doing,” he said. “Once, we saw some kids kicking an old can around. We gave them a real soccer

ball and they thought it was the best thing they ever saw. We also helped fishermen fix their boats so they could feed their families. People in America do not realize how good they have it here.”

Of course, Iraq has unfriendly people who are willing to hurt civilians and sacrifice their own lives to kill Americans. He said Iraq attracts terrorists from all over the world. The war lures terrorists into the open so friendly forces can kill or capture them.

“It is better to fight terrorists in Iraq than over here,” he said. “We get rid of many foreign fighters and terrorists over there every day.”

As part of that terror fighting effort he brings the trainees to the Cape Fear for this seven-day exercise to finish seven months of training. Graduates will deploy to Iraq and relieve boat crews already on duty there. Besides the boat crews, Iversen said all of America’s military is up for any challenge.

“I pity the poor S.O.B. who starts the next war with us,” he said. “Our military is more prepared today than ever before.”

Iversen said he will continue to prepare sailors for battle, but he needs help from Bladen County residents who want to assist in the training effort. He badly needs landowners along the river to give permission for sailors to train on their property. Another concern is keeping the lock and dam facility open both for military training and public recreation. There could be Navy funding for improvements on the Army Corps of Engineers property.

For more information about helping the sailors train contact Josh Iversen at 757-353-5484, 757-462-3072 or e-mail him at joshua.j-ivseseb@navy.mil.

Also, do not forget to wave if you are fishing on the river when an armada of Navy gun boats passes by. Remember, they are the good guys.