

Anchor's aweigh on the Cape Fear-Navy trains in Bladen for Iraq mission

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ELIZABETHTOWN—While returning to the Elizabethtown boat ramp on Wednesday night, the Fletcher family saw a bizarre sight on the Cape Fear River. Near the bridge, three men in traditional Arab clothing drifted and fished from an inflatable boat. On shore sat four men, similarly dressed, along with a uniformed Marine who carried a portable radio. At first, the fishing family laughed at the sight, but quickly understood this was serious business as Riverine Squadron Two of the U.S. Navy trained for deployment to the Euphrates River in Iraq. Robert Fletcher, his wife Elizabeth, and youngest son Ethan, enjoy the freedom of being able to fish on their favorite river thanks to soldiers like these. Robert said his family is happy to share their fishing hole with the Navy. "I read in the Bladen Journal that the Navy was training on the Cape Fear River," he said. "I do not mind because this benefits all of us and I am proud to have them here." During that training, sailors and their instructors roar up and down the river in gunboats. Exercises often involve explosions and gunfire with blank ammunition. The sailors are careful not to swamp any fishing boats with their wakes. They use radar to scan the river ahead for other vessels and slow down to no-wake speed before reaching them. After six weeks of boat and weapons training at Camp Lejeune, the sailors set up a forward operating base beside Lock and Dam 2 for their final exercise. "They are welcome here anytime," Elizabeth Fletcher said. On the river, the instructors who posed as Iraqi fishermen bided their time until they heard a low rumble of diesel engines throbbing down the river in the darkness. On board four patrol boats, running without lights on a balmy summer evening, sailors wearing night vision goggles scanned the shoreline for any sign of trouble as the flotilla approached Tory Hole Park. As the instructors watched from shore just a few hundred feet away, the trainees practiced during their first exercise on the river. The Riverines, as they call themselves, return to the Cape Fear four times a year because this river closely matches the navigational conditions they will encounter on the Euphrates River. When Operation Iraqi Freedom began in 2003, the Marines patrolled the river in small boats to keep insurgents from moving arms and explosives over these watery highways in the desert. Now, the Navy is taking over the mission; however, during the transition period, active duty Marines and veterans who work as civilian contractors are training new recruits who volunteer. During the Vietnam War, the Navy ran a small boat program to interdict Vietcong units along the Mekong River and other waterways. Now with the Global War on Terror, the Navy, best known for aircraft carriers and destroyers, is focusing more on smaller vessels with teams of elite sailors. "Friendly Elizabethtown" A Marine, Capt. Arthur Decotus, commands the military camp that sprung up overnight on the outskirts of Elizabethtown. Dressed in an Arab robe, he watched the trainees work on the river. This was their first mission, so everything, of course, did not go as planned. One sailor had an anxiety attack on the boat. Decotus described the job the sailors would do in Iraq and how the Americans have the fastest, best-armed boats on the rivers in that troubled land. "Most of the boats we saw were small, maybe wooden or aluminum vessels up to 18 feet long," he said. "People catch fish there by shocking them with electric generators." Decotus said the Euphrates, much like the Cape Fear, is winding and narrow in places with few navigation aids. Again, like the Cape Fear, the Euphrates has a system of locks and dams to control the water levels. That is why the Riverines, based in Little Creek, Va., haul

their boats and gear to Elizabethtown four times each year. For Decotus, this is his second trip to Elizabethtown and he appreciates the welcoming spirit here. "Local people are very hospitable and friendly," he said. "They are outgoing and very generous to us." For his part, Decotus instructs the men to always watch out for other boaters on the river. "If a bunch of 40-foot boats were rocking my little fishing boat around in the wakes I would get a little annoyed after awhile," he said. "That has not been the case so far. Every time we go by people smile, wave, and give us the thumbs up. That means so much to the students and instructors. It says a lot for the people around here. They are very supportive of the military and we appreciate that." Decotus said he wished more Americans supported the military the way folks do in Bladen County. Americans are not getting the full story on the Global War on Terror from television news reports, he said. War is an unnatural disaster that involves more than firefights and bombings. "I have been back for more than a year and I still get frustrated when I watch the news," he said. "We are not in Iraq just to get shot at but we actually have a mission and are doing things to help people. On the news you never hear about all the times we open schools or help people build better neighborhoods." Many Americans may not understand the war, but Daniel Acosta, 21, from Clarksville, Tenn., knows why he wants to get involved. During a training break the young seaman shared MREs with friends under a shade tree. Acosta's step-father, Julio Sevilla, who raised him, is a retired Army paratrooper who instilled patriotic values in his adopted son, plus a sense of humor. "I decided to join the Navy so I would not have to wear BDUs and stomp around in the sand like my dad ... now look at me," he said. Like the other sailors, Acosta volunteered for one of the most dangerous jobs in the Navy. All graduates of the Riverine school can count on deployment to Iraq. "One day, when I have grandchildren, I want to be able to tell them that I did my part," he said. "You cannot complain unless you do your part." His friend, Enver Sibliamartinez, said he was impatient to do his part. "I want to leave right now, see what it is like and get it over with," he said. "We will win this war on terror because we are the best." Not so fast, said Instructor Jason Duehring. First, the young sailors must learn the skills they need to survive and accomplish difficult missions in a hostile land. Every mission begins with careful planning and meticulous attention to every detail, from the locations of landing zones to extra batteries for night vision goggles. There is no room for sloppiness on the battlefield. "When they first start it takes them five or six hours to get ready for an operation," he said. "They need less time for planning as they get more proficient. This is the last week of a seven-week course. They graduate from us and go on to do great things." This week, the training will get a little tougher, according to one Marine instructor, Sgt. Jake Lucko. "We start out easy at the beginning," he said. "Later in the week it will get more exciting with a lot of gunfights. This time we will have air support from A-10 Warthogs and Blackhawk helicopters." Boaters and anglers can expect plenty of excitement along the Cape Fear River this weekend.

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