

Royal In Fallujah

by CSgt M R Tomlinson RM

CSgt Tomlinson is currently on a two year LCI exchange programme with the USMC at Camp Lejeune North Carolina, USA. His billet serves as an Amphibious/Riverine Instructor to Small Craft Coy (SCCo). He recently had the unique opportunity to deploy to Iraq with SCCo. Whilst deployed he was able to assist with Combat Operations in Fallujah and Iskandariyah operating as both a Riverine advisor and as GCE, Ground Combat Element Leader.

The following account is a very brief insight into my tour to Iraq with SCCo. Not only was it an honour to be asked to deploy with SCCo, it would also soon prove to be a greater honour as I soon found myself fighting alongside our brave brethren, the USMC.

SCCo recently deployed with a new type of Riverine craft in order to mount Riverine patrols throughout the waterways of Iraq, namely the Euphrates and the Tigris. The Small Unit Riverine Craft, SURC it is capable of carrying 18 troops in light order at a top speed of 40 knots; three gun mounts provide multi purpose firing platforms for weapon systems such as GPMGs, Mk 19 Grenade Launchers, .50 Cal HMG and the Gau 17, a gattling gun that throws out 3000 rounds per minute. All the above weapon systems were used on many occasions, providing both invaluable fire support to the GCE and as a direct weapon against the attackers.

Iskandariyah would be my first introduction to Riverine operations in Iraq. 4th Platoon had already been patrolling the waterways of the Euphrates and had already had several engagements with the insurgents before myself along with a section of 3rd Platoon and Capt Wittnam (a fantastic CO) joined them. We would spend the next ten days patrolling on the Euphrates searching for insurgent activity on the water as well as conducting snap VCPs, cordon and knocks/searching houses for insurgents/weapons caches. Although we were subject to regular IDF mortar and rocket attacks, contact with the enemy was minimal, this was probably attributed to the amount of firepower these boats yield. The insurgents had only days before been on the receiving end of 6000 rounds of returning fire when they attempted to ambush the boats on a patrol. However, despite little activity, time on the ground proved invaluable to us, we would get our share of enemy contact sooner than we realised at Fallujah where we would spend two weeks operating from a FOB site not 400 metres from the Joan district during the November offensive.

Following lessons learned during the April offensive of Fallujah when the insurgents used the Euphrates as an MSR, SCCo were tasked to establish two blocking positions around the Southern boundary of the city, our mission was to deny freedom of movement into and out of the area by the insurgents, to prevent resupply of weapons and ammunition



SURC in transit on Lake Habaniyah, note the Gau 17



Day 10 of the battle, SCCo are still engaged daily by the insurgents

via the Euphrates, serve as a Medevac platform, conduct land side ground ops, and provide fire support to any other forces within our TAOR. We deployed on the night of 8 November 2004 from our launch site and commenced our transit down river towards Fallujah. Five SURCs and one RAC were used during this op, 53 ranks of SCCo were spread between the craft as boat captains/coxns/gunners/mechanics/my GCE of ten marines and the medic. (As with all other ops the GCE would always be seated in the first two craft; their task is mainly as a dismount section utilised on the ground for infantry tasking.) Within 20 minutes of launch we were at our Limit of Exploitation (LOE), the intelligence we had received that the insurgents were actively patrolling the river banks proved correct; no sooner had we arrived, the enemy engaged the front two boats from a range of 50 metres, a mix of HMG/small arms fire ripped overhead and between us, some rounds striking the gunners Kevlar plates on the GPMG mounts, others passing directly through the open consuls of the craft. Immediately we returned an immense weight of fire directly into the building and riverbank positions where the enemy had foolishly tried to take us on. The rear SURCs manoeuvred forwards and increased our return of fire, as the enemy were gradually silenced, the craft turned 180 degrees to enable the rear .50 cal and Mk 19 weapons to engage and silence the attackers. Upon breaking contact the craft moved upstream 300 metres and established the FOB site, luckily we had survived what would prove to be one of several ambushes. The Fallujah offensive lasted approximately 19 days, SCCo spent 15 days operating from the FOB site, we took on multiple tasks and certainly proved an asset to the land force commanders. Every day we were subject to IF mortar/rocket attacks, sniper/heavy, medium and small arms fire.

Seven days into the Op on 15 November at 1500hrs we were tasked to search a compound for a suspected weapons cache in our TAOR. We decided to set a diversionary manoeuvre and patrol up river past our intended target, with the intention to insert the GCE further up stream. All was going to plan however a well prepared ambush lay in wait, the insurgents had actually dug in several fighting positions along the river bank with good cover and concealment. Just as the two front lead boats (with myself and GCE embarked) started to about turn we came under sustained RPG, RPK and small arms fire. Rather than attempt to drive through the ambush the boats turned directly into the ambush. With GPMGs, MK 19s .50 CAL and even the Gau 17 returning fire we closed their position. No sooner had the two SURCs rammed into the river bank, I disembarked with my two fire teams and the ever-



I to r: CSgt Tomlinson, Interpreter Greg and Capt Wittnam, CO SCCo



One of the many arms caches found by SCCo

enthusiastic Capt W and commenced assaulting the fire positions. For the next 48 minutes we were in contact, fire and maneuvering across irrigation fields closing with and destroying the enemy, following a personal experience at ranges as close as six feet. During this time the SURCs and crew were also taking RPG and small arms fire, however they still managed to provide us invaluable fire support. It seems that a local village not 400 metres from our position was accommodating a large number of insurgents that had obviously fled from Fallujah. As it soon became apparent that we were almost surrounded, we started taking fire from left and right and to the rear; we were now greatly outnumbered with ammunition at a low state and an increasing number of insurgents ingressing our position we decided to call in the SURCs and conduct a hot extraction. We finally broke contact after 1 hour 8 minutes. The only casualty we sustained was LCpl Williams who took a round to the arm.

The Fallujah offensive continued for another eight days, during this time we continued to engage pockets of insurgents both from the boats and whilst on the ground. We were also subjected to several IF attacks involving extremely close air burst mortar fire, sometimes falling 10 metres from the boats. Finally we were stood down, the majority of insurgents had either been killed, captured or fled. For the USMC, Fallujah had proven to be the biggest urban battle since the TET offensive of Vietnam. For SCCo it had proven to be the first major Riverine warfare involving US forces, again since the Vietnam war.

Upon our return to Camp TQ we were immediately stood up to convoy back down to Camp Iskandariyah. Our success in Fallujah was common word and suddenly SCCo were the asset all commanders wanted. We were to assist with several clearance ops with the resident 24th MEU, and the Black Watch. From there on SCCo would achieve every mission with outstanding success. My nine weeks with the Company had come to an end, I returned to Camp Lejeune, and am now assisting the other two platoons of SCCo with their preparations to deploy. Capt Wittnam keeps me informed of their progress in Iraq, SCCo have just completed the Ramadi phase of the stabilisation process, again this Op proved to be

aggressive and hostile. However, as always the Boats and crew withstood the pace and finished the job. Their success is attributable to the dedication, professionalism and motivation of the Marines.

During my memorable time with SCCo in Iraq I have been able to advise/assist the Company in many ways, I have been able to see the sharpest edge of Riverine warfare (something very unique for an LC1) I have also seen first hand just how valuable a gun boat/fire support platform is, and something I now passionately feel our RM Corps needs.

Should any readers wish to contact me, with queries or requiring photos, I can be e-mailed at mattnshar@charter.net.

Colonels Commandant Lunch

The Colonels Commandant Lunch with HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, Captain General Royal Marines, took place at Admiralty House, Whitehall on 16 November 2004.



Seated in the front row from left to right: CGRM, Mrs Dutton, HRH, Mrs Fulton, Rep Col Comdt

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