

Navy's riverine patrol: Peacekeeping in a war zone

By Corinne Reilly - *The Virginian-Pilot*

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The Navy riverines of Squadron 1 can tell a lot by the looks on the faces of the children standing along the shoreline.

If they're smiling, the village will probably be friendly. Scowls generally mean the opposite.

So, when the riverines pulled their boats up to land at the first stop on their patrol Thursday morning, they were unsure what to make of all the blank stares.

In the end, though, the children made their feelings clear: They began throwing rocks as the Americans motored away.

Squadron 1, which is headquartered in Virginia Beach at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek, is halfway through a six-month tour. Traditionally, the mission of riverines is to secure inland waterways such as rivers and swamps. They are known for their integral role in the Vietnam War, and they come well-equipped for combat.

During this deployment, however, the squadron's 200 sailors have not engaged in any firefights. Instead, like most U.S. forces in Iraq these days, their mission focuses on peacekeeping.

As thousands of American troops prepare to leave Iraq by Sept. 1, the riverines are staying on. They're training local security forces, giving sports equipment to kids, checking in on villagers and conducting what the Navy calls "presence patrols" to maintain the relative calm.

But that doesn't mean their job is easy. Besides rock-throwing children, they face grueling heat, boat engines clogged with trash, long stretches of boredom and occasional intense moments. Their guard must always remain up: Just because most of their patrols have been quiet doesn't mean they'll stay that way.

For the two dozen riverines on Thursday's mission, the day began before sunrise. By 4:30 a.m., they were dressed and preparing their boats for a five-hour trip down the Qarmat Ali, a southern waterway near the Iranian border.

None of them likes getting up early, but it's better than working in the afternoon heat, when temperatures can top 120 degrees.

By 6 a.m., they were loading up. An hour later, they pulled away from their riverside camp in two crowded 33-foot assault boats, both painted camouflage green and well-armed with rifles and mounted machine guns.

The day's task was three-fold: The riverines planned to pass out soccer balls to children along the waterway, patrol a stretch they hadn't visited recently and transport a small team of civilian researchers to villages that are unreachable by road.

"We're still doing a lot of hearts-and-minds stuff - trying to win over the people," said Hugo Zepeda, a first-class petty officer from Virginia Beach who led the mission. "Even though the U.S. is on the way out, we still want the Iraqis to see that we're here to help and that they can trust us."

A few minutes into the patrol, the riverines hit their first obstruction: a pontoon bridge so low that they had to quickly take down the boats' antennas and crouch down as they passed underneath. Inches above their heads, Iraqis sped across the rickety metal in pickup s and taxi cabs.

At their first stop, a bustling neighborhood where they planned to pass out a few soccer balls and off-load the researchers, the patrol was met by blank-faced children. More than a dozen riverines stepped ashore to provide security for the researchers, who came to interview locals about violence in the area and the availability of government services.

They stayed for about 30 minutes. As they loaded back onto the boats, the children began throwing rocks. "You're welcome for the soccer balls," someone muttered.

Then the ground team recounted what the others on the boats had missed: As the researchers were wrapping up their interviews, a car carrying four Iraqis stopped nearby. All four people got out and quickly disappeared. Something about it didn't feel right to the riverines, and there have been car bombings in the area lately.

So they took some photographs and wrote down the car's license plate number - information to be passed up their chain of command.

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"I'm glad we're outta there," one gunner said. "I definitely don't feel like getting blown up today."

Back on the water, they moved toward a stretch of rural villages. They passed groves of date palms, dilapidated shacks made of cinder blocks and mud, fishermen casting giant nets, donkeys pulling carts and herds of water buffalo cooling themselves in the river.

Then one of the boat's engines overheated. A first-class petty officer named Jason Baldwin lifted panels in the floor of the vessel to assess the problem. He said he suspected trash and silt from the river were blocking the intakes. He worked quickly. Within a few minutes, the boats were moving again.

Shortly after 8 a.m., the patrol made its second stop to pass out more soccer balls and conduct more interviews. This time, the kids were smiling, and everything on land went smoothly.

As the ground team re-boarded, the others handed over cold water from a cooler. When someone declined a bottle, he got one anyway. "Dude, drink it," he was told.

Dehydration and heat exhaustion are huge threats. "You have to drink constantly when you're sweating like this," Zepeda said. "We've had some guys learn that the hard way."

The riverines wear roughly 50 pounds of armor and gear when they patrol, and they spent almost all of Thursday's mission in direct sunlight. The first few hours weren't so bad, but by 10 a.m., it was 110 degrees.

"The heat is by far the hardest part," said Seaman Gilbert Scott, who lives in Virginia Beach. "You never get used to it."

When they're able to, the riverines travel as fast as 40 knots. They prefer higher speeds - the wind cools them off. But they frequently must slow down for bridges, low-slung power lines, fishermen and water buffalo.

"We make such a big wave when we're going fast that we can knock over a small boat if it's too close," Zepeda said. "And we definitely don't want to do that. Stuff like that - it kind of undoes all the hearts-and-minds missions."

At the patrol's third and final stop, as the researchers asked more questions, the riverines who weren't providing secu-

rity stayed in the boats. The driver of one noticed a small Iraqi boy approaching in a dinghy. He motioned for the boy to stay back. "You're cute, kid," he said. "But that doesn't mean I trust you."

A little while later, the riverines spotted camels in the distance.

"I've done three deployments here, and that's the first time I've seen a camel," said Petty Officer 3rd Class Josh Aldus, who also lives in Virginia Beach. "This is big."

A lot of things are setting this tour apart from his first two.

"There's just not much going on now," he explained. "I actually prefer it like the first deployment - like a real combat deployment. When it's slower like this, you think about home more, and all the little things annoy you more."

"I'd say this time has been the hardest."

After another bout of engine trouble, the riverines moved on to the stretch of river they hadn't visited in a while. They waved at people on shore. Out of soccer balls, they tossed Gatorade and bottled water.

Around noon, the riverines pulled their boats in for the day. One guy carried a cooler off his vessel, then opened it up and dunked his head in the icy water. A few others lit cigarettes. Most took off their heavy armor and gear.

They all headed for shade.

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Navy's riverine patrol: Peacekeeping in a war zone (cont.)



Seaman Ryan Tucker, 20, of Virginia Beach, prepares for a patrol with Navy Riverine Squadron 1 on Thursday, Aug. 12, 2010, in Iraq. Sailors are up around 5 a.m. to for a patrol that starts at 7 a.m. and usually lasts around five hours. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Seaman Alex Smalley, 21, of Virginia Beach, loads water on the boats before their patrol Thursday, Aug. 12, 2010, in Iraq. The patrol can be grueling in the heat and cases of water are necessary to keep the sailors hydrated. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Petty Officer 1st Class Jeremy Schwanz, left, 30, of Chesapeake, and the boat's driver, Petty Officer 2nd Class Russell Estes, 27, of Virginia Beach, signal to an accompanying assault boat after resolving engine problems during patrol Thursday, Aug. 12, 2010, with the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1 in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Locals gather to watch one of the riverine assault boats from the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1 on patrol Thursday, Aug. 12, 2010, in Iraq. The squadron is based in Virginia Beach. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)
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Seaman Greg Borger, 22, of Virginia Beach, keeps watch while Iraqis check out the patrolling sailors from Riverine Squadron 1. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Petty Officer 1st Class Jason Baldwin, 30, left, and Petty Officer 2nd Class Francisco Trujillo, 24, keep a watchful eye out while on patrol in Iraq with the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)
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Petty Officer 1st Class Michael Lamb of Chesapeake stands guard while children clamor to get a soccer ball that the sailors handed out while on patrol with Riverine Squadron 1 in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)
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A riverine assault boat from the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1, based in Virginia Beach, squeezes under a bridge while on patrol in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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A riverine assault boat goes on patrol Thursday, Aug. 12, 2010, in Iraq. Usually around 10 sailors are stationed on the boat, which is part of the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1, based in Virginia Beach. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Jason Baldwin, 30, a first-class petty officer from Virginia Beach, stands guard with a .50-caliber gun at the rear of the boat while on patrol Thursday, Aug. 12, 2010, in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)
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Petty Officer 3rd Class Rob Lotton, 23, of Virginia Beach, walks down to the river before the start of a patrol with the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1 in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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The Navy's Riverine Squadron 1, which is headquartered in Virginia Beach, is halfway through a six-month tour in Iraq as of August 2010. Here, sailors gather intelligence during a stop while on patrol. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Petty Officer 3rd Class Josh Aldus, 23, of Virginia Beach, makes his way back to the boat while on patrol with the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1 in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Petty Officer 2nd Class Francisco Trujillo, 24, reaches back onto the boat while others clear out some of the crowd that had gathered Thursday, Aug. 12, 2010, during a patrol by the Navy's Riverine Squadron 1 in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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Chief Petty Officer Scott Buckingham, 39, of Newport News, takes a break and pets some of the dogs that gathered near Riverine Squadron 1's boats at the Basra Operations Center in Iraq. (Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot)

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