

Euphrates

Riverine Warfare on the Euphrates River

By Bill Roggio (*ThreatsWatch LLC, December 2005*)

HADITHA DAM, IRAQ: The company of Marines known as the Dam Security Unit are a unique bunch. The DSU is a one of a kind unit in the Marine Corps. They are primarily made of reservists, almost 90% of them. And they come from units across the country; Texas, Florida, Virginia, Indiana and Mississippi. Naturally there were some snags in the beginning while integrating the disparate units, but you wouldn't know it by watching them operate.

Their primary mission is to provide for security on the Haditha Dam. To achieve this, they conduct patrols and provide a quick reaction force on the river and lake. But the DSU is looking to expand its mission to support operations up and down the river.

Their boats are called Small Marine Riverine Craft, are 40 feet long by 10 feet wide, and are powered by twin souped-up 880 horsepower racing engines. The SMRC can easily exceed 40 knots, and is both quick and highly maneuverable. Because it is jet driven and not propeller driven, the SMRC can go into waters as shallow as 9 inches. It holds a crew of five, and can carry up to thirteen Marines for an assault.

The boat packs some serious firepower to go along with its speed. It mounts two M240G machine guns forward, and either a 50 caliber machine gun at the rear, or a or a Mark 19 grenade launcher. The boat is also equipped to mount an electric powered Gatling gun.

The DSU company is commanded by Major Joe Cleary. I took a ride on the "Beefirm", whose crew is Sergeant Kevin Firmin, the boat captain; Corporal Brandon Beebe, the cockswain; "Doc" Thomas Stein, the navy corpsman; Corporal Oleg Bakalashv, the .50 cal gunner; and Lance Corporals Joseph Finchum and Bryan Kay, the M204G gunners.

Sgt. Firmin speaks highly of his crew, "I have the three best gunners in the company. Cpl. Bakalashv is a sniper on the .50, and Kay and Finchum spray and pray. Cpl. Beebe can put the boat in any space" of the size of the boat.

The sunrise patrol was on Lake Haditha, and consisted of four boats. The shoreline of the lake is largely barren of vegetation, making identifying potential threats more easily than on the river downstream of the dam. The morning patrol covered half the lake in in a little more than one hour. One fishing boat was searched and two Marines from another boat dismounted to the shore to search a suspicious tent. Sgt. Firmin unwisely allowed me to take the boat for a spin at the end of the patrol, and I can attest to the boat's speed, power and quickness. We returned in one piece.

After completing the morning cruise, the boats were drawn up from the lake and loaded for transport for a three boat patrol downriver from the dam. The riverine environment downriver is markedly



The Euphrates Riverine Environment.

different than the lake. The banks are thick with reeds and palm groves, and the landscape was dotted with ancient aqueducts.

The area is ripe for ambushes by insurgents from the shore, and the DSU has taken fire from the banks in the past. Sgt. Firmin stated "the unit out here in the last rotation was in 38 firefights in 6 months." Recent patrolling has been lighter, but they have been in several firefights.

Since the bridges have been taken out along the Euphrates during operations over the summer, boat traffic across the river has dramatically increased. The river is shallow enough it can be walked across in many places. A boat ride across the river can take less than 2 minutes, making patrolling the rivers vital for keeping insurgents from using this mode of transportation.

The afternoon patrol lasted for about one hour, with two trips up and down the river to a point just north of Haditha. It was another quiet patrol.

There is talk of disbanding the company in the near future. This would be a great mistake, as the riverine environment demands a presence on the river. Iraq is the Land of the two Rivers, and the River War is fought on the rivers as well as its banks.



Small Marine Riverine Craft.



The Crew of the Beefirm.