

Sailors prepare Iraqis for riverine combat

By Andrew Scutro
Staff writer

ON THE PEARL RIVER, Miss. - Abu Taleb is 30. He's been an Iraqi police officer for 11 years, a veteran of the Saddam Hussein era. Abu Taleb is not his real name. He's using it to protect his identity, as Iraqi police officers and those seen as collaborating with Americans are often targeted for death by insurgents. But today, Abu Taleb stands on the shore of the Pearl River, near New Orleans. He and 15 of his comrades have traveled more than 7,000 miles - for many the first time in an airplane - to Stennis Space Center for riverine combat training courtesy of Navy special warfare instructors.

When they return to their 250-man unit based on the Tigris River in and around Baghdad, they will form a cadre designed to train others on such tasks as boarding suspicious vessels and evading ambushes from riverbanks. "I cannot wait to go back and put this training on the field," he said through an interpreter. "We will take this training and give it to our friends. We need it." Worldwide reach Some say the Navy is a bit player in the war on terrorism. Cmdr. Lance Bach, a SEAL and the commanding officer of the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School, would disagree NavSCIATTS exists to train foreign militaries how to operate and maintain small craft in combat operations. Signs inside the school building are written in English, Spanish and Arabic, attesting to the worldwide reach of their skills and expertise.

The compound at Stennis sits next to headquarters for Special Boat Team 22, the special warfare unit that concentrates on riverine combat. The Pearl River bayou country is ideally suited for such training. Bach said the Iraqi unit has six boats in country but had inadequate training programs to support them. A civilian police assistance training team arranged for the Iraqis to travel to Stennis.

Because of the reality on the ground there, the Iraqis got a customized course that emphasized escaping ambushes and boarding suspect vessels. An assessment team from the Navy school went to Iraq so the instructors could better develop the course. Bach said the Iraqis need to learn some urgent lessons and tactics, such as how to evade incoming fire - and return it.

"You have to understand. These guys hadn't driven a boat before they came here. They've come a long way," Bach said. "There's nobody [policing] the river, so the insurgents have figured out that they can use the river like a highway." The Navy instructors are doing diplomatic work as well. On the weekends, they take the Iraqis out into their communities and on shopping trips to Wal-Mart, where the Iraqis scooped up cosmetics for their wives and clothes for their children. "We've shown them what the United States is really like," Bach said. "We have more in common than we realize."

There have also been several trips to area war museums. "They see that the U.S. doesn't have an easy history," he said. "We had a civil war, and here we are today." Bach predicts more Iraqis will come to Mississippi. "I expect that we could be doing this again in the spring," he said. On their own A final training exercise at the end of October capped six weeks of intense training. Navy instructors accompanied the new Iraqi sailors on a mission scenario but took a more passive role than usual. That's because they know their charges will soon be on their own.



Stennis Space Center, Miss. (Oct. 23 2006) - An Iraqi Soldier assigned to Iraqi Riverine Police Force fires a M-60 machine gun during training. The Iraqi force is currently attending a six-week course at Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School (NAVSCIATTS).

*U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Brien Aho
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The mission called for two boats to go down the Pearl River, drop off a two-man surveillance team, hide in the bayou for an hour, then pick up the team. They're prepared to search for weapons on a suspect vessel, as well. Chief Rob Rheume, a special warfare boat operator who has been a NavSCIATTS instructor for three years, ran the exercise. For him and the other instructors, the language barrier that makes life so difficult in Iraq complicates training - every communication requires an interpreter. "It's a middle man," Rheume said as he rode in one of the boats. "It's been a challenge for all of us at the schoolhouse."

Further complicating the final exercise is the absence of the Iraqi commander. He'd learned that his younger brother had been killed in Iraq, and the news sent him into mourning. He did not make it to the mission. Without him, the men fell quickly into confusion while trying to push off the quay wall and begin the exercise. The instructions Rheume had just given on boat assignments were quickly ignored. "They don't want to listen. Who is in charge? Someone needs to take charge," Rheume said in exasperation. He then called out for an interpreter, ordering: "They need to get this un-assed, and they need to get it un-assed right now."

Finally the two-boat patrol got underway. After test-firing their weapons and dropping off the two-man team, they hid in Wastehouse Bayou. The Iraqis camouflaged the boat with a net and palm fronds cut from trees ashore. They waited and listened for boat traffic. When a boat approached, they quickly zoomed after it. They caught up to a suspect boat manned by two role-playing instructors. After some hectic yelling, the boarding team of the whole crew except the coxswain found a plastic pistol and knife on the boat. "They finally gained control," Rheume said. "It took them a while, but they finally got it."

They wound down the exercise with a smoke-shrouded "hot extract" of the two-man team, one of whom they treated for wounds. "You have to keep them motivated, but they are definitely picking up a lot of stuff," Rheume said. "I think some of them are kind of sad about having to leave because the way of life over there isn't really the best right now." Abu Taleb might agree. He's begun to feel at home in America. The NavSCIATTS training has been better than anything he's had in Iraq, Jordan or Egypt. "This is not for me," he said through an interpreter. "This is for my country."