

News from Iraq

submitted by: Richard Eaton

We put two boats on Uday's Lake yesterday, and the 8 River Patrol men did Great. Running the boats in the weeds of the Lake made it possible to deal with cooling problems that developed when the weeds were sucked into the cooling intakes. When we got the problems resolved, we discovered that the boats can really MOVE!!! And maneuver really sharply as well. All were very impressed, and I was very impressed with the way the men handled all phases of the training, and with the way they handled the boats.

So today we put the two boats onto the Tigris River so they could get the feel of how the boats react in the current. Putting in went very well, and we spent an hour cruising the River. We had an audience at the River Patrol Headquarters, who had heard our radio transmission to Patrol Dispatch that we would be on the Tigris. We decided to take the members of the River Patrol headquarters Staff for rides in the new boats, so that they would all feel a part of the entire program. It went over very well, except that Lt. Col. Alaa was at another River Patrol Station, down river.

After the last riders were dropped off, we headed down river, to stretch out the boats, and see how they would handle on a long run. As we approached River Patrol Checkpoint 13, just south of the Dora Oil Refinery, our nice new shiny FAST boat suddenly slowed to stop, right in the middle of the river!! I noticed that the other boat, correctly following about 300 yards to the rear, and to the left, backed off immediately, but also slowed to a stop. We were stuck on a sand bar, in the middle of the Tigris River!!!

After about 5 minutes, the other boat worked itself free, but could not approach us, because we had "skimmed" across the surface of the water to where we were, then got stuck, so at slow speed, the other boat could not get close enough to pass us a tow rope. (No, I was NOT driving the boat when it got stuck!!)

Then the Cavalry arrived in the nick of time. You see, Col. Alaa was helping the US Army to access and search two islands in the Tigris River, just below Checkpoint 13, and we were in full view of everyone else in River Patrol, (and a bunch of US Army guys, with camera!) sitting on top of that sand bar. The River Patrol had 4 of the older, ratty looking patrol boats that they had been using for the past 20 years or so. The River Patrol Police were with the Colonel, who was leading the search of the islands for bad guys and hidden munitions. Most were already searching the first of the islands, and since the boats were not needed at the moment, they came out, with

Click on thumbnail for close-up image:



two of the divers aboard, and tried first to pull us off, but no good!! Then two of the divers went over the side and pushed the boat backwards and by using the engines in reverse, we were able to wash some of the sand away from under the boat, and we were finally OFF the sandbar. We motored down to the Island where they were finishing up the island search, and were called over to the bank to take Colonel Alaa and several of the River Patrol Officers on board, having finished up the search. Since we were a definite asset with our size and power, Col. Alaa directed us to carry the River Patrol Officers down river to the next island, where some rockets had reportedly been launched from last week. the US Army was posted up and down each bank of the river, but all they could do was shoot at problems, since there was no way for them to get to the islands, other than our boats.

This was an excellent opportunity to teach shoreline observation and approaching a hostile shoreline, so we went along. It worked out very well, using the Boats as mobile Machine gun posts, should any bad guys jump up out of the weeds with guns. We landed the Search Teams on the west bank and cruised up and down the bank slowly, watching and listening intently for any signs of trouble. When the search was completed, we moved back in and picked up the Police Officers, watching the terrain behind them as they loaded up. Col. Alaa advised that they had found a site on this island that showed the burn marks in the grass and weeds from 3 different missiles being launched from the middle of the island, but found no indications of hidden munitions or other activity on the island.

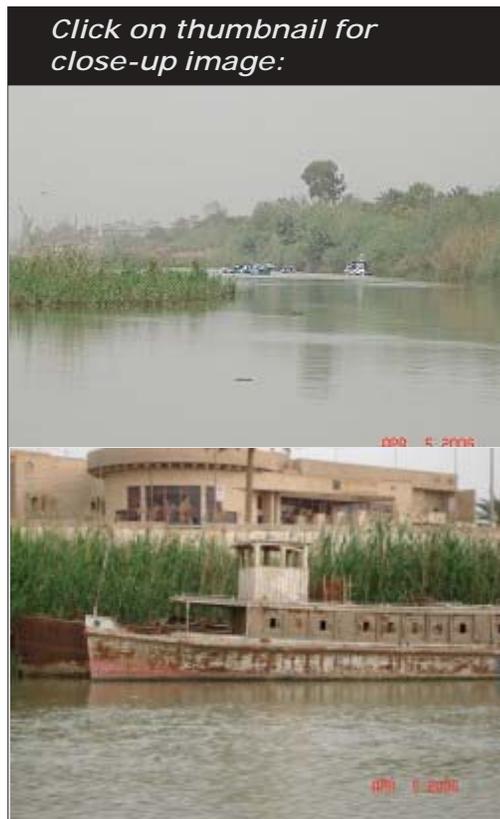
Job done, we dropped off Officers at River Check Point 13, and then headed up River

toward the Headquarters, to drop off Col. Alaa and the Police Officers. Col. Alaa wanted to go slowly, to match the speed of the other smaller boats, so we were moving at approx. 8 knots, up river, watching the East Bank of the River, as a Riverine team is suppose to do. Approx. 3 miles up stream, on the east bank of the river, I observed a man washing out a military uniform in the river, on a damaged dock. We waved at him, and at some Iraqi soldiers on the bank above. Col. Alaa and some of his staff were talking to the soldiers, who seemed "perturbed" that we had gotten close to them and to their "base" which appeared to be another of Saddam's smaller "homes". After a few minutes some more soldiers, and what appeared to be a commander of some rank appeared and he and Col. Alaa kept arguing with each other, and we were told to move the boat into the dock, by the army commander.

When we tied up, 3-4 of the River Patrol staff walked up the dock, and

went with some of the soldiers to the main house for a "conference" and to talk to the higher brass by phone. In the Meanwhile, Col. Alaa got on the boat's radio and started talking to Baghdad Patrol Dispatch, advising them that a Group of Iraqi Special Forces had threatened to shoot at us if we did not stop and come to the bank, and that they were now threatening to arrest us because we did not have THEIR permission to be on the River, behind their compound. About this time a new group of Iraqi army men showed up, wearing helmets, vests, and weapons.

Up to this point, I had let Col. Alaa and the Army commander deal with each other, but I realized that if they decided we were to be arrested and hand cuffed, that I would not be able to use my telephone, so I called Lt. Col. Guy MONCUR, GBR, my immediate



supervisor and an excellent Officer (poor man! He will be gray haired by the time I leave Iraq!). I told Col. Moncur where we were and what was going on. He immediately began to attempt to locate the matching US Army unit assigned to the Special Forces unit, which were called the "Wolves". I also contacted the Shark Base TOC to let them know where I was, and then finally located the 4th Inf. Division TOC phone number and began advising them of the situation and asking for assistance by having the pair of Apache Gunships in the area to assist in the Island=arches come up River, and "stand by" right over our boats, while the Iraqi Army commander got his brain reconnected. (I figured the Apaches would quickly "COOL" any desire or interest in shooting as us or even arresting us, and let common sense and intelligence prevail.) I was later advised by Col Alaa that this particular group is Supposedly part of the Sader Brigade militia, and had a bad reputation for making bad things happen to civilians who they "searched and destroyed". Given the commander's initial attitude, I could see why. No one hates Cops more than "organized crime", no matter what you call the organization!!!

BUT just as I was about to ask the 4th ID TOC about sending the Apaches up to make a "house call", Col. Alaa waved at me and said that his General Ali had gotten through to someone high up, and that everything was now OK and we were about to leave. I advised the 4th ID of the happy news, and thanked them for their help, and we moved out into the River, waving good bye to our new friends, The Wolves.

The "funny" thing is, if only the OLD boats had been caught like this, with NO powerful radios to communicate with Patrol Dispatch, and no VERY NEW and very EXPENSIVE LOOKING fancy patrol boats, which were OBVIOUSLY not insurgent owned, every one of the Police Officers, including Col. Alaa, would have been arrested, taken up to the compound for an unknown amount of time, and probably have had all their weapons "stolen". Having the means to communicate quickly and effectively via radio helped solve the situation quickly. I also noted that Col. Alaa maintained authority and command very professionally, and that his leadership in this

stressful situation was excellent. All of the Police Officers also maintained a calm and professional attitude, from the youngest officer to the seasoned veteran. A very good and Professional Police Command, from Leader to the River Cop.

After we left the Wolves to finish their laundry, etc. we cruised up the Tigris and docked at the Main Headquarters to off load the Search party and I was invited to have a late lunch with Col. Alaa. After lunch, we returned to the Compound, where we discovered that loading the boats onto the trailers in the RIVER was a far different thing from loading them on a nice smooth still Lake. It took several attempts by each boat to finally make the 90 degree run across the current and into the waiting trailer on the boat ramp. Finally they were both out of the water and secured on their trailers, but in need of a good cleaning!!!!

Well, heck, we needed something to do tomorrow morning, now didn't we?? I knew there was a good reason my old bosun's mate made us keep swabbing that damn deck, and scrubbing the bulkheads in the corridors.

So, Tomorrow morning (Thursday, in Baghdad) the next 8 crewmen to be trained in the new boat handling will be taking the boats to Uday lake, and have their initiation in how they move and go. And then, Friday, (unless everyone is off duty!!!) we will be back on the Tigris River again, so we can all get use to the POWER of the River, and Riverine Warfare, Iraqi style.

So, if this is just Day 1 on the Tigris River, I can hardly wait for Day 2.

This was two weeks ago, and we have averaged every other day running training patrols north to the far end of the City. Picked up 3 bodies so far, out of the River. We have NOT been fired on yet, and we spend a lot of time waving at the people on the banks, and they wave back. Night OPS in a few weeks, IF we can get fuel back into the boats. WE have our own US version of the Ministry of Interior here. It's the Military supply system and its millions of rules and procedures.

Gotta love the Army!!!!