

duty station: IRAQ



oil platform

Reservists Stand Guard Over Iraqi Oil Terminal

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KHAWR AL AMAYA OIL TERMINAL, Northern Persian Gulf - Deep in the waters of the Persian Gulf, the future of the Iraqi economy stands lonely upon concrete pillars.

It is the Khawr al Amaya oil terminal (KAAOT), the site of a terrorist attack that took the lives of two Sailors and one Coast Guardsman assigned to USS Firebolt (PC-10).

Navy Reservists mobilized from Mobile Inshore Undersea Warfare Unit 104 (MIUW-104) stand guard over the terminal, alongside a contingent of Marines from the Interim Marine Corps Security Force Company, Bahrain.

These Sailors and Marines work side by side with a group of Iraqi oil workers and security forces, into whose care the platform will eventually be turned over.

These forces are sentries ensuring nothing like the Firebolt attack of Apr. 24 happens again. They guard not only the lives of their fellow service members, but also the means by which the Iraqi people will rebuild their economy in the months and years to come.

Located about 100 miles north of Umm Qasr, Iraq's main port,

Sailors live and work on an attached floating barge, which is also quite run down. But they make it work.

"The first few days we were very, very conscious of every hazard around here," said Walters. "Now, we know where the bumps are; we know what things not to step on. It just becomes second nature."

AT2 Michael De los Reyes is a Reservist from San Jose, Calif. He volunteered to take part in the liberation of Iraq and arrived on the platform just days after the Firebolt attack. He has been working with the Iraqis onboard the platform to make the situation more livable.

"It's been kind of fun and exciting out here. We've been able to think outside the box and make things work to accomplish the mission," said De los Reyes.

For months after they arrived at KAAOT, they had no showers and no toilets, and did their laundry by hand and hung it on clotheslines.

"The berthing areas we were assigned to were in poor shape," said De los Reyes. "We put a lot of elbow grease and time in to fix them up. We've actually worked well and coordinated some things with the platform manager."

According to De los Reyes, the Iraqi crew has installed air conditioning

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KAAOT represents billions of dollars in future oil revenues for the young democracy. The terminal was shut down briefly after the April assault.

OS1 Mike Walters, from Phoenix, Ariz., is a Reservist living and working aboard KAAOT. He said the Firebolt attack brought the reality of the situation into focus.

"From a Navy standpoint, and to me personally, it really helped us to understand that this is real," said Walters. "When you're further away from it, you hear the stories about what's going on in Baghdad and Fallujah and other places, but you don't really get to feel it. The Firebolt attack brought it home."

Walters said he understands the sacrifice the fallen Sailors made for their country.

"Those guys did what they were trained to do, and unfortunately they lost their lives, and some others were injured, and you never want to see that happen, but they saved the platform. At the end of the day, that's what we're all here for," said Walters.

The oil platform is 45 years old, and in a terrible state of disrepair. It was attacked heavily during the Iran/Iraq war of the 1980s and during Operation Desert Storm.

units in most of the crew spaces. De los Reyes has worked tirelessly with the Iraqi electrician in order to improve living conditions.

"Now the berthing areas here are actually pretty nice," said De los Reyes. "They look almost like a stateroom you'd find back on a ship."

From the Combat Information Center (CIC), the Reservists operate a radar system, camera systems and standard bridge-to-bridge communications. The CIC consists of a single 10-by-10 room in a four-story building aboard the barge serving as their barracks. They keep a close eye on all boat traffic in the area, while the Coast Guard patrols aggressively about the waters.

In recent months, coalition forces have instituted new policies regarding boat traffic in the waters surrounding Iraqi oil platforms. Only vessels with proper authorization may enter the 2000-meter "exclusion zone," and any vessel that enters that two-kilometer radius without contacting coalition maritime forces may be either destroyed or disabled.

Iraqi citizens realize their livelihood depends on the safety of the Gulf. To insure this, they sometimes report information about suspicious or dangerous crafts.

"We receive a lot of reports from the local fishermen that there are



Photo by JO3 J. Hastings Mciver

AT2 Michael Del Los Reyes, Navy Reservist and member of Naval Coastal Warfare Group ONE, stands high atop the berthing spaces of the Khawr al Amaya oil terminal, an Iraqi oil platform. He and four other Reservists live and work on the platform alongside both Marines and Iraqi contractors, and are charged with surveillance of the surrounding waters and the protection of the platform from enemy attack. Repairs to the platform, the main structure of which was built in 1961, are still underway, so luxuries such as laundry and shower facilities are not yet available.

“It’s hard for people back home to believe, but it’s true. There are pirates out here. And not only that, but we’ve also seen other crafts in the area coming close by and taking surveillance of the platform. So we know that there are bad guys out there, and we just don’t take anything for granted.”

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Reservists have integrated themselves seamlessly into a dangerous and difficult situation, working alongside both Marines and Iraqi security forces to safeguard the future of the Iraqi people. They’ve even begun to see the difference their efforts are making.

“A few of the terminal workers are actually ex-soldiers who fought in Saddam’s army,” said De los Reyes. “Speaking to these guys and understanding the type of lifestyle they had to live due to the rule they lived under, and then seeing them now that life is improving for them, makes this all seem pretty important. We can see how the Iraqi economy is very key right now. As long as it becomes successful, life will get better for these people in general. The gratitude is there, and understandably so.”

Walters has also noticed the impact he and his fellow Reservists have made. “Things are changing, and hopefully becoming better. These oil platforms are going to drive the economy in the future, and ultimately the success of protecting these platforms, I think, makes the entire war effort a success,” said Walters. “In my 13 years in the Navy this is hands-down the most unique and exciting mission I’ve ever been involved in. No doubt about it.” ❖