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Explosive History Calls Navy EOD Deep Into Operation Iraqi Freedom

By JOI Joseph Krypel

The misconception is that we blow things up," says Chief Boatswain's Mate John Crabtree, "but our goal, our real mission is to keep things from going boom and hurting a lot of people – or creating an ecological disaster that would devastate this area and it's people for years."

Crabtree, a 35-year-old Canal Winchester, Ohio native, and Master Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Technician is one in a long history of U.S. Navy EOD technicians – saving lives, saving locations, and remembering the devastation of the past.

Starting with the bitter and battle-torn experiences of the British in the early days of World War II, when the Germans began a demoralizing campaign against the British Isles, tons of explosive charges were purposely fused so as not to detonate until one to 80-hours later. At the height of the blitz, more than 2,200 separate areas within the city of London were evacuated because of unexploded bombs, and a large number of sea mines were washing ashore on Britain's beaches.

Faced with the immediate and urgent need to recover and dispose of the tremendous amount of unexploded ordnance, the British formed the first Mine and Bomb Disposal Squads - many of which died as a result of booby-trapped ordnance.

Learning from the Allied experience, the first U.S. Naval Mine Disposal School was established at the Naval Gun Factory in 1941 – and the bomb disposal school was created just one month later.

Following WWII, the U.S. Navy consolidated its mine and bomb disposal units into a single EOD program.

Spanning the globe from the days of WWII - providing invaluable work clearing channels, harbors and captured fields of mines, unexploded bombs, projectiles and booby traps – the work of EOD teams has changed with the technology of the day, and with the threat of the times.

In all past, present and future conflicts, Navy EOD technicians have, and will continue to provide the highest level of protection to personnel and property. Their relentless efforts ensure joint and coalition forces have uninhibited battle space access as well as the free and safe movement of humanitarian aid.

Two primary targets in the beginning moments of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) were the gulf oil terminals of Mina Al Bakr (MABOT) and Khor Al Amaya (KAAOT), located within the Iraqi boundaries of the waters of the North Arabian Gulf.

These targets were important because the liberation of Iraq means the return of Iraqi assets to the people of Iraq from Saddam Hussein's regime and the Baath Party leadership.

MABOT and KAAOT are critical in that they are Iraq's only means of distributing oil from the extensive network of oil fields in the desert, through miles of pipeline, and finally into tankers that can then transit the world's oceans for commerce as part of the United Nation's Food for Oil program.

Saddam Hussein was aware of their importance, and hoped to deny access to the U.S. led coalition – by any means possible.

According to statements made by American-captured Iraqi prisoners of War, the hard working civilian crews of the oil platforms were removed from MABOT and KAAOT by Saddam's army just prior to the start of U.S. led advances on Iraq – and replaced with Iraqi military personnel, to include divers and ordnance experts.

"We all knew they had ordnance to use – we just had to ensure they didn't have the chance to use them," said Crabtree, leading Chief Petty Officer for EOD Mobile Unit (EODMU) Two, Detachment 20, homeported in Little Creek, Va.

Two teams of two EOD members joined U.S. Navy and Polish Special Operations in the opening seconds of Iraq's liberation during the late hours of March 19, 2003.

"We had trained for months – we knew our mission – and we were ready to do our job," explained Aviation Ordnanceman 1st Class Scott Hayward, a 34-year-old Rochester, N.Y. native and team member of EODMU-11, Det. 5, from Whidbey Island, Wash.

"We aren't a take-down team – we are explosive experts," continued Hayward, "Intelligence indicated the Iraqi Regime of Saddam Hussein had the ability and willingness to booby trap these platforms, just plain blow 'em up... So when Naval Special Warfare included EOD in this job, we were used in the

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manner we have always trained for.”

Hayward explained that he and other EOD team members were placed at the trailing end of the SEALs platoon – ensuring rear security, safety, and to act as additional aggressive resources only in the case of something going astray.

“When the coalition Special Forces teams were boarding the platform, we could see the Iraqis from our positions in the boats,” said Builder 1st Class Donald Shaw, 33 from Annapolis, Md., “and it became immediately apparent that they could see us.”

Shaw, a member of EODMU-2, Det. 20, homeported in Little Creek, Va., and the other members of the EOD team aboard, described what they say was the longest and most intense rush of adrenaline they have ever had – and it lasted only seconds.

“They saw us – they pointed right at us and started moving around the berthing spaces where they were located,” explained Shaw.

“We weren’t sure what they were going to do,” continued Hayward, “but when we heard the words ‘Americans’, and then saw the Iraqi soldiers actually putting their hands behind their heads – we became relieved, but stayed just as alert as we had been from the beginning. It was a tense few seconds.”

Once the area was secured, interrogations began – and, according to Hayward and Shaw, went well.

“They were waiting to surrender,” exclaimed Shaw, “They were actually glad to see us, and cooperated fully – they fired no shots, showed no real aggression, and provided EOD with the information we had been looking for.”

“When the explosives guy came forward, we used every communications means available to find out what we had ahead of us,” continued Hayward. “We had carried a small arsenal of our own to show these guys what we were looking for – and the visual aides we used, were the items we expected to find.”

Hayward and Shaw went on to say

that while there were hidden arms and ordnance, the Iraqi military placed on MABOT and KAAOT had pretty much laid-out the contraband for the coalition forces and EOD to find.

“It was pretty ironic,” said Shaw, “The MABOT group had nearly all their weapons and explosives in the berthing with them.” Hayward added, “The KAAOT crew didn’t quite put it right in front of us, but it was mostly staged and pre-positioned in a single location – very nice indeed.”

Spanning a period of seven days, and combining the efforts of 11 EOD technicians from EODMU-11, Det. 5, EODMU-2, Dets. 20 and 22 and a command and control representative from Commander, Amphibious Group Three (CPG-3), a stockpile of surface-to-air

missiles, light machine guns, cans of ammunition, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, high explosives, detonators, timing devices, and fuses totaling nearly 300 pieces were found aboard the one-mile stretch of MABOT and KAAOT.

According to the EOD technicians aboard, small arms continued to be found wrapped in blankets, stuffed into air-ducts, hidden in beds and ovens, and placed amongst the steelwork corners all over the platform.

“The Iraqis could have done some serious damage, explained Lt. Cmdr. Edan Antoine of CPG-3, “there was enough high explosives aboard to blow the platforms and cause an enormous ecological disaster – we’re just glad they used their heads, and realized their actions would have affected the future of the Iraqi people.”

Weapons and explosives searches were conducted by EOD technicians from beneath the water line to the top of the platform – well over 180 feet from the water up.

“We did an extensive search,” said Hayward, “and we felt pretty good about the dives conducted on the structure supports and the main forty-inch oil risers

even before we started.” Hayward explained that while the threat of underwater charges was a real one, the condition of dive equipment found and intelligence collected during the initial contact led EOD to believe that the threat was minimal.

“The dive-gear was in pretty rough shape – missing parts, dry-rotted seals and equipment – we were able to assess early on that there was no underwater threat, but we did extensive dives just to be sure.”

The Camp Patriot combined EOD team amplifies the U.S. Navy’s EOD mission and reputation. Removing over two-tons of crew-serve arms, ammunition and explosives from the hands of the oppressive Baath Party regime, team technicians say that all equipment that

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ABE1 (EOD) Paul Darga

was confiscated will be evaluated for use by the Free Iraqi Fighting Force (FIFF) to help assist in the continued disarming of the regime; ensuring a viable and secure Iraq.

“We’re proud to have done our part,” concluded Aviation Boatswain’s Mate – Equipment 1st Class Paul Darga. “The people of Iraq can be assured that the oil terminals we secured belong to them – and the oil that now continues to flow from those terminals belongs to the free Iraq – not to Saddam Hussein.”

Operation Iraqi Freedom continues to be a delicately orchestrated dance involving many nations, units, battalions and individuals – and key players from the beginning, the U.S. Navy’s EOD members forward deployed to Camp Patriot.

EOD members are qualified in both static and free-fall parachute jumps and can parachute or be delivered by helicopter rope suspension techniques, including fastrope, rappel, and special purpose insert and extraction, to minefields or other areas suspected to have unexploded ordnance and booby traps. They are able to operate both closed circuit diving rigs (bubbleless units) as well as open circuit SCUBA.