

Keeping the Sea lane Clear

GFI spent a couple of nights aboard a US warship in the Gulf

A couple of months ago I received a call from Flight Lieutenant John Ellis of the British RAF. He wanted me to interview Commodore Peter Hudson, the man heading coalition naval forces in the Gulf. He turned out to be very interesting and we ran the interview in GFI in August. That call however was the beginning of a journey that saw me helicoptered out to the USS Thach where I would see first hand exactly what the coalition forces did, and how their actions at sea related to the tactical vision that Commodore Hudson had described.

I was nervous as I waited for the car to arrive. It was slowly dawning on me exactly what I was about to do. The helicopter ride was uneventful - six of us were headed to the Thach, and as I would hear on many occasions in the coming days, "boring is good, exciting means that something has gone wrong."

The view however, was incredible: below the thudding blades, Bahrain stretched out from its coastline in glistening white against the deep azure. It is easy to become blasé about all the land reclamation we hear about, but when you see it from the air, in a diesel stinking hot box, dressed in a life jacket, cranial helmet, goggles and ear guards - the scale of it is incredible; the work goes on and on, apparently forever, until the sea claims its victory over land, darkening as it deepens, and overpowering man's attempts to tame it.

Commodore Hudson had already explained CTF 152's mission to me: "to form alliances of co-operation that reduce the places where those interested in pursuing [illegal] activity can operate." He explained that whilst he was not really concerned with small scale smuggling: "the cigarette runner looking to make a little extra;" those



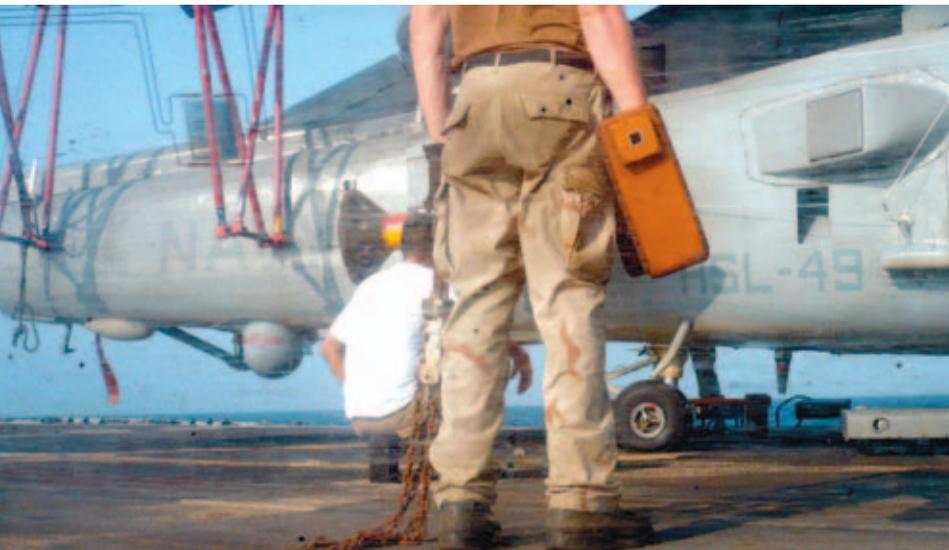
*Words and pictures
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involved with people or drug smuggling, piracy and, "engaging in anything that furthers international terrorism," were a threat to the overall maritime security of the region and therefore the main targets of the coalition force.

We landed suddenly, and without warning, far sooner than we had been told to expect. The USS Thach was not too far away they had said, but when I asked exactly where in the Gulf we were, the question was answered quickly and vaguely, as if they didn't want me to know: "somewhere off Qatar, not too far from Iran." And this is thing about being at sea: unless you know exactly where you are, you cannot know where you are at all: the sea looks the same in every direction - flat and shimmering, like bluely tinted foil.

Waiting for us at the back of the hangar - a cramped, hot place, lined with tools, and parts and, strangely, a guitar amp - Commander David Haas, Lieutenant Commander Bruce Stanley and First Lieutenant Johannes Schonberg waited for us, wondering why it was taking so long for us to leave the "hee-lo", as all on board insisted on calling the helicopter. Throughout my time onboard, these three, but especially Haas and Schonberg would be my guides, answer all my questions, and show me time and time again where the bridge was, where my rack was, and where I should go to eat.

Commander Haas is navy to the core - they all are, but with Haas, he looked exactly like the Navy Man of my imagination with the deep tan of a life lived outdoors, and sunglasses that suggest that he could stare down the sun. He has been in service for 18 years and, "doesn't have a clue about what he will do" when he retires. His options are





varied, in part because of the wealth of experience he has attained in the navy, but due also to the pension provision 20 years of naval service affords all its personnel. "50 per cent pay, free medical and dental - for life," he beams at me. And with that to fall back on if all else fails, you can afford to be picky as to what your next career might be.

He took me on a tour of the ship, leading me through all the doors and hatches you have to go through - and seal again afterwards, with huge levers and twisting dials: a real life game of MouseTrap. It took about an hour to tour the ship and at each new area - the spaces divided by heavy steel - he would explain, more or less, what happened there. I learnt that the ship is powered by twin turbo engines, "the same ones that power a DC-10 aeroplane," and that these could be rotated whilst moving, "to give negative thrust" and "stop the ship in about a length and a half." Pretty impressive stuff, especially when you consider how many car lengths it takes to stop your car, and that your car doesn't weigh more than 4,000 tonnes.

The USS Thach is a Perry class frigate which means it's just 453 feet (138m) long and 45 feet (not quite 14m) wide. Below the water line the keel sinks a paltry 22 feet (nearly 7m), and above the water line there are just two decks. In other words: not very big at all, and yet,

into such a relatively confined space, 224 souls live and work, often for months at a time, alongside more mechanical and electrical equipment than I have ever seen in a single place. Conditions then, are tight.

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To put this all in context, picture if you will, my 'stateroom' and home for the two nights I was aboard. Imagine a box, seven feet by ten, the ceiling thinly hovering about ten feet up: at one end there are racks (navy slang for bed) upon which we sleep, and at the other storage space; there is a computer and TV by the bed, and a sink in the corner. This is an officer's room, and it sleeps three. There is enough viable floor space for two chairs, but unless all three officers are

asleep in their racks, there is really only enough space for two of them at a time. The enlisted men live below deck and have even less space to call their own.

The average age across the entire US Navy is young at just 22. But the more I heard the enlisted sailors speak about their lives, the more I realised that they are being afforded opportunities unobtainable in the civilian world, that the navy life is their best shot at university education, at learning skills that will set them up for life in careers as diverse as engineering, electronics and information technology.

I saw the galley, a tiny, hot place where 1,000+ meals are produced each day; the 'desal'[ination] plants that produce over 13,000 gallons of fresh water from some of the saltiest seawater on earth; the four diesel generators that power the ship's three AC units, all its lights, its communication and tracking tools and everything else that 224 men need to stay alive. The ship's power also provides all the power needed to start the two helicopters attached to the ship and all of their surveillance equipment. Throughout, Haas explained to me in laymen's terms what everything did and, more often than not, declaring something particularly impressive as "pretty cool."

I liked Haas. His demeanour was that of an untroubled leader. Later, after expressing my surprise at his laid back

approach he would explain that, “the screamers, I think, are like that because they are not comfortable with what they are doing and use authority as a bludgeon instead of precision tool.”

We had come full circle and entered the combat room; the nerve centre and heart of the ship. Think of any submarine movie: the dark space lit only by red light, the radar and sonar bleeping, their operators hunched over their screen waiting for the worst to happen. The combat room is exactly like they show it in the movies. It is dark and cool in there, the air conditioning cranked up to eleven: “to protect the machines, not the sailors.”

Inside, my eyes slowly adjusting to the dark, I caught my first glimpse of how Commodore Hudson’s words were put into action. Here, on the screens of at least eight different stations, little blips of light in the dark signalled the existence of an entire eco-system of commercial and military maritime activity: here the oil and gas fields of Qatar, there the pipelines that carry their valuable cargo to shore, and the thousands of ships that ply their trade on the calm waters of the Gulf. And of course, some of these blips might represent those that wish to upset this comparative calm, or exploit others for ill gotten gain. The USS Thach’s role is to find those that wish to disrupt the status quo. And stop them.

Jake, a thin man in his mid to late twenties, tells me about the FLIR (Forward Looking Infrared) that can “spot,

and help identify, any vessel that it comes across, even at night.” With a range of about 150 miles, it is this capability that most strongly serves 152’s mission. By taking a real time, visual snapshot of all at sea at different points throughout the day and night, it is possible to map visually who is doing what, where. With that information, combined with radar, radio and all the other electronic bells and

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whistles, it is much easier to prioritise areas in which the coalition should focus their attention.

The Iranian question is a tricky one. Many on board the Thach agree with Commodore Hudson who said of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, “whilst they may report to Tehran, they have freedom to carry out operations on their own;” in

essence, a law unto themselves. Others even went as far as suggesting that one day, a day they hoped to see, it would be, “cool if a US, or coalition ship, could make an official visit to an Iranian port.” And further, that they believed, “the Iranian navy to be a professional navy, just like the US;” with, “little interest in disrupting the general maritime security; the status quo that sees everyone making a ton of money at sea.” Haas was more guarded in his reply to the Iran question: “most of the time, they are not even on our radar, they keep themselves to themselves and don’t bother anyone.” Asked whether he would have allowed his sailors to be taken, as the British navy somehow did in 2007, by the IRG he simply says, “no.” And that is the end of the conversation.

I witness how he deals with perceived threats to the Thach’s security in an exercise that night. The exercise was designed to teach the crew in how to stop an incoming vessel that is way beyond the (known only to the Thach) ‘no sail zone’ that surrounds the ship. As with everything they do, the exercise is as much about thinking as it is about doing. First the threat must be evaluated: is a collision likely, and if so, where will it occur. Then every attempt is made to contact the vessel’s pilot to alert him of the imminent danger, both of collision and of the likely consequences of failing to alter his course. As Schonberg told me, “it is not unknown for civilian pilots to fall asleep at the wheel; we try very hard to wake them up!”

If none of that works, the horn is sounded, spotlights shone, flares fired and then, eventually, warning shots fired; with matters escalating swiftly from there.

Smoking a cigarette, one stifling dawn, a 12 year submariner described how the drills he hated most were the, “endless fire drills.” But how, when a fire caught in perhaps the worst place on earth: “200 metres down,” his sub’s tight knit crew reacted instinctively to deal with it. “The fire was under control in 30 seconds from the alarm being sounded; some of the men showed up in their underwear.”

Late on my second day, tired and dehydrated, the enlisted sailors, some of them as young as 18, donned hard hats and life jackets and stood on deck for hours in the sun as the ship performed a Replenishment At Sea (RAS). They did not complain about the heat or the sun,





did not question why they had to stand in 120 degrees - on a hot metal box, in seas that touch 90oF - holding on to a rope that never tugged or pulled. Instead, they followed orders.

Which brings me to the only real negative about the whole experience: on the morning of the second day I supposed to get very wet indeed. But, at the very last minute, I was not allowed.

The RHIB (Rigid Hulled Inflatable Boat) is about 15 feet long; it has an outboard motor and room for about seven or eight men. (The USS Thach is unusual in that it has an all male crew. About 15 per cent of the US Navy is female but the Thach, being an old ship was never designed to house women and, "would cost too much to retro-fit to accommodate them.")

Every morning, based on 'intel' compiled from the "hee-lo's" mission last night and the never ending swish-swoosh of the radar, the combat room identify groups of craft, otherwise unidentifiable to all the ship's clever electronics. Usually dhows, no larger than the ones you see endlessly moored in the bays of Bahrain, these small craft represent the salt of this aquatic earth. Dhows are used to fish with, to transport small quantities of cargo and as pleasure craft, but sometimes, they are used as the hidden-in-plain-view vessels of those wishing to take advantage of the relative calm of the Persian Gulf. The RHIB's job is to go and have a closer look.

Nervous again - this is where it could all go seriously wrong - I followed Schonberg to the armory to be fitted with a flak jacket and helmet. This was serious, and they were taking no chances. I followed him up ladders again, through hatches, sealing doors behind me, to wait for the order to board. Talking to the boarding crew - should it come to that

- the tension was palpable. The orders are to communicate, to offer food, water and medical help. But if it is going to go wrong, it will go wrong in an instant. The sailors, tooled up all, and the Bahraini interpreter, seemed oblivious to, but at the same time cautious of, what was about to happen.

I was scared, but at the same time, trusted absolutely those who would be around me. Sadly, then came the order that I was not to go with them. I unzipped my flak jacket, unclasped my helmet and walked dejectedly to the bridge.

At the very last minute, I was not allowed. And the decision came from on high...

I watched the approach through the binoculars from the bridge and I can report: no one rattled or pointed any guns and no one on the dhows ever looked scared or ill at ease. I cannot tell you what was said, but the fishermen that the RHIB approached, if at first reluctant to speak, by the time the RHIB pulled away, were smiling, taking deep pulls from the bottles of water they had been given. Later I was told that one of the dhows had given corroborative statement into some piracy already under investigation by the task force.

Since returning to Bahrain, I have learnt that the reason I was not allowed aboard the RHIB was down to concerns for my safety; had there been another RHIB onboard, I would have been allowed



on the first. The concern was that, in the event of anything going wrong, they would not have been able to get me out.

My time on board the USS Thach has changed the way I think about the armed forces. I saw young men, highly trained all, working as a single unit for the protection of the ship. This in turn ensured the success of their mission and that of CTF 152's. **GFI**

With thanks to the 224 souls that hosted me, those in particular that guided me, and to everyone else that helped to make it so.

This is an abridged version; to see the full text and more pictures, click <http://vingette.blogspot.com/2008/09/uss-thach.html>