

BARBERS POINT DOLPHIN DEPLOYS AS JAWS IN THE GULF

By LCdr. Greg Fuller

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, a lone Coast Guard helicopter was on station in the Arabian Gulf. The HH-65A Dolphin and an eight-man detachment—two pilots, a rescue swimmer, and five flight mechanics—flew numerous missions during the six-month deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Here, a pilot recounts some of their experiences.



PA1 John Gaffney

We began our journey from CGAS Barbers Point, Hawaii, in January as the embarked aviation detachment on *Boutwell* (WHEC 719), which joined the *Tarawa* (LHA 1) amphibious ready group heading to the Arabian Gulf. It presented a significant challenge during the transit learning how to speak “Navy” and get all of our mistakes out of the way before we got into the gulf. We learned that flying in the starboard delta pattern as plane guard for six hours at a time is as boring as it sounds. After our second week underway the air boss on *Tarawa* made it clear that he did not like the call sign “Dolphin 90” and that we had until our refueling between sorties was complete to come up with a new call sign. After a few moments of panic we agreed on “Jaws 90” because we figured if we were painted bright orange and unarmed, we should at least sound tough. The air boss told us that we were about 30 seconds away from being called “Guppy 90” for the rest of our deployment, but “Jaws 90” stuck.

In February we arrived in the gulf and became part of the *Constellation* (CV 64) battle group. Initially, our mission was to support the enforcement of United Nations sanctions and prevent the smuggling of illegal oil and goods. This mission directly paralleled our migrant and drug interdiction mission in the Coast Guard and we quickly adapted to a new environment. Operating in a relatively small body of water that had over 150 coalition warships and 300 helicopters was quite a challenge. Every



coalition warship had a required standoff distance of at least 3 miles, with the LHAs requiring 5 miles and the aircraft carriers 10 miles. In sandstorms and at night this became quite difficult, with occasional close calls that under normal circumstances would be referred to as near midairs. The most useful pieces of equipment we had on



PA1 Tom Sperduto



Left, *Boutwell*, with the Barbers Point HH-65A Dolphin on board, leads the *Tarawa* amphibious ready group during transit to the Arabian Gulf. Upon their arrival, the Dolphin became the only Coast Guard helo on station in the gulf. Above, “Jaws 90” returns to *Boutwell* after investigating a possible threat during a general quarters emergency. Facing page top, pilots LCdrs. Greg Fuller, left, and Tim Schang prepare for a mission in the gulf.

patrols, as well as the required standoff from coalition vessels while transiting. The workload was also compounded by operating in an air traffic control system that rivaled many Class B airspaces in the States, while trying to not cross the “black line” that separated us from Iranian territorial waters.

board were our traffic alert and collision avoidance system (TCAS) and forward-looking infrared sensor (FLIR). We were the only rotary-wing aircraft in the gulf operating with TCAS and it proved to be invaluable in such a high-density operating area. The FLIR allowed us to identify vessels while maintaining a safe standoff distance during

Being part of the *Constellation* battle group gave us the opportunity to land on 23 different coalition warships, including Australian, British and Spanish vessels. Our less restrictive operational limits, smaller size and mission flexibility quickly made us the asset of choice for many unique missions. In addition, our ability to fly with passengers at night and fly single-pilot made us the VIP transport of choice. It didn’t take long for the senior leadership to realize they could sit in the back of a noisy H-60 Seahawk, a hydraulic-oil-leaking H-3 Sea King, or get stick time in the quiet, comfortable HH-65 Dolphin.

I think everyone was a little surprised and baffled to see the bright orange Coast Guard HH-65 helicopter patrolling the gulf, landing on their ships and flying into Iraq. I know the Navy, Marine and other coalition helicopter pilots were relieved that there was at least one aircraft in the war that was an easier target than they were. We were tempted to paint a big bull’s-eye on the



Above, the Barbers Point aviation detachment to the Arabian Gulf, l-r: LCdr. Greg Fuller, Lt. Olav Saboe, AMT2 David Blowers, AST3 Drew Dazzo, AET2 Harold Toledo, LCdr. Tim Schang, AMTC Russell Hoover and AMT2 Mischa Gorsh. Below, under escort by the detachment's HH-65A Dolphin, HMS Sandown leads HMS Sir Galahad as the logistics landing ship carries the first humanitarian supplies into Iraq.

side, but settled on a large shark to represent our call sign. Despite our initial concerns about flying in a combat zone painted bright orange, it was probably the safest color because a blue-on-blue engagement or midair collision was a real concern.

Being the only of type in theater had its drawbacks. The Coast Guard had not been included in the briefings for an operation at offshore oil terminals that was ongoing while we were on a surface search patrol in the area. The operation was being viewed real-time by senior leadership, and needless to say they were a little surprised to see our orange helicopter flying across their plasma screen. After the admiral demanded to know what we were doing there, the air control officer informed him that we were Coast Guard "Jaws 90" and that we were doing exactly what we were told to do: patrolling and looking for anything suspicious.

In one historic mission, we flew escort for HMS *Sir Galahad* as she carried the first humanitarian aid into Iraq via the Khawr Abd Allah river, which had recently



Royal Navy PO(Phot) Tam McDonald

been cleared of mines. This was followed by many reconnaissance and logistics missions to the port of Umm Qasr and as far inland as Basrah. The operations were not without mishap and constantly tested our ability to operate within the letter of the law and in accordance with our flight operations manual. After landing in a parking lot at Umm Qasr, we took a rock through the windshield while on a mission to pick up the fleet

Counterclockwise from below, “Jaws 90” sits chocked and chained aboard *Boutwell* in the Arabian Gulf. The Dolphin prepares to launch from *Constellation*. A view from the cockpit as the helo hot-refuels aboard *Connie* illustrates the crew’s Hawaiian roots. The Dolphin takes off from the landing zone at the port of Umm Qasr for a VIP transport mission.



PA1 John Gaffney



LCdr. Greg Fuller



PA1 John Gaffney

Hawk (CV 63) was gracious enough and close enough to help us out of our predicament and give us some gas.

Back aboard *Boutwell*, it was a surreal experience to

be sitting on the flight deck watching Tomahawk missiles launch from ships around us and then watching them land in Baghdad on CNN. It was an equally sobering experience to wake up to the ship’s general emergency alarm at 0430 when an Iranian gunship came close astern at high speed with no lights on. This highlighted the reality of the situation and our number one concern, an asymmetric small boat attack. The Dolphin was launched to identify the target and tensions escalated from that point. This became an increasingly contentious relationship as the Iranians constantly tested the limits of what the coalition would stand. As we patrolled in the vicinity of the oil terminals, Iranian gunships threatened to shoot us down three different times. That’s when being unarmed and bright orange made us feel very alone. Fortunately, our British neighbors and their heavily armed Lynx helicopters were a great asset to convince the Iranians to play nice. The information we were given as we left Hawaii for the gulf was that if any hostilities began, *Boutwell* would be 100 miles south of the nearest Navy ship away from any hostilities. In reality, we were 15 miles off the coast of Iraq guarding the oil terminals and intercepting any vessels departing the Shatt al Arab and Khawr Abd Allah rivers.

I never would have imagined when I entered the Coast Guard 14 years ago that I would be able to join the local VFW, much less have flown to Basrah, Iraq, in a Coast Guard helicopter. Seeing Saddam Hussein’s presidential yacht permanently at rest in the mud, still smoldering from many direct bomb hits, is a sight that will stay forever etched in my memory. Being referred to as warriors is not how typical “Coasties” would identify themselves, but our crew would all identify with being called true mission hackers. I attribute our mission success to the fact that our entire aviation detachment volunteered to go on this deployment. Operation Iraqi Freedom was a once in a lifetime opportunity for all of us. ✈️

LCdr. Greg Fuller is the Flight Safety Officer at CGAS Barbers Point, Hawaii.



PH2 Richard Moore

chaplain. Our flight manual dictates that this emergency requires us to land as soon as practicable, but leaving the aircraft in Iraq and not mission capable was not an option. Out of radio contact, the pilot in command made the call to return to the ship. Our flight manual also dictates flying no faster than 70 knots, which due to our fuel state and strong headwinds would have had us ditching in the water 100 miles from the ship. After apologizing to the chaplain for the colorful language he was hearing from the cockpit, we stared at the pilots’ window bowing and flexing for the rest of the transit as we flew back at 130 knots.

During our deployment, we also occasionally flew medical evacuation missions. One medevac to USNS *Comfort* (T-AH 20) was particularly memorable. The high temperatures in the gulf forced us to drastically reduce our fuel load and consequently our endurance. We encountered a 35-knot headwind that, combined with *Comfort* heading away from us at 20 knots, left us out of gas halfway from nowhere. This was the first and hopefully the last time in my aviation career that I will have to declare an emergency for minimum fuel. More than a few tense minutes were spent debating whether to land on the nearest deck unannounced and risk getting shot down, or wait until we could get a response from anyone in the middle of the night. Fortunately, *Kitty*