

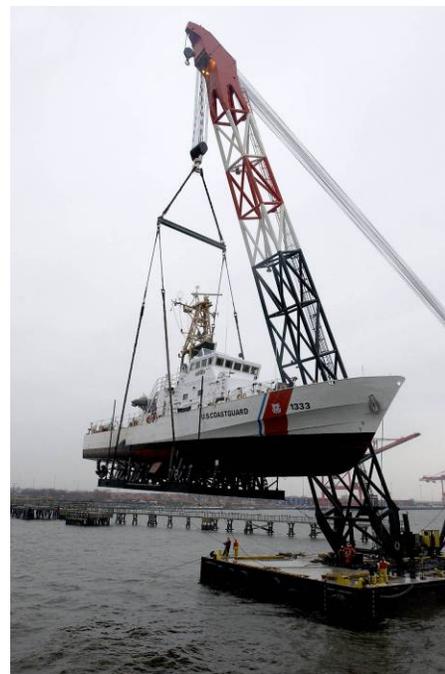
## “Tip of the Spear”: Combat Operations of Adak and the WPBs in Operation Iraqi Freedom

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The maritime conditions of Iraq and the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG) can greatly limit the operations of large naval vessels and warships. Due to this and the navy’s lack of in-shore patrol craft, a large part of the U.S. Navy’s request for Coast Guard assistance in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) centered on the service’s shallow-draft patrol boats. Cutters of the 110-foot Island Class, also known as WPBs, would serve as the mainstay of shallow-water operations. Commanded by LT Sean C. Mackenzie (Class of 1992), the deployment of the 110-foot patrol boat Adak serves as a snapshot of WPB operations in OIF. Deployment of the WPBs overseas would represent the first combat deployment of Coast Guard patrol boats since the Vietnam War, even though other Coast Guard assets had served in operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the 1990s.

In early February, the Coast Guard’s Atlantic Area Command deployed to the NAG the WPBs Adak, Aquidneck, Baranof and Wrangell. The 110s arrived in Bahrain at the beginning of March having ridden on board the Motor Vessel Industrial Challenger for thirty-five days. On March 5, a heavy-lift crane off-loaded the WPBs taking only six hours to set all four in the water. LT Mackenzie, Executive Officer LTJG Scott A. Rae (OCS Class of May 2000), and the crew ran Adak through sea trials for two days and on March 9, Adak and sister ship Aquidneck deployed to the NAG followed by Baranof and Wrangell on March 12.

In the days leading up to combat operations, Adak focused on maritime interdiction operations. Coalition vessels had restricted passage of local watercraft out of the Khawr Abd Allah (KAA) Waterway, thinking that these vessels might carry mines or escaping Iraqi officials.



*Heavy-lift crane loading 110-foot cutter Adak on board a Military Sealift Command ship destined for the Middle East.*



*Adak performing maritime interdiction operations on board a dhow typically used for regional commerce.*

By mid-March, local watercraft had attempted several breakouts with fleets of dhows and small boats and, on March 17, a large breakout consisting of sixty Iraqi watercraft attempted to evade Coalition units. With the vessels scattering in all directions, Adak, Wrangell and their small boats, aided by other Coalition units, managed to corral all of the Iraqi watercraft and board them.

None of the vessels carried escaping Iraqi leaders and all had discharged any illegal cargoes typical of small smuggling vessels. After boarding teams had thoroughly searched the dhows, Adak and the other patrol vessels allowed the watercraft to proceed along a specific route into the NAG.

In the early morning hours of March 20, Coalition forces initiated combat operations with air attacks against key military targets in Baghdad. In addition, Coalition forces had to secure Iraq's Khor al-Amaya Oil Terminal and Mina al Bakr Oil Terminal to prevent environmental attack by the Iraqi regime. On the evening of March 20, SEAL teams supported by Polish Special Forces personnel, stormed the oil facilities. During the operation, Mackenzie and Adak, along with Baranof, maintained security around the terminals to prevent reinforcement or escape by Iraqi military forces. After the SEALs cleared the terminals of Iraqi personnel, weapons and explosives, Coast Guard personnel from Port Security Units 311 and 313 arrived to secure the facilities.

Next Mackenzie received orders to patrol the KAA Waterway, so by the early morning hours of March 21, Adak had steamed up the KAA to serve as a guard ship. In fact, of the 146 Coalition naval units in the NAG, Adak stationed itself deepest in enemy territory and served as the "tip of the spear" for Coalition naval forces. During its early morning patrol, Adak and navy patrol Chinook surprised and stopped two down-bound Iraqi tugboats, including one towing a barge, and ordered them to anchor. At first, the vessels raised no suspicions for they ordinarily serviced tankers and smaller watercraft that plied local waters. But the two patrol vessels continued guarding the tugs and a special boarding team composed of Australian and American

explosives experts searched the tugs and barge and found concealed within them a total of seventy contact and acoustic mines. Had they been released, the mines could have sunk or heavily damaged Coalition naval vessels operating in the NAG. The team secured the tugs and Chinook transported the tug crews back to a Coalition naval vessel for processing. The captain of one of the mine-laying tugs admitted that the sight of Mackenzie's "white patrol boat" had prevented him from deploying his deadly cargo.

Throughout March 21, the captain and crew of Adak experienced a great deal of excitement. At 06:00, Australian and British frigates began naval fire support operations in what became known as "Five-Inch Friday." The warships poured nearly 200 rounds of four-and-a-half-and five-inch shells into the Iraqi defenses while Adak screened the vessels to ensure that no unauthorized watercraft approached. During this time, Mackenzie and his men felt buffeting from the explosions of hundreds of bombs and shells lobbed on shore. British Royal Marines, supported by U.S. Navy and Royal Navy hovercraft, commenced the amphibious assault on the Al Faw Peninsula; the largest amphibious operation carried out since the Korean War.



*A captured Iraqi Republican Guard crew member from the destroyed PB-90 gunboat. The POW suffered from hypothermia when rescued from the KAA Waterway and proved to be one of the first maritime POWs of the war.*

During the landings, an Iraqi PB-90 patrol boat had been cruising upstream on the KAA Waterway and positioned itself where it could threaten low-flying Coalition helicopters and provide early warning reports to land-based Iraqi forces on the Al Faw Peninsula. To engage the PB-90, the Coalition command center vectored in an AC-130 gunship, which destroyed the Iraqi vessel. Afterward, a Coalition helicopter spotted three surviving crewmembers floating down the KAA and notified Adak of their location. The WPB recovered the three hypothermic Iraqis at 8:30 a.m. and transferred the prisoners to an Australian naval vessel for processing. Coalition experts later identified the men as warrant officers from Iraq's Republican Guard.

After Coalition forces wrapped up the initial phase of combat operations, Coalition planners focused on opening the KAA Waterway to vessel traffic. Wrecks from the Iran-Iraq War and the First Gulf War still littered the KAA and its shores, but mines proved a greater concern. Some mines still remained in the waterway from Operation Desert Storm. Minesweeping operations began on March 22 with navy Sea Dragon helicopters towing minesweeping sleds along the waterway. Mackenzie received orders for Adak to join sister ship Wrangell, and navy patrol craft Chinook and Firebolt to escort U.S. Navy and Royal Navy minesweepers up the KAA. The process proved slow as the minesweepers proceeded at a rate of three knots up the forty-mile channel to the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr. The patrol boats had to stand off 1,000 yards from the minesweeping vessels and they often had to station themselves upriver from the minesweepers. On several occasions, the minesweepers located mines in waters previously navigated by the WPBs and, on one occasion, Adak's crew listened as the patrol boat contacted a mine that came to the surface and failed to detonate.

It took about a week to complete mine-clearing operations on the KAA and with Umm Qasr in Coalition hands, cargo vessels could begin steaming into the Iraqi port. Naval combat operations concluded near the end of March, but Mackenzie and Adak joined the other WPBs to



*Adak on patrol in the Northern Arabian Gulf.*

continue their force protection role and served as escorts while navy salvage vessels Catawba and Grapple removed obstructions in the waterway. On March 28, Coalition forces sent the first shipload of humanitarian aid into Umm Qasr on board the shallow draft Royal Fleet Auxiliary Sir Galahad under the escort of Adak, Wrangell, a minesweeper and patrol

craft Firebolt. Adak and its crew continued escort duties along the KAA into early April. On April 11, Adak escorted Iraq's first commercial shipment on board Motor Vessel Manar, which carried 700 tons of Red Crescent Society aid of food, water, medical supplies and transport vehicles. Meanwhile, Mackenzie received orders to return to base and, on April 12, Adak redeployed to Bahrain after completing a thirty-five day non-stop deployment to the NAG.

On April 9, organized resistance had ceased in Baghdad, followed in mid-April by a cessation of resistance in most other Iraqi cities. On May 1, President George Bush announced the end of combat operations in Iraq and the Coalition's offensive operations came to a close. During OIF, Adak, its sister ships and their crews brought many vital capabilities to the theater of operations. The patrol boats operated for many hours without maintenance in waters too shallow for most naval vessels and served as the fleet's workhorses in boarding, escort duty, force protection and maritime interdiction operations. The characteristic white hulls of the WPBs also provided a less antagonizing presence in a highly volatile region. As in past Coast Guard combat missions, such as Vietnam, Coast Guard patrol boats and personnel, such as LT Sean Mackenzie, exceeded all expectations in shallow-water and in-shore maritime operations. Given the frequency that hostilities erupt in the world's littoral regions, shallow-draft Coast Guard units and their specialized personnel will continue to play an important part in future naval operations.



*Crew of the Adak grouped on the bow of the 110-foot cutter during a rare break from patrol duties.*