

# War Zone Operations of the Buoy Tender *Walnut* in Operation Iraqi Freedom

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**Figure 1.** Buoy tender *Walnut* performing aids-to-navigation work during Operation Iraqi Freedom. (Coast Guard Collection)

Units and personnel of the United States Coast Guard and its predecessor services have served with distinction in every major American conflict, and 2003's Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) proved no exception to this rule. In OIF, the Coast Guard excelled in its specialties of port security, coastal and environmental security, and maritime interdiction operations. At the height of combat operations, 1,250 Coast Guard personnel served in OIF. Coast Guard vessels and land-based personnel brought many vital capabilities to the theater of operations, including aids-to-navigation.

Leading up to the March 2003 offensive that initiated OIF, planners believed that the Iraqi regime might engage in acts of

environmental warfare as it had at the end of the First Gulf War (1990-1991). United States Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) forwarded a request to the Coast Guard's Pacific Area (PACAREA) command for an ocean-going buoy tender for environmental disaster response. PACAREA selected the 225-foot buoy tender *Walnut*, home-ported in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Like other buoy tenders in the class, *Walnut* carried a spilled-oil recovery system that could skim over 400 gallons of oil per minute and pump the oil into specially designed 20,000-gallon inflatable barges.

NAVCENT's request for *Walnut* went up to the Department of Defense's Central Command (CENTCOM) and on to



**Figure 2.** Buoy tender *Walnut* underway in the Northern Arabian Gulf with a 110-foot Coast Guard patrol boat in the foreground. (Coast Guard Collection)

the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The request specified an arrival date no later than February 28. Before departure, the buoy tender had to prepare for combat operations. It received extra small arms and two additional .50 caliber machine guns for a total of four .50 calibers along the deck rail. This provided added firepower to defend against potential small-craft attacks while serving in the theater of operations. *Walnut* also added four additional crewmembers, including one to aid with chemical, biological and radiologi-



**Figure 3.** On the bridge of buoy tender *Walnut* while underway in Operation Iraqi Freedom. (Coast Guard Collection)

cal (CBR) defenses and three others to support twenty-four-hour radio coverage. *Walnut's* crew also received pre-deployment small arms training and undertook CBR drills.

One month prior to the arrival deadline, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had not signed the deployment order. And, with *Walnut's* transit speed of around twelve knots, PACAREA planners realized that the buoy tender had to get underway at least a month before that date regardless of formal authorization. Lacking official sanction, *Walnut* got underway and began its passage to the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG) on January 18, 2003. For the first leg, *Walnut* steamed from Honolulu to Guam, a base on the outside limit of the buoy tender's normal area of responsibility. At Guam, *Walnut* loaded extra equipment for oil-spill capability and awaited the official deployment order. Rumsfeld signed the order after *Walnut* had laid over for a few days, so the tender departed Guam and continued on its way.

*Walnut's* crew had new concerns



**Figure 4.** Buoy deck operations seen from the flying bridge of *Walnut*. (Coast Guard Collection)

after departing Guam. Piracy had remained a threat to commercial shipping in the Philippine archipelago, especially for small, slow, coastal freighters with a low freeboard and *Walnut* resembled these vessels. To counter the threat of piratical attack, *Walnut's* captain placed extra lookouts on the bridge and fantail, providing each individual with night vision goggles during the evening, and the crew prepared fire hoses and small arms for rapid response. *Walnut* transited the area without incident and steamed on to Singapore and, from there, proceeded to the NAG to rendezvous with the OIF's Coalition fleet.

On February 27, a day before *Walnut's* arrival deadline, the buoy tender moored at Mohammad Al-Ahmad Kuwait Naval Base. By that time, the tender had already changed its operational command to the United States Navy's Task Force 55. It was the first out-of-hemisphere combat deployment of a Coast Guard buoy tender

since the Vietnam War. For the next two weeks, *Walnut's* law enforcement team checked United Nations resolution compliance of commercial vessels bound to and from Iraq. They did so by boarding in-bound commercial vessels to search for contraband cargo, and checking out-bound vessels for illegal Iraqi oil. After helping alleviate the backlog of vessels requiring compliance boardings, *Walnut* took up station as the guard ship overseeing the holding area for commercial vessels steaming in and out of Iraq. In late March, *Walnut* also supported Coast Guard Port Security Units that occupied the newly captured Gulf Oil Platforms (GOPLATs) by shipping supplies to the GOPLATs and unloading them with its 40,000-pound capacity buoy crane.

*Walnut* had been deployed to the NAG to defend against environmental warfare in the form of oil spills. However, the buoy tender's primary capability was aids-to-navigation. The decrepit buoy system



**Figure 5.** Aged Iraqi buoy showing marine growth encrustation and dilapidated upper works. (Coast Guard Collection)

marking the channel along the Khor Abd Allah (KAA) Waterway leading to Iraq's primary port of Umm Qasr proved very dangerous for deep-draft commercial vessels. So, early in April, *Walnut's* crew began surveying the waterway's old Iraqi buoys, beginning with an aerial assessment from High-Endurance Cutter *Boutwell's* HH-65 helicopter. And, on April 1, personnel from *Walnut* boarded the 110-foot cutter *Baranof* to survey the KAA's buoy system from the water. The survey team found the buoys in poor condition and none were located on station.

*Walnut's* crew had heard rumors that a warehouse in the old port of Umm Qasr housed a full set of new buoys. During the *Baranof* trip, the survey party stopped at Umm Qasr and located the warehouse. A few days later, *Walnut* also transited the



**Figure 6.** Divers entering the water to survey a buoy in the murky waters of Iraq's Khor Abd Allah Waterway. (Coast Guard Collection)



**Figure 7.** Divers working from a Coast Guard small boat supporting *Walnut's* aids-to-navigation operations. (Coast Guard Collection)

KAA to survey the waterway's channel marker system and moored in Umm Qasr. By April 9, *Walnut* received orders from CENTCOM to rebuild the channel marking system. The buoy tender on-loaded supplies in Bahrain for repairing and replacing the old buoys and got underway to begin aids-to-navigation operations along the KAA Waterway.

Aids-to-navigation work along the waterway proved more dangerous than in *Walnut's* home waters of Hawai'i and the Pacific. The current flowing down the KAA could reach a rate of four knots, or nearly five miles per hour. In addition, there existed the threat of booby-trapped buoys or floating mines caught in buoy anchor



**Figure 8.** *Walnut's* deck gang posing with a newly raised Iraqi buoy. (Coast Guard Collection)



**Figure 9.** *Walnut* returning to its homeport in Hawaii. (Coast Guard Collection)



**Figure 10.** Homecoming for a *Walnut* crew member. (Coast Guard Collection)

chains. With the Arabian summer approaching, physical work proved extremely hot and, when raised on deck, the Iraqi buoys brought with them the stench of accumulated marine growth and clouds of flies attracted by the smell. And, the war-zone threat level remained high, so *Walnut's* crew remained vigilant with their weapons locked and loaded.

*Walnut's* deck crew raised each of the old buoys and replaced them with new ones equipped with solar-powered LED lights. Within a month, the buoy tender had replaced all the old channel markers with new freshly-painted buoys that properly marked the channel day or night. On May 5<sup>th</sup> *Walnut* placed the final buoy and began preparations for the return voyage. In mid-May, the tender departed the NAG for the forty-five day voyage back to Hawai'i. *Walnut* never did use its oil spill capability, but proved vital to aids-to-navigation work on the KAA, ensuring the safe transit of Coalition vessels and humanitarian aid to the port of Umm Qasr.

During OIF, the Coast Guard performed many vital functions, including aids-to-navigation. Buoy tender *Walnut* and its crew added an important chapter to the Service's history and lived up to the Coast Guard's motto *Semper Paratus*, "always ready."



**Figure 11.** *Walnut's* crew takes a break during aids-to-navigation work to pose for a group photograph. (Coast Guard Collection)