

Preserving Our History for Future Generations

USCG Group Charleston LEDET

Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm

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On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Within a few days the Iraqi military pillaged the country, seized hostages, drove the Kuwaiti government into exile, and presented a potential threat to Saudi Arabia. In response, President George H.W. Bush made it clear this aggression would not stand. He led the United States and a coalition of more than 30 nations in diplomatic, economic, and military strategy against Iraq known as Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm.

At the request of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Coast Guard ordered several Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDET) to the region. A team of four from Coast Guard Group Charleston; LTJG Walt Westin (Officer in Charge), BM1 Tom Dougherty, MK2 Wayne Setliff and BM3 Ray Leal, deployed to the Persian Gulf and were assigned to the USS NICHOLAS (FFG-47).

Prior to deploying, a friend of mine asked "I hope this isn't all about oil, is it?" I wasn't sure how to reply. So, I didn't. I just knew Uncle Sam wanted me to go.

Our duty in the Persian Gulf was to enforce the United Nations embargo on vessels in and out of ports within Iraq and Kuwait. To assist our LEDET in accomplishing this mission, we trained navy personnel on procedures and tactics of conducting at-sea boardings. The LEDET also stood mine-watch in the heavily mine laden waters of the Gulf.

An Associated Press report on November 30, 1990, stated: "Iraq must withdraw from Kuwait and release its hostages by January 15th or risk attack from the U.S and its allies in the Persian Gulf. The United Nations Security Council authorized the use of force against Iraq with a 12 to 2 vote. Secretary of State James Baker says the UN Resolution is self-executing; meaning an attack against Iraq could be launched without further action by the Security Council. Baker says before taking any action, the administration would consult with Congress as well as countries that would take part in a military operation. Iraq says it will ignore the UN ultimatum. Iraq's ambassador to the UN says it will be his country's destiny if the United States starts a war. He also vows that Iraq won't kneel but will rise to this responsibility".

In early December the NICHOLAS concluded a five-day dockside availability in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, for a project I hoped would never be needed. We also conducted several boardings, which included a pilothouse drifting near the anchored USNS MERCY. It was undetermined why there was only a wooden pilothouse, but my guess was the vessel hit a mine. Interestingly, a container of warm coffee and fresh bananas was found onboard. The floating



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hazard was towed away from the MERCY and .50 caliber target practice was used to break it into smaller pieces.

By the end of December, the NICHOLAS was the northern most allied ship in the Persian Gulf and vessel traffic in and out of Iraq or Kuwait had stopped. Most of the captains from previously boarded vessels stated they wanted to get their ships out of those ports before January in fear of war and having their vessels destroyed. And that is exactly what happened. Any vessel movement immediately after the war began was destroyed by allied forces.

Since NICHOLAS no longer conducted boardings, the LEDET was fully integrated into the ship's General Quarters battle stations. Petty Officer Leal and I were assigned the .50 caliber machine gun on the 03 deck.

The evening of January 1, 1991, USS NICHOLAS and two Kuwaiti vessels, the AL SANBOUK and ISTIQLAL lay at anchor. An exchange of ship tours was conducted. Kuwaiti sailors came aboard NICHOLAS, and we went aboard the AL SANBOUK. The crew was very friendly. They, like the rest of us, wanted a peaceful resolution to the crisis. But if not, they were prepared to lead the coalition forces by sea in their extremely well-armed ships. These were the only two Kuwaiti naval vessels to evade capture. When the land, sea and air invasion of Kuwait began, one of the vessels was already underway; the other had to fight their way out of the harbor. All other vessels were captured or destroyed by Iraq.

These men had not seen their families since before the invasion and didn't know if they were dead or alive. They didn't know if they still had a home. The numerous atrocities Iraq was inflicting on the Kuwaiti people was barbaric.

As our motor whaleboat pulled away and headed back to the NICHOLAS, the Kuwaiti sailors shouted out "THANK YOU! We'll see you again, in Kuwait!"

It was at that moment I realized the answer to my friend's question whether it was all about oil. The answer for me was, I'm here to get these people back to their country. Back to their families. The very same thing I would want.

In early January as tensions worsened with Saddam Hussein continuing to defy the United Nations Security Council demands to withdraw from Kuwait, the NICHOLAS was serving in the northern Persian Gulf as an advance Combat Search and Rescue ship. The Coast Guard was utilized for their search and rescue experience. For several days the NICHOLAS and Kuwaiti vessels conducted ship maneuvers and Combat Search and Rescue drills. January also brought numerous Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) drills aboard ship. Our masks were now carried at our side all the time. Mines continued to inundate the area. Nearly every day an additional mine was spotted.



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When Iraq failed to meet the January 15, 1991, deadline for withdraw set by the United Nations, the coalition forces transitioned from Operation Desert Shield to Desert Storm. Shortly after midnight on the morning of January 17th, the NICHOLAS went to General Quarters as the air raids began. Ships to the south of us fired Tomahawk missiles destined for targets in Iraq and Kuwait.

On the night of January 18th and into the 19th the NICHOLAS engaged Iraqi garrisons on nine oil platforms in the ad-Dorra oil field. These platforms were a strategic location off the coast of Kuwait and utilized as an observation outpost for ship movements and air-defense. They were heavily loaded with anti-aircraft guns and shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles.

Navy Seahawk helicopters and two Army Kiowas helicopters were launched from the NICHOLAS under the cover of darkness. The helicopters and NICHOLAS, along with the two Kuwaiti ships, neutralized the enemy garrisons with the use of 76mm guns and hellfire missiles. During the engagement an incoming missile was reported, and the NICHOLAS launched chaff and took evasive action.

When smoke from the platforms settled and the secondary explosions ceased, NICHOLAS moved in for survivors. Petty Officer Leal and I at our battle station manned the machine gun with our sights shifting between the platforms and an Iraqi small boat. LTJG Westin and Petty Officer Setliff searched the surrendering prisoners as they came aboard NICHOLAS from the Iraqi small boat and the NICHOLAS motor whaleboat. The motor whaleboat was used to retrieve Iraqis that were in the water and from the platforms. Afterwards, Setliff stood guard over the prisoners while Mr. Westin assisted the ship's surgeon and corpsman. He had his hands deep in Iraqi chest cavities holding pressure where the doctor instructed him. For other casualties having less severe wounds, the surgeon told our LT to sew them up. Having never given someone sutures before he was somewhat nervous of leaving a scar. The doc made a comment about just get it done; so LT commenced his brief surgical career with needle and thread. By sunrise on the 19th the count was 23 prisoners and five killed in action. These were the first enemy prisoners captured in the Persian Gulf War.

One minute we're blowing them up. The next minute were saving their lives, feeding them, and washing their clothes. They're humans. But the reality is they could have killed us.

I later stood guard at the room where naval officers interrogated the POW's. At one point the GQ alarm sounded again. I wasn't sure exactly what to do... continue guarding the prisoners or go to my GQ station. So, I asked both officers if either had ever handled a 9mm before. One said yes, so I handed him the 9mm, told him there's a round in the chamber and I'll return later for it, then I went to my GQ station. The following day all POW and KIA were flown off the ship.

Charleston LEDET had an unforgettable deployment aboard USS NICHOLAS and the roles the U.S. Coast Guard played in the Persian Gulf War. From assisting the NICHOLAS crew during underway replenishment with various ships including the USS Wisconsin; the recovery of a



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downed USAF F-16 pilot from the waters off the Kuwaiti coast; the countless nerve-racking hours of mine watch on the bow; the NICHOLAS heading to Iraqi vessels that were attacked by fighter jets to look for survivors; escorting the hospital ships USNS MERCY and COMFORT; and many other undertakings. We received our assignment orders, transferred off the ship and returned home before Kuwait was liberated. I can only hope the Kuwaitis I met on New Year's Day had returned home safely to their families... as I did mine.

