Last Call for PB MK III

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As most of you know by now, Special Boat Unit TWENTY FOUR at NAB Little Creek, VA, and Special Boat Unit THIRTEEN at NAB Coronado, CA, were disestablished on September 30, 1993. When the disestablishment rumors were made official late last year, we realized that OCEAN VENTURE 93 would be SBU-24's last major exercise - and the last call for LANTCOM Mark III Patrol Boats.

Unlike the west coast Special Boat Units, SBU-20 and SBU-24 were realigned in 1991 to be craft-specific: Rigid-hull Inflatable Boats (RIBs) were assigned to SBU-20, and seven 65' Mark III Patrol Boats were assigned to SBU-24. Two patrol boats were turned over to NSWC Dahlgren and one was transferred to SBU-26 in 1992. Although our four remaining patrol boats look virtually identical, there is a considerable difference in their engineering plants. PB731 and

Unscheduled underway replenishment with USS Boone (FFG 28).

SBU-24 (1)

SBU-24 (2)

PB778 are outfitted with three conventional 8V71 diesel engines. PB735 and PB758 were modified in 1989 to accept the larger and more efficient 8V92 diesels. Training focus for our patrol boats was tailored toward anticipated exercise requirements.

OCEAN VENTURE is a JCS-directed, USCINCLANT-sponsored exercise which includes formation and activation of a quick-reaction Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) at a simulated deployment location. At the exercise mid-planning conference, it was decided that four patrol boats would participate in OCEAN VENTURE 93. Two patrol boats would provide operational support to SOCLANT's JSOTF in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. The other two boats would act as surface opposition forces (OPFOR) in support of the Joint Exercise Control Group (JECG) in Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico. Advance planning was initiated in preparation for the first-ever four boat deployment to the Caribbean.

Long range transits are nothing new for SBU-24. Over the past two years, we have executed round-trip and one-way transits to Panama for training and to transfer custody of a patrol boat to SBU-26. Last year, a two-boat detachment conducted a 5000 nautical mile round trip transit to Trinidad and Tobago for Foreign Internal Defense (FID) operations in support of OCEAN VENTURE 92. However, a four-boat deployment would present additional logistical and maintenance challenges and requirements, especially for craft that ranged from one to five years beyond their intended fifteen-year service life.

As a Naval Reserve Force (NRF) command, SBU-24 has 86 reservists assigned along with the 76 active duty personnel. Because the reserve component has no assigned craft, they routinely train on our patrol boats during drill weekends. OCEAN VENTURE 93 offered an outstanding Active Duty for Training (ADT) opportunity for our reserve boat crews.

To validate our readiness to deploy, Operational Readiness Evaluations (ORE) were successfully completed in February and March by Detachments ALFA (8V92 crews), BRAVO (8V71 crews) and CHARLIE (reserve crews). Logistics Requirements (LOGREQ) for fuel, pier space and fresh water were submitted to the appropriate agencies and a Plan of Intended Movement (PIM) was drawn up. For the transits between Norfolk, VA, and Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, refueling/logistics stops would be made at Moorehead City, NC; Mayport, FL; Freeport, Grand Bahamas; Crooked Island, Bahamas; Grand Turk, Turks and Caicos Islands; Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic; and San Juan, Puerto Rico. The PIM dictated a fourteen-day transit, and was adjustable to allow for weather delays. Because the length of the transit lent itself to a seventeen-day reserve ADT period, we decided that two reserve crews and two active duty crews would man the boats during deployment and redeployment, and four active duty crews would man the boats during the exercise itself. Primary objectives during each transit were to conduct underway training aimed toward qualification of personnel as Boat Captain, Chief Engineer, Patrol Officer and Combat Craft Crewman (SNEC 9533); inport and underway FXP-6 NSW exercise sustainment training; and underway weapons training and gunnery exercises.

On the evening of 13 April, Det ALFA and Det CHARLIE departed SBU-24 for the 2000 nautical mile transit. The weather and sea state cooperated all the way to Florida, where a recent storm had left 10-12 foot seas offshore south of Mayport along their track. An extra day spent in Mayport allowed the seas to calm and enabled the boats to receive an overnight express package from SBU-24 with repair parts for a critical piece of equipment on PB778 - the toilet! The remainder of the transit went smoothly and the boats arrived at Naval Special Warfare Unit FOUR (NSWU-4) ahead of schedule on the morning of 27 April. They were greeted by Det BRAVO and Maintenance Support Team

(MST) personnel who had flown in by C-5 two days earlier. Over the next two days, Det CHARLIE (reserves) turned over its boats to Det BRAVO, and the MST replaced a burnt-out transmission on PB735. On 29 April, Det ALFA steamed to Gallows Bay,

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Christiansted, St Croix, and the reserve crews returned to CONUS via comair.

From 29 April-13 May, Det ALFA, now designated a Naval Special Warfare Task Unit (NSWTU), provided operational support to the JSOTF in St Croix. Support missions included special operations forces (SOF) insertion and extraction, coastal patrol and interdiction, search and rescue (SAR) support and submarine at-sea rendezvous. Meanwhile, Det BRAVO provided surface craft OPFOR support to the JECG in Puerto Rico. Following the scripted OPFOR scenario, they conducted enemy coastal patrols, surveillance and intelligence gathering operations, SAR support and small boat attacks against the amphibious task force. Both PB detachments were on time and on station for every exercise requirement, and were commended across the board by SOCLANT and the JECG.

On 13 May, Det ALFA returned to NSWU-4, and two reserve crews arrived in Puerto Rico via comair. The next day, following NSWU-4's change of command ceremony, Det ALFA turned its boats over to Det CHARLIE and all hands prepared for redeployment. The transit back by Det BRAVO and Det CHARLIE began the morning of 15 May with clear skies and calm seas and continued without incident until our arrival at Crooked Island. The boats were notified that the fuel barge had been delayed and no fuel would be available for three days. At this point, we remembered our motto: Semper Gumby (Latin for "always flexible"). Hasty arrangements were made on the island's only telephone to refuel at Grand Exuma Island, fifty miles out of our way. However, twenty minutes out of Crooked Island, a U.S. Navy warship was spied on the horizon and hailed on the bridge-to-bridge radio. An unscheduled underway replenishment was coordinated with USS Boone (FFG-28). Each patrol boat received 1000 gallons of JP-5 and a bag of steaks. Our hats off to CDR Mike Dunaway and his men, whose willingness to support enabled us to remain on PIM and saved us several thousand dollars in OPTAR. The rest of the transit was problem-free and the four boats arrived on schedule at SBU-24 on 25 May.

That the first-ever four patrol boat deployment to the Caribbean was a tremendous success can be attributed not only to the professionalism of the boat crews and the deployed MST, but to the dedication and focus of command personnel in preparing four aging craft for a 4000 nautical mile transit. With proper care and feeding, the Mark III Patrol Boats can still do the job.

Although OCEAN VENTURE 93 was SBU-24's last major exercise, it may not be our final long range transit. We were recently tasked to begin planning for delivery of two patrol boats to Panama in August. PB735 will be turned over to SBU-26 in Panama, and PB758 will eventually be transferred to SBU-12 in Coronado, CA.

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