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Army Divers Survey July 14th Bridge Debris

By Rick Haverinen
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Left to right, Sgt. Brett Taake, Staff Sgt. Joseph Wulczynski, 1st Lt. Charles Martin, and Sgt. Eric Bailey prepare an inflatable boat for launching on the Tigris River in Baghdad, Iraq, beneath the July 14th Bridge. The squad from the U.S. Army's 74th Engineer Dive Team was in Baghdad Dec. 15 to measure debris in the river from an earlier incarnation of the bridge, which was destroyed during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. [USACE Photo by Rick Haverinen]

Baghdad, Iraq - An Army diver was getting to the bottom of Iraq's 1958 revolution Dec. 15.

Sgt. Daniel Gorman was the only member selected to wear the wet suit and submerge in the Tigris River of a six-Soldier squad from the 74th Engineer Dive Team sent up from Kuwait Naval Base to do some measurements of a damaged Baghdad landmark.

The "July 14th Bridge" was installed over the Tigris River in 1962 to commemorate the 1958 coup in which King Faisal II and others were assassinated and

the military seized power. In 1968, Saddam Hussein continued the new tradition of conquest as the Baath party took over. U.S. forces destroyed the original span during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and a replacement bridge was attacked by Coalition forces in 2003. The current bridge, still bearing the original revolutionary name, opened Oct. 25, 2003.

Broken spans and supporting pillars of the 1962 bridge and the bridge destroyed in 1991 are still submerged in the Tigris. The Government of Iraq's Ministry of Construction and Housing sent a request to Gulf Region Division, US Army Corps of Engineers, to survey the wreckage.

GRD, headquartered in Baghdad, is a joint effort comprised of nearly 600 Civilians, Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen. The Corps provides quality and sustainable engineering in support of civil/military construction in Iraq. When requested to survey the wreckage under the bridge, GRD contacted the dive team to provide the scuba work.

"We're gathering all the critical underwater data that we would need to possibly remove this bridge later," said Staff Sgt. Daniel Kennedy, who was crew chief for the mission.

Threat conditions have eased enough in Baghdad that Iraqi and Coalition Forces reconstruction planners are thinking ecologically. The Government of Iraq's Ministry of Water Resources and the Baghdad Amanant (municipal government), wanted to know if the way the old bridge was laying on the river bottom would affect erosion or river flow. The various Iraqi governmental offices are also concerned that the considerable amount of heavy debris could hinder any further development of the Tigris for river traffic.

The Army divers visiting Baghdad are a portion of a 25-Soldier team from Fort Eustis, Va., deployed to Kuwait since January. Although this particular mission required only Gorman to work in the water, the five other members are a necessary part of the job, looking after Gorman's safety, operating the boat, recording data, and doing the heavy lifting. They work, eat, sleep and relax together in the same barracks room at military compound in the International Zone.

"I think the advantage we have over other military units in the Army is the fact that we're so small," said Staff Sgt. Joseph Wulczynski, who operated the inflatable boat that Gorman used as his dive platform. "We're very close knit. I know almost all the guys in the dive field right now, including the guys who are stationed in Fort Leonard Wood, (Mo.), down in Panama City, Fla. and Hawaii. I'm on a first-name basis with a lot of them."

Left to right, Sgt. Brett Taake and Staff Sgt. Joseph Wulczynski prevent their inflatable boat from drifting away while suits up on the Tigris River in Baghdad, Iraq, beneath the July 14th Bridge. The squad from the U.S. Army's 74th Engineer Dive Team was in Baghdad Dec. 15 to measure debris in the river from an earlier incarnation of the bridge, which was destroyed during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. [USACE Photo by Rick Haverinen]

The Army divers have a six-month career school that teaches scuba and surface-supply air techniques but also pours on the technology and science.

"As with any kind of diving, you have physics and physiology," Kennedy said. "There are a lot of bad things that can happen to you while you're underwater. So you need to know about all those so you make sure that doesn't happen."

"This work isn't just physical," said Sgt. Eric Bailey, who stood by in the boat with

his scuba equipment ready in case Gorman encountered trouble. “There’s a technical aspect that involves a lot of training and on-the-job experience. It requires a broader understanding of technology because we handle things like side scan sonar and hydrographic survey equipment.”

Kennedy said Army divers regularly do “anything you can think of underwater, from underwater salvage, to demolition, construction, ships husbandry, surveys, side scan sonar measurements, pretty much the gamut.”

Kennedy said he most enjoys demolition work and underwater welding and cutting.

“Anytime you get to do some welding under water, people don’t usually think of those two things going together very well, but we can do it,” Kennedy said.

The U.S. Army has a total of 160 divers and they are principally stationed at Fort Eustis and Hawaii. They are on temporary duty assignments the majority of the year and work jobs all over the United States. This team has members that have also travelled to Korea, Vietnam, Oman, Qatar, Corsica and France.

With more than 4,000 projects valued at $6.9 billion already complete and another $2.6 billion for approximately 400 projects underway, GRD and the Coalition Forces working with their Iraqi partners are building a strong foundation for Iraq’s future.

Staff Sgt. Daniel Kennedy, left, observes while Staff Sgt. Joseph Wulczynski helps diver Sgt. Daniel Gorman with his tether in the Tigris River in Baghdad, Iraq, beneath the July 14th Bridge. The squad from the U.S. Army’s 74th Engineer Dive Team was in Baghdad Dec. 15 to measure debris in the river from an earlier incarnation of the bridge, which was destroyed during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. [USACE Photo by Rick Haverinen]

Note: Rick Haverinen is a public affairs specialist with the Gulf Region Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Iraq. For more information, contact public affairs by phone at 540-542-1443, by e-mail to CEGRD.PAO@usace.army.mil, or visit www.grd.usace.army.mil <http://www.grd.usace.army.mil/> .