

# MEBA Officers Star in Operation

Coming off rave reviews for their impressive performance in the hugely successful Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), MEBA members are making waves in a blockbuster sequel that is promising to be bigger and better. Imaginatively tagged with the moniker “Operation Iraqi Freedom 2,” the Military Sealift Command has projected that 24 million square feet of cargo will be shipped to and from the Middle East in “OIF 2004” which began in January and could run through June. During the first OIF, about 21 million square feet of cargo was delivered to U.S. forces overseas.

The Pentagon’s massive rotation of roughly 240,000 military personnel, along with each division’s necessary equipment, will presumably constitute the largest troop rotation since World War II. Defense planners estimate that 110,000 fresh forces will be poured into the Iraqi theater while 140,000 tired troops, most who have been in the region since hostilities began, are coming home. A Kuwaiti-based logistics official pointed out that OIF 2 was like the Normandy invasion “in both directions.”

The lion’s share of our fighting forces are being flown by air but 95% of their combat-essential equipment are shipping out aboard a slew of U.S.-flagged vessels. OIF 2003 was praised as the most efficient sealift ever with kudos handed out all around for the “phenomenal” state of readiness of our mariners and their vessels. But OIF 2004 is designed on an even grander scale with the ‘lessons learned’ from the first operation certain to help realize even smoother sailing.



The Combat Stores ship USNS SATURN took part in multi-national exercises based on the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Crewmembers took part in board, search and seizure operations. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy.

## ‘We Did It Before, and We’ll Do It Again’

Just as in Part I of the OIF sealift, the LMSRs are leading the way. These Large Medium Speed Roll-On Roll-Off vessels, each capable of lugging over 300,000 square feet of cargo, have received little lag time between sealifts. MEBA officers proudly serve aboard 11 of these floating behemoths, managed by Patriot Contract Services, including the newly constructed USNS BENAVIDEZ that was called into action soon after sailing out of the yard. LMSRs were slotted for service as early as November 2002 and many members serving aboard those vessels are making their fifth or sixth trips into the region.

MEBA members also serve on the majority of the Ready Reserve Force (RRF) fleet vessels (managed by Keystone, Marine

Transport Lines, Mormac Marine & Patriot). The Maritime Administration maintains oversight of the ships while they lie in wait (in Reduced Operating Status) at their respective berths around the country. However, the Military Sealift Command assumes control once the vessels are placed into Full Operating Status (FOS) though MarAd stays involved in the decisionmaking process.

When the call comes to shift a ship into FOS, the appropriate Union halls are informed and MEBA officials fill the available jobs by seniority. MEBA satisfied crewing requirements in remarkable fashion and well ahead of time during OIF 1 even though multiple vessels were activated at once, with no notice and often on weekends, or after the close of business.

# Iraqi Freedom – the Sequel

MEBA Union hall officials and members have mastered the drill and the second huge ramp-up in just over a year has been steaming ahead like a smooth running engine. Although the second phase of the Operation is proving even larger, the experiences of the first go-round have truly helped refine the process. "I don't foresee any problems in ramping up militarily useful vessels for OIF 2 that are under contract with MEBA," President Ron Davis ascertained, "...as always the Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association is ready to serve."

## A Decided Advantage

MEBA officers are recognized as the most highly qualified mariners sailing today and they enjoy a decided advantage with the expertise lent to them by the Calhoun MEBA Training School.

Seagoing labor in this country endures the most rigorous preparation in the world to secure necessary licensing and documentation. Our training school affords our members unparalleled continuing education that keeps them at the top of their game. In addition to the required qualifications to serve aboard ship, mariners sailing on Government vessels in FOS are expected to meet a series of additional requirements and certifications. Much of these needs are taken care of by the Government Vessel operations course at the School that includes computer-based Shipboard Automated Maintenance Management (SAMM) instruction as well as Chemical Biological Radiological-Defense (CBR-D) training and Damage Control. Among many other things, the course also puts a spotlight on engineering systems utilized aboard the LMSRs. Members heading into the Gulf have also

enthusiastically taken advantage of the Small Arms course that the School offers.

## "Forward...From the Sea"

Besides the well-catalogued contributions of the LMSRs and the Ready Reserve Force, there are a plethora of MEBA-crewed vessels supporting the cause. The military continues to contract commercial U.S. flagships to carry key cargoes to the Gulf on an infrequent basis. These include ships involved in the Maritime Security Program.

Members serving aboard several maritime prepositioning vessels chartered by the MSC are helping to make an impact including the latest prepo ship - the USNS LCPL ROY M. WHEAT. An exorbitantly long conversion period sidelined the WHEAT for OIF 2003 but MSC was delighted and relieved when this Maritime Prepositioning Force (Enhanced) vessel finally received its Certificate of Inspection signaling the end of its shipyard stay. MSC promptly ordered the Keystone-contracted WHEAT into the Persian Gulf



The CAPE RACE, an RRF ship berthed in Portsmouth, VA, was tapped for OIF 2 service in early February. Transiting through the Straits of Gibraltar with Morocco's Atlas mountains in the background is (l-r) Spec. 4 Carraballo, Captain Pat Wright, Chief Engineer Jim Mathews, and Chief Mate Phil O'Connel.

to support our troops. MEBA members, serving aboard the ship both on deck and in the engine room, were happy to go.

MEBA is also supporting our country aboard 41 Naval Fleet Auxiliary Force vessels and Special Mission ships that provide underway replenishment and crucial support to our Navy on a perennial basis. MEBA civilian mariners (CivMars) aboard these vessels include oilers, ocean tugs, hospital and ammunition ships among others. These CivMars are constantly on call for their country. Anthrax, Smallpox and CBR-D preparation are second nature for these mariners who keep the Navy mission-ready on a global basis.

One of the MSC Combat Stores vessels with MEBA officers aboard took a central role in a multi-nation proliferation security exercise staged recently. Sea Saber 2004 was held in the Arabian Sea from January 11-17 and the MEBA-crewed USNS SATURN was used as part of a maritime interdiction scenario.

Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) members believe these types of exercises aid in combating terrorists trying to transport weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The drill involved the interception and search of a ship suspected of carrying equipment and materials related to WMD. Under the exercise scenario, a CH-46 helicopter transported heavily armed U.S. Marines and Spanish counterparts to the SATURN, which was outfitted to mimic a merchant ship carrying concealed and biological weapons. U.S. warfare commanders watched the drill and coordinated the assault from a television screen in a special operations room aboard the Navy ship USS PELELIU.

## MEBA Officers Star in Operation Iraqi Freedom the Sequel



The USNS YANO took on cargo in Jacksonville before heading into the Persian Gulf as part of OIF 2. Left to right is the YANO's 3rd A/E John Fitek, 1st A/E Chris Bolduc and Chief Engineer Claude Pfeffer.



### "It's Part of the Gig Here"

Since the buildup to the March '03 war in Iraq, a necessary evil of sailing aboard ships under MSC control has been the requirement that mariners must be immunized against both Smallpox and Anthrax. The Government had a logistics nightmare on its hands during the first OIF as they attempted to get all crews inoculated before vessels penetrated high-threat areas. Complicating matters is the policy that mariners who have certain medical problems are not eligible for the Smallpox vaccine and therefore cannot sail as part of the crew. USNS YANO Chief Engineer Claude Pfeffer pointed out that, "no one wanted to take them - but it's part of the gig here."

Initial fears that vaccination requirements might seriously diminish the pool of available mariners were alleviated during OIF 1. Seafaring men and women rose to the challenge and MEBA was pleased that the process went so smoothly for our members. Challenges involving inoculations during OIF 2 appear marginal. Obviously, mariners sailing in OIF 2004 who didn't participate in the first Operation are subject to both shots. But mariners who sailed

The Calhoun MEBA Training School's Government Vessel Operations course provides essential knowledge for mariners shipping out on MSC vessels. Among many other things, the course includes instruction on CBR-D, Damage Control, Shipboard Security and engineering systems aboard LMSRs.

in support of OIF 2003 won't need more Smallpox shots since the immunizations are good for ten years. Anthrax vaccinations involve a series of six shots over a period of months for maximum resistance so repeat mariners in this Operation will only have to pick up from where they left off on the inoculation schedule.

### "Pretty Much Business As Usual..."

The United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM), DoD's provider of air, land and sea transportation, stated that, "the current mission demands a heightened focus on synchronization of lift assets into and out of the Central Command's theater of operations." MSC revealed that this Operation involves more combat service support equipment instead of the massive volumes

of combat gear required in OIF 2003. In addition, members are shipping huge quantities of equipment to be used in the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq.

Much of the drama that mariners experienced in their first OIF 2003 mission has evaporated now that official hostilities have ceased and members have gotten a good overview of the situation. "They were fitting us with gas masks [during OIF 1] and preparing us for the worst," Brother Pfeffer remembered. "We didn't know what to expect the first time we went over there. Now we know what we're getting into." Now, despite continued heightened security and the company of armed 'Guardian Mariners,' Chief Pfeffer reported, "it's pretty much business as usual." ✕