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LCDR Holly Harrison, '95

Guardian, Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Bronze Star Recipient

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As a young high school student, LCDR Holly R. Harrison, '95, probably never imagined that she would one day become the first woman to command a Coast Guard vessel in a combat zone. Harrison knew that she wanted to continue the family tradition of service to one's country. However, it's doubtful that she envisioned herself in 12 years becoming the first woman in the Coast Guard to receive a bronze star.

"I knew I wanted to go to sea," said Harrison. "I wanted to be on the water where the action was, making a difference."

Originally Harrison, a U.S. Naval Sea Cadet in high school, was interested in joining the Navy. However, during one summer when no opportunities with the Navy were available, she went to a Coast Guard recruiting office in Alexandria, V.A. to gain experience in the field.

"After 2 weeks of exposure to cool videos and other recruiting tools, I decided to check out the USCG. I spent all of my remaining two-week training blocks with the CG at TRACEN Yorktown and STA Miami Beach...and the Navy was history," said Harrison.

Harrison, an Arizona native, had her eyes set on attending the Coast Guard Academy, where she was granted acceptance and arrived as Swab Harrison in the summer of 1991. After completing four years at the Academy, Harrison received a variety of shipboard assignments, including ones on Storis



LT Harrison on USS *Milius* (2003)

(WMEC-38), and the 110-foot cutters Kiska (WPB-1336) and Aquidneck (WPB-1309).

Harrison served as an ensign on Storis in the stormy Bering Sea and boarded numerous fishing vessels in support of the cutter's law enforcement mission. Next, Harrison transferred to Hilo, Hawaii, to serve as executive officer on board the 110-foot patrol boat Kiska, which performed a variety of missions in the mid-Pacific area. Harrison served on board Kiska for two years before later receiving command of her own cutter, the WPB Aquidneck homeported out of Fort Macon, North Carolina.

Near the end of 2002, after well over a year in command of Aquidneck, Harrison received orders to the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG) to take part in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

"I joined the service to get out on the water and conduct missions...and this was going to be a demanding, challenging and unique mission," said Harrison. "I had watched Desert Shield/Storm on TV and this time I was excited to have the opportunity to contribute personally."

At the Integrated Support Center-Portsmouth, in Hampton Roads, Virginia, Harrison spent over two months preparing the cutter and crew for deployment to the Middle East. These preparations included rigorous training in small arms and chemical, biological and radiological warfare. Harrison and her crew also prepared Aquidneck for trans-Atlantic shipment on board a Military Sealift Command ship.

Harrison and her crew boarded a chartered jet for Bahrain and touched down on February 26. Shortly after arriving, Harrison and the three other patrol boat skippers boarded USS Valley Forge, a guided missile cruiser and command ship for Task Force 55, under which the cutters would operate. Task force commander, U.S. Navy captain John W. Peterson, had specifically requested use of the patrol boats during the September 2002 planning for OIF naval operations. Peterson and his staff briefed the skippers on their upcoming mission and the naval combat operations about to begin.

“I think of myself as a Coastie and cutterman first and make no distinction based on my gender.”

Within ten days of Harrison’s arrival, M/V Industrial Challenger delivered Aquidneck and the other 110s after a thirty-five day passage. After conducting sea trials for two days, the Aquidneck along with sister ship Adak, sailed to the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG). Upon arrival they began maritime interdiction operations, boarding and inspecting indigenous watercraft that navigated the waters along coastal Iraq.

“The challenge before deploying was to think of all the ‘what if’ scenarios and try to train for them so that we were prepared,” said Harrison. “Once in theater, we had to get up to speed on both the local area and USN/Coalition operating procedures. Then, it was a challenge to constantly change tactics so that those who were watching us could never predict our actions. The last thing we wanted to do was become predictable.”

During March, Coalition naval forces restricted the flow of Iraqi watercraft along the Khawr Abd Allah (KAA) Waterway, the primary maritime link between Iraq and the Gulf. Naval planners believed that these dhows and other watercraft might hold mines, weapons or escaping Iraqi officials. The Iraqi watercraft countered Coalition efforts by staging breakouts, which involved dozens of watercraft trying to escape simultaneously. These attempts included a large breakout of sixty dhows on March 17. Aquidneck worked together with the other WPBs and an HH-65 helicopter from high-endurance cutter Boutwell to corral the watercraft and board each of them. Together, they managed to inspect all the vessels and found no weapons, illegal cargoes or Iraqi officials.



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In the evening of March 20, Operation Iraqi Freedom's combat operations began as Coalition warships launched Tomahawk missiles toward Baghdad. Aquidneck patrolled around the naval vessels during launch operations to screen them from intruders. The missile launches proved an awesome sight and none of the off-watch crew could sleep. Harrison was unaware of the fact that, as captain of Aquidneck, she had become the first woman to command a Coast Guard vessel in a combat zone.

After Coalition naval forces wrapped up the initial phases of combat operations, naval planners focused on opening the KAA Waterway to vessel traffic. On March 22, Aquidneck joined the escort detailed to protect Coalition minesweeping vessels clearing a channel to the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr. In order to do this, Aquidneck and the other escorts had to navigate upstream of the minesweepers. Harrison's crew realized that they were sailing through unswept waters and that the thin-skinned cutter could be torn apart by a floating mine. "Knowing what a mine would do to Aquidneck if we struck one was not an easy thought as I went to sleep at night," admitted Harrison. This mission concluded successfully with no casualties to the minesweepers or their escorts, but later analysis indicated that Aquidneck had passed through water that held active mines.



Aquidneck performed numerous patrol missions to safeguard Iraqi oil platforms. On several of these patrols, Iranian gunboats would appear, test Harrison and her crew's reactions, and gauge the capabilities of Aquidneck. Harrison had to draw a fine line between responding assertively while not provoking hostilities. Harrison chose the middle ground of having the crew ready to man the cutter's loaded guns without training any weapons on the Iranian vessels. Whenever the Iranian vessels appeared in Aquidneck's patrol area, Harrison

paralleled their course and matched their speed, sometimes exceeding thirty knots to do so. Harrison made sure her cutter did not present a threatening posture, but she never backed down and the Iranian gunboats always broke off these encounters and retreated to their territorial waters.

Securing the KAA Waterway for regular commercial traffic required not just minesweeping operations, but the clearing of other obstacles as well. Wrecks and hulks of destroyed ships dating back as far as the Iran-Iraq War dotted the KAA Waterway's shoreline. Armed boarding teams from the WPBs had to clear the shoreline of any potential threats hidden within these wrecks. During these operations, a boarding team from Aquidneck discovered military supplies within the hulk of a tanker, including Iraqi military uniforms, money, AK-47s, fresh food and drawings of Coalition naval vessels. Aquidneck's shore parties also secured a number of coastal bunkers that proved inaccessible to land forces.

While serving as Aquidneck's captain, Holly Harrison's cutter and dedicated crew conducted innumerable maritime interdiction, search and rescue, escort and combat-related operations in the Northern Arabian Gulf.

"I could not have asked for a better crew," praised Harrison. "Despite the arduous conditions, there was such a feeling of teamwork and camaraderie. They

stepped up in every way possible and took on some daunting challenges. The guys devised all sorts of ingenious ways to make life a bit easier for 22 people crammed onto a ship with only 18 racks. It was tough and most wanted to go home, but they knew the mission we had to perform and did it to the best of their ability."

In 2003, Harrison received recognition for Aquidneck's achievements under her command. She became the first female member of the service to receive the Bronze Star medal in addition to her record as the first woman to command a Coast Guard cutter in combat.

"I understand why this distinction is important in the larger scheme of things with regard to diversity and the integration of women into the service, but on a personal level I have always been a bit uncomfortable being singled out because of my gender," Harrison asserted. "There were other WPB COs, the CO of the Boutwell and CO of the Walnut, who served in Iraqi waters and received the Bronze Star."

After re-deployment to the United States, Harrison transferred to the Maritime Law Enforcement School, in Yorktown, Virginia, and put her rich boarding experience to use as a senior instructor. She moved with the school to Charleston, South Carolina, to help establish the Coast Guard's law enforcement academy in that city. Following her teaching work in Yorktown and Charleston, she served

for two years as executive officer of the medium-endurance cutter Legare, which performed several drug interdiction and illegal migrant patrols in the Caribbean. Today, she serves as a program reviewer at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"What I love about the Coast Guard is that while the service values diversity, it is ultimately performance that matters. There are no obstacles in the way for women to serve in any area they want and the door is wide open...they just have to step up and perform."

Dr. Thiesen received a Master's degree from East Carolina University's Program in Maritime History and earned a Ph.D. from University of Delaware's Hagley Program in the History of Technology and Industrialization. His research interests include Coast Guard history, naval history, ship design and construction, and the history of technology.

