

Seabees Lend a Critical Hand; One Woman to Another

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CAMP AR RAMADI, Iraq (NNS) -- Three Seabees attached to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 1 returned from Iraq Jan. 5 after serving as a part of the Lioness program for a month.

While serving alongside the 3rd Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment, the three women served in roles unusual to their specific ratings within the Seabee community, but critical to the success of current operations in theater.

They were not only able to aid the interests of our country and allies, but they helped to make a connection between our two cultures by respecting the differences between the two.

Muslim cultures do not allow for a man to touch a woman who is not related to him, which created the possibility for women to be used as traffickers of contraband and increased the possibility of misinterpretation as male service members conducted searches of female Iraqis.

The Lioness program, established by the Marine Corps, was created to provide the U.S. military with a culturally acceptable way to conduct effective personnel searches of Iraqi women at traffic and entry control points throughout the operational theater.

"It was awesome," said Construction Mechanic 3rd Class Cassandra Workman. "When we would take the women to be inspected, and they were able to see our faces and hear our voices, they just lit up. You could really see the difference.

"Having a female there releases the stress of the possibility of misinterpretation for both the Iraqi woman and the U.S. service member," said Workman. "These searches are imperative, and are going to be done regardless. But it's just better this way, with us here."

For some of the Seabees serving in the Lioness program, their roles were different than what they were used to.

"This is totally outside of anything that I have ever done, or that a Seabee

would normally do," said Builder 3rd Class Megan Sullivan. "It felt really good to be able to play this specific role. In all that we do and accomplish as Seabees, it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to be able to contribute in this way."

Prior to being deployed to one of the various traffic control points in the area, the Seabees went through a structured training program that covered many topics from basic Marine Corps martial arts, search techniques and cultural familiarization, to the rules of engagements. However, they soon found that some of the most critical training would be learned when they arrived at their post.

"The Iraqi women really responded well when we would talk to them in Arabic," smiled Workman. "During our off-time, interpreters would teach us Arabic over a game of cards. The Iraqi women would usually stop, look and smile when we spoke to them in their native tongue. Not that they didn't understand, but that they appreciated our efforts to learn the language."

Removed in part from their general responsibilities as Seabees, they still found time to live by the famous motto: "We Build, We fight."

"I built some shelves for the Marines that I was working with," said Sullivan. "Hey, no matter what, I love being a builder."

In the current operational climate, the Seabees occasionally find themselves participating in jobs outside their normal duties to ensure total mission success. From participating on Convoy Security Elements to the Lioness program, Seabees continue to answer the call.

"Though it's not something that we would generally do, and was scary at times, you had to find your personal determination and go make it happen," said Sullivan. "It's what we joined the military to do."

NMCB 1 is part of nearly 1,200 Sailors and Marines supporting critical general engineering and construction efforts in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq as part of 30th Naval Construction Regiment (Forward).

CDR Diana Sorrentino, USNR