

## Guarding GITMO

By Jeffrey Pollinger, Coast Guard District 13 Seattle

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is the oldest U.S. Naval base located outside the continental United States. It's also been the center of attention recently because enemy combatants have been detained there since the war on terror began. But it was also home to Coast Guard Port Security Unit (PSU) 313 during a six-month deployment. From December 2007 to June 2008, the Tacoma, Washington-based unit was in Guantanamo Bay providing anti-terrorism force protection at the base.



PSU 313 carried out this mission by patrolling the bay and other waterways 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the deployment.

Other missions included search and rescue and vessel escorts. PSU 313 operated under the guidance of the Joint Task Force, which included all other



branches of the military and other federal agencies. "It was exciting to see the Coast Guard involved in a joint environment, working with a huge task force that includes more than 2,000 people from just about every federal agency you can think of," said Cmdr. James Howatson, commanding officer of PSU

313. Howatson, like most members of the 134-person unit, is a reservist. When he's not serving with the Coast Guard he serves as the deputy police chief of the Tacoma Police Department.

The deployment to Guantanamo Bay is the unit's third since being commissioned in 1998. In Feb 2003, PSU 313 was deployed to support Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, where they provided security for an Iraqi oil platform in Northern Iraq. PSU 313 has been



previously called to service in Operation Desert Storm and in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. As in past deployments, PSU 313 had its own weapons, engineering, logistics, food service, communications and medical staff. Like other Coast Guard port security units, PSU 313 is self-sustainable for 30 days. Because enemy combatants are detained at the base, the security level is elevated. To provide security on the water, the unit used highly-maneuverable and armed open cabin 24-foot boats to respond and confront any potential threat.



"When you've got crew-served weapons onboard, they can address a target a lot quicker and a lot easier with the open view," said Lt. Jeffrey Engel, the unit's operations officer.

In addition to safeguarding the waterways, members of the unit were also responsible for escorting detainees and providing security during

arraignments at the courthouse. The unit was chosen by the joint task force because of the unit's law enforcement experience. After training in courthouse and perimeter security, PSU 313 quickly led the way by establishing procedures for the

handling of detainees. For most of the members, guarding the detainees was an experience they will never forget. Petty Officer 2nd Class Peter Clute was one member assigned to detainee operations. He was present in the courthouse when admitted 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and several other detainees appeared before the court. "To be in the same room as the terrorist masterminds made me feel like we were really a part of history," he said.



Although the sight of non-military boats near the base is rare, occasionally the PSU was called upon to assist distressed mariners. In April, the master of a 23-foot sailboat called the Coast Guard for assistance because he was low on fuel, water and food and was having trouble operating the vessel in six-foot seas. PSU 313 answered the call. After locating the vessel, crews boarded the vessel and escorted the boat and its two occupants safely to land. There, crews supplied them with rations and water while the Navy refueled the boat. Before PSU 313 demobilized, each member that was involved in detainee operations received an Army Achievement Medal for

their efforts. PSU 313 had many roles and responsibilities while deployed at Guantanamo Bay and partner agencies agree - the unit accomplished the mission. Lt. Col. William Wozniak, Commanding Officer of Military Police Battalion 525, which worked closely with PSU 313, sums up the success of the unit's deployment - "The whole unit was highly regarded and did a fantastic job. It was an honor and a privilege to have served with them," he said.