

Nathan Bruckenthal: A Life of Service



DC3 Nathan Bruckenthal was the first Coast Guardsman to be killed in wartime action since the Vietnam War. A native of Long Island, he enlisted in the Coast Guard on 5 January 1999 at age 18. Bruckenthal served on the *Point Wells* out of Montauk, Long Island and then at Station Neah Bay, Washington. While there, he spent time with the Makah Nation community, volunteering with the fire department, the police department, and the local football team. In 2004, while stationed with the Tactical Law Enforcement Team South at the Coast Guard Air Station in Miami, Florida, PO3 Bruckenthal's unit was given orders to deploy to the Persian Gulf during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Their mission was to provide port and coastal security, maritime law enforcement, humanitarian aid, and training to the newly established Iraqi coast guard.

On 24 April, Bruckenthal was part of a seven-member Coast Guard and U.S. Navy boarding team on the USS *Firebolt*, a patrol boat operating out of Manama, Bahrain. Their mission was to patrol the waters of the northern Persian Gulf to prevent Iraqi insurgent attacks on shipping or on offshore oil rigs. While on patrol, they spotted a dhow, a small boat, near the Iraqi Khawr Al Amaya Oil Terminal. They intercepted the craft and, attempted to board. The dhow was packed with explosives and detonated by suicide bombers. Two Navy sailors were killed. Coast Guard PO3 Bruckenthal died of wounds sustained in the blast.

The Makah Nation held a memorial service for Bruckenthal on 30 April. Tribal leaders, military veterans, and high school athletes gathered at Neah Bay High School, Neah Bay, Washington. Makah Tribal members performed a ceremony to honor and bless Bruckenthal. A traditional blanket was presented to Coast Guard representatives. Tribal Chairman Ben Johnson also presented a hand carved and painted paddle. Both were later be presented to Bruckenthal's widow. Members of Native American Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1481 presented a 21-gun salute.



Posthumously award the Bronze Star with Combat "V", he was interred on 7 May, 2004. Said his mother, "He was a public servant from when he was a little boy. He always wanted to be on the fire department. He wanted to be a policeman just like his dad. His stepdad was an officer in the Army and he

wanted to emulate them and grow up to be those kind of men -- strong, and brave and faithful and honorable.” Nathan Bruckenthal left behind a pregnant wife. Said fellow Coast Guardsman Daniel Burgoyne, “He was honored to do anything the Coast Guard asked him. He was a true patriot and he loved serving his country.”

On 25 July, 2018, the Coast Guard honored the service and sacrifice of Bruckenthal commissioning the new Fast Response Cutter *Nathan Bruckenthal*.

On 25 April 2003, DC3 Bruckenthal was interviewed by PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR. The interview is transcribed below:

Q: Okay, let's just start by . . . if you could just tell me your name, your rank, and spell your last name for me?

DC3 Bruckenthal: It's DC3 Nathan Bruckenthal.

Q: And what unit are you attached to?

DC3 Bruckenthal: TACSOUTH [Coast Guard Tactical Law Enforcement Team South].

Q: What's a DC3 do for a TACLET?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I essentially do a lot of different jobs. My job with the LEDET [Law Enforcement Detachment] is that I'm just a . . . right now I'm a boarding team member.

Q: OK.

DC3 Bruckenthal: One of eight. I'm going to BO [Boarding Officer] School in the next . . . well as soon as we get home I'm going to BO School.

Q: And what's that?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Boarding Officer School.

Q: Boarding Officer, okay.

DC3 Bruckenthal: So as of right now I'm just a boarding team member. My job varies, you know.

Q: What's the difference between a team member and an officer? Is that why there's got to be someone in charge of a boarding?

DC3 Bruckenthal: The Boarding Officer is the person who will make contact with the master of the ship. The boarding team member will do the initial safety inspection and deal with the crew; jobs along that line.

Q: How long have you been in the Coast Guard?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Five years.

Q: Five years?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Yes.

Q: And you enlisted out of high school?

DC3 Bruckenthal: No, I enlisted about a year and a half after high school. I decided that college was . . .

Q: College sucked, right?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Actually I just . . . it was going to be in my PD and I just wanted to get some college so I could make it above Sergeant. I still got that, so I'm just trying to get this so I can get some college and then still become a police officer or a firefighter. That's what I want to do.

Q: Well you certainly have picked a place to get some experiences.

DC3 Bruckenthal: Definitely.

Q: And how long have you been with the TACLET; your whole career so far in the Service?

DC3 Bruckenthal: No, I've been all around the place. I've been at the TACLET now for about nine months.

Q: And what did you do before that?

DC3 Bruckenthal: First out of boot camp I was on an 82-foot patrol boat out of Montauk, New York.

Q: Which one?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Point Wells [WPB-82343], and then I went to DC "A" School and then I was at Station Neah Bay. It's Neah Bay, Washington; the end of the world, and I was there for two years . . .

Q: At least from Queens, yeah. (Laughter)

DC3 Bruckenthal: . . . and then I came down here, so.

Q: What kind of things do you do to train up for . . . well the things that you do to train up to be a boarding team member, were they different for this mission? Do you have to go through the . . . here I'm thinking about things like how many times they stick you in the arm?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Oh, with a . . . stick you in the arm with . . . ?

Q: For vaccinations and all that.

DC3 Bruckenthal: Oh yeah, we definitely got a lot of vaccines in us before we came, you know, and we do a certain training that . . . our training team down at TACSOUTH; they set up this training schedule for us and it's amazing. It's something that you just . . . you know, you're like, you do it and you're like, whoa, I can't believe we actually just, you know, this is great stuff that I never thought I'd get to do. And they really do help you out, and just all their training staff there. So coming over here to the Middle . . .

Q: What are some of the kind of things you'd do?

DC3 Bruckenthal: We do a lot of . . . we have mock boardings that we do. Down in Miami they have some boats that we'd be doing, you know, some tugs down in the river that we do mock boardings on. We use paintball guns and stuff like that for simulation. You know, what we've got to do. We also have platforms on land that we work with. They'd use a lot of noise simulation and stuff like that, and it is very intense, very hardcore training for a long time, and you just get it done, and we do that. We train every day when we're in port. I mean we just train and train and train.

Q: Do you get a lot of policy to go along with your training; like why you're doing certain things?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Oh definitely. The Coast Guard policy is always in effect. We always go with Coast Guard policy.

Q: And "Use of Force" and all that?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Force Continuum, Use of Force Policy, and that's just our job and we have to live by it.

Q: Had you been on a number of boarding missions in the Caribbean before you came here?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I did one deployment for 70 days. We had a four-ton cocaine bust down there. It was my first patrol with the TACLET so I was pretty psyched about that. It gets you built up. You know you're like, I'm finally doing something that's, you know, going from a housing DC to doing something like that where it's like you're stopping drugs from coming into the country. It's just a great feeling and now I'm coming out here and doing this. It's like I'm on a high horse right now.

Q: When did you get here?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I got here the end of February.

Q: And can you describe sort of the run-up to that first night of the war; your experiences on different vessels, different . . . was this the first time you had to interact with people from other navies in the coalition?

DC3 Bruckenthal: For me it was. We worked with the New Zealand Navy. We did some boardings down here at the pier; some mock boardings with them, just running through with their boarding teams showing them what we do. We don't try to change their policy or anything.

Q: Uh hum.

DC3 Bruckenthal: We just show them what we do and see if we can help them in any way.

Q: Was there anything that they did that was that much different from what you guys are doing?

DC3 Bruckenthal: It's all basically the same. It seems like all the navies that we've worked with, everybody has the basic same rules of engagement and use of force policies and stuff. It's really cool to interact with another navy to see what they do. Also though, just to catch up on things like that. So we did that and then we went and worked with the Polish Special Forces and they're great guys. I learned a lot from them. They have the same "Use of Force" as us. They do the same job as we do.

Q: Did you do any combined boardings with them?

DC3 Bruckenthal: We did. We did some UN [United Nations] boardings with them down in the holding area; pretty compliant boardings. Just basics; checking the holds. We did a few - I can't recall how many we did - but we did a few boardings with them. We were on there for about a week doing boardings with them.

Q: As tensions got a little bit higher and the war started to get closer, can you describe that night that the war started; where you were and what you were doing?

DC3 Bruckenthal: We were, I believe at the mouth of KAA [Kwahr 'Abd Allah] River. We were tasked to do a boarding on a tug that was allegedly broke down in the middle of the river, and we went onboard and just . . . I stood security with the crew and we did make sure that the . . .

Q: When you say, stood security, you were actually keeping them in place?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Just keeping them in place, keeping an eye on them, and they were really compliant, pretty scared.

Q: How about you?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I get "amped up" when I'm put into something like that. It's just my nature. I mean don't get me wrong. Your nerves are always there just like you do anything. I mean if you're not scared or if you're not nervous about doing something then there's probably something wrong with you. You know you've probably been in the job too long.

Q: Or not long enough.

DC3 Bruckenthal: Or not long enough, exactly. So we just did that boarding, made sure that what they were saying that their engines were totally dissembled, and they were, and we went ahead and got off that vessel.

Q: And that was the night the war started?

DC3 Bruckenthal: That was the night, I believe, yes.

Q: Could you see it and feel it, hear it, from where you were?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Yes.

Q: Yeah. What was it like being in the middle of a naval bombardment?

DC3 Bruckenthal: It's pretty . . . for a person like me who's never really seen anything like that before, it was pretty interesting. I mean the sounds of war, and the colors of war you could say is how the . . . the color of the sky. I remember the sky was a big factor. You could see . . . it was very hazy from the smoke and very loud. Our ship; we were on the PC-10 [USS *Firebolt*]. It's the *Firebolt*; a naval ship, and it would shake every once in a while from some of the sounds; some of the noises that were coming off. So we were pretty close. It was . . . it gets to you. You know you're thinking of, hey yeah, we're doing this. I agree with what we're doing and I stick by my country totally, but at the same time you've got to think of where the end of that noise is coming from. But you just do your job and you just make sure everything . . . your crew and your team is safe, and stuff like that.

Q: Did you have any sensation that these things were coming from behind you, over your heads, or . . . ?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Not really. Like I said, that night was real dark. You couldn't really see much except for the haze in the sky.

Q: Uh hum.

DC3 Bruckenthal: So you would see flashes but you really couldn't tell where they were coming from, but we knew.

Q: Can you describe what you guys did the next day when you encountered these tugs?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Like I said, I'm just a boarding team member, so they told me to get dressed along with the other seven team members on our team. They said, get dressed. We have a boarding to do. We went ahead and saddled up. We went out, did this boarding on the tug with a barge next to it. We tied up next to the alongside tow and went onboard, mustered the crew - again I stood security back aft with the crew - and then the Australian Marines were there and we had a couple of Navy EOD [Explosive Ordnance Detachment] guys there. They went and took a look at the mines and stuff like that. I wasn't really involved with much of that because I was making sure that . . . the security; made sure nobody was, you know, the demeanor of the crew. You've got to look to see, you know, hey, are they acting funny or whatever? But you're always looking for something like that, and the crew was pretty nervous.

Q: Do you think they felt in fear of their lives?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I don't think I can say whether or not they did. The demeanor of them; they just seemed like they were pretty nervous; whether they got caught or they'd known they got caught, or whatever. They were pretty nervous sitting there. They wouldn't talk much. They wouldn't talk with each other.

Q: They didn't try to talk with you guys at all?

DC3 Bruckenthal: The only thing they'd ask us for is water and if they could use the bathroom.

Q: Uh hum.

DC3 Bruckenthal: We would take them to the bathroom if they needed to go and stuff like that.

Q: They were taken EPW?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I believe so. I'm not sure.

Q: But they passed out of your control?

DC3 Bruckenthal: They passed out of our control and went onto a different ship. They took them . . . I'm not sure where they took them to or what they did with them after that.

Q: And after that what sort of things was your team doing?

DC3 Bruckenthal: We did another quick sweep of the vessel to make sure that it wasn't sinking; just to make sure it was intact. We made sure . . . we found another automatic weapon that hadn't been found before. We were down on the barge. We had all the weapons lined up on the barge and everything like that, and it was pretty scary standing on top of 60-something mines, you know, like uggghhh, let's get off this thing. (Laughter)

Q: You like to have EOD guys when . . .

DC3 Bruckenthal: Exactly. It was great having them there. You know, it's like, hey, we trust you guys.

Q: Yeah, and after that day, as the war progressed, what do you recall now as significant operational highlights of what the unit did? Did you continue your boardings off the *Firebolt*?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Continue boardings off the *Firebolt*?

Q: Did you serve on the *Firebolt* from that point to the end of hostilities?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Well until we came back into port.

Q: Okay, which is now?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Which was now, yes.

Q: Okay, so you've been on there since then.

DC3 Bruckenthal: Yes.

Q: Because the war started up until whenever you got off?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Yes.

Q: Okay, so you weren't on another vessel after that?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Not until the end when they were transferring us around.

Q: Right.

DC3 Bruckenthal: We did a lot of escort duties back and forth from Umm Qasr. We actually pulled into Umm Qasr.

Q: Did you go ashore there?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I just stepped ashore and then went back to the conn [the ship's bridge area]; just pretty cool.

Q: What was Umm Qasr like when you stepped ashore there?

DC3 Bruckenthal: It was sandy; pretty deserted; a lot of Marines; a lot of coalition forces were there but you could tell it was deserted. Pretty eerie, and that was when we escorted one of the . . . the first humanitarian ships.

Q: Do you remember what vessel that was you escorted?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I can't recall off the top of my head.

Q: What do you take from this that you'll take with you for the rest of your career in the Coast Guard and your civilian career?

DC3 Bruckenthal: I think, work-wise, my career-wise I take the tactics that we used; the communications with other coalition forces, how it really was. I mean there were times when there was a language barrier. I mean when we were with the Polish . . .

Q: Almost like the NYPD [New York Police Department]. (Laughter)

DC3 Bruckenthal: Exactly. You know it's like you really couldn't communicate with them because they don't speak English and we don't speak Polish. So you use a lot of hand signals and a lot of stuff like that, and it seemed that it worked out perfectly.

Q: Uh hum.

DC3 Bruckenthal: I mean nothing's perfect I know, but still it seemed to be rolling. Even when we would be training with the Aussies [Australians] or the New Zealand folks, I mean the accents still . . . I mean like, you know, I don't have much of an accent but we have guys on our team that have accents and they have really thick accents, so it's like you have to learn how to slow down and stuff like that.

Q: Can you tell the difference between a New Zealander and an Aussie?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Not really.

Q: Not really. (Laughter)

DC3 Bruckenthal: So I think I take that for work-wise just that things work. You know the training that we get, the training that we do is - as tedious as it sometimes is - it works. I mean there's always something there. And for my personal life; just the way it felt that first day of war, just that you're feeling that, okay, yeah, this is getting done and this is getting done for a reason.

Q: Are you glad it's over?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Well it's not over yet, but . . .

Q: Until you get home, yeah.

DC3 Bruckenthal: Well not even until I get home. I mean I still have family over here.

Q: Do you?

DC3 Bruckenthal: So I mean there are still things that just need to get done. So until this whole thing is over with, you know, there's still going to be that feeling; something to tell my kids.

Q: Is there anything that you'd like to add or anything we haven't covered that you wanted me to comment on or add?

DC3 Bruckenthal: Not really. I think we've pretty much covered everything.

Q: Well DC3, I really appreciate this.

DC3 Bruckenthal: Alright Chief.

Q: Thanks for hanging around and . . .

DC3 Bruckenthal: No problem.

END OF INTERVIEW