

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

Operation Iraqi Freedom

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### Abstract

During my year tour in Iraq, my role as the Company Operations NCO was to perform the functions of advisor to the Commander on daily TOC Operations, Custodian of secret documents, Site inspector of engineering operations, Air movement controller of personnel, and submitting daily engineer progress reports to higher headquarters. I also served as the Senior Enlisted Noncommissioned officer in the absence of the First Sergeant. My location of deployment began at Camp Anaconda (Balad), Iraq and moved north to the Q-West Base Complex, Iraq where I completed my one year tour of duty.

## Background

I was born in Martins Ferry, Ohio and raised in the small town of Beallsville which is located in south eastern Ohio. I enlisted in the United States Army Reserves at the age of 18 as a 77F, Petroleum Supply Specialist on 26 April 1986. Several years later, I obtained the engineering MOS of 21X. I currently have twenty-two years of service in the reserves.

During my Army Reserve career, I was assigned to several reserve installations as I frequently moved for promotion opportunities. Some of my unit locations were in Parkersburg, WV, New Martinsville, WV, Beaver Falls, PA, Weirton, WV, and Coraopolis, PA. My leadership positions included, Squad Leader, Platoon Sergeant, Operations NCO, First Sergeant, and most recently, the Sergeant Major of a DPW section.

I am writing about my personal experience during my deployment involved with Operation Iraqi Freedom III. My mobilization/deployment covered the time frame of October 8, 2004 through December 28, 2005. This writing includes the initial time leading up to my mobilization, my mobilization time at Ft. Bragg and my deployment period in Iraq.

Being a SFC/E-7, I was a TPU soldier attending my Army reserve drills at Weirton, WV. I decided to place a promotion packet in for MSG, at a Quartermaster Company for my secondary 92F MOS. On January 15, 2004 I was notified of my promotion to MSG/E-8 and transfer to my new reserve unit in Beaver Falls, PA. My new unit was currently deployed, so I was the senior noncommissioned officer when I arrived. I took charge of the handful of soldiers and prepared to train them the best that I could under the circumstances. When I had attended my new unit for 5 months, I received notification that I was being involuntarily transferred as a cross-level soldier for deployment. To my surprise, I was being transferred back to my old unit in Weirton, WV. I would be placed in the position of the Operations NCO which was an AGR

SFC/E-7 position. I was confused by this transfer because I was still a TPU soldier who was now a MSG/E-8. None the less, my time for mobilization/deployment had come and I was happy that at least I would be deploying with soldiers and friends that I was familiar with.

### Training

Now that I was back at my old reserve unit, my new position would prove to be somewhat of a challenge. Our company was scheduled for an annual training at Ft. Dix, New Jersey. This training would be essential for me to learn the requirements of my new position. It would also, give me insight to the people who I would be working closely with in the long year to come.

This two week annual training proved to be one of the most exhausting that I had ever participated in. Not only, were we attempting to conduct engineering construction projects on a 24 hour schedule, but we were preparing for tactical operations for our near-term deployment. In 15 days our annual training was over and we returned to our home station where we began to prepare for our mobilization at the unit.

Many of us were on orders at the reserve unit to assist in SRPs and packing preparations. This time was exciting because many of us were not sure of what to expect being this was the first deployment for many of us. During this time, we were flooded by new soldiers who like myself, were involuntarily transferred as a cross-level soldiers to the unit. It was a very trying experience as we were processing the incoming personnel and packing up the unit's equipment for shipment overseas. Our first real mobilization/deployment orders finally arrived and were scheduled for October 8, 2004. This would be the date that we would be moving to our mobilization site at Ft. Bragg, NC.

With orders in hand, we said our good-byes and were on the bus to Ft. Bragg, NC. Soon we arrived at Ft. Bragg and linked up with our other companies of the 463<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Battalion. Our

training began right away; it included diverse weapons qualifications, medical reviews, first aid training and countless meetings. Several soldiers were deemed non-deployable and were sent home for various reasons. The rest of us that made our necessary deployment requirements, continued to train for a total of 3 months at Ft. Bragg. The training, proved in many ways to be out dated or of little use for the environment that we were about to be deployed to.

### Mobilization

At the end of our Ft. Bragg pre-deployment training, we were now prepared for our flight overseas to Kuwait. After being in the air for nearly 12 hours we finally arrived in Kuwait. In Kuwait, we again went through some weapons system qualifications at the range and began to up-armor our wheeled vehicles for the convoy north into Iraq. Our company had been in Kuwait for several weeks when several soldiers and I were identified to be on the advanced party to fly into Iraq. Our mission was to link up with the unit (94<sup>th</sup> Engineers). This would be the company that we would replace once we all arrived in Iraq. I was to gather as much information as possible and e-mail it back to my Commanding Officer. This information would include; unit location, past engineering projects, convoy procedures, equipment transfers and personnel living/housing conditions. During my arrival, I would also discover that Camp Anaconda was known for its harassing daily intake of mortars. We also would experience the not so distant blast of a car bomb that killed several Iraqi soldiers at our front gate.

For nearly 10 days my team worked with the 94<sup>th</sup> Engineers, gathering as much information as possible. The remainder of my company then convoyed north to our location at Camp Anaconda (Balad), Iraq. When our company arrived, we moved into temporary housing which were tents. Once the entire company was reunited, we began to do a right-seat ride with the 94<sup>th</sup> Engineers. This included, our Commander working with the 94<sup>th</sup>'s Commander, the XO working

with the 94<sup>th</sup>'s XO, supply working with supply and so on. This transition process proved to be very useful and prepared us for upcoming missions and potential problems that we might encounter.

After the 94<sup>th</sup> Engineers departed the theater of operations we were left to manage our company under the sole directives from our battalion. Immediately, we moved into the old building facilities that the 94<sup>th</sup> was occupying. These structures were electrically unsafe, poorly lit with plywood walled room dividers that looked like animal stalls. Our soldiers, now taking ownership began to modify their living conditions by working around the clock to fix-up their buildings. In about a 1 week, the members of our company had gutted and restructured their existing living areas. This was about the same time that our company started to get operation orders for several local missions. These missions included the construction of small C-hut buildings used for troop housing, pouring concrete helicopter pads and expanding a road section by a bridge just outside the wire of Camp Anaconda. During these first months of deployment our unit also participated in tower guard duty for Camp Anaconda. We also, formed our convoy security team which we would use when we traveled on the roads in Iraq in the year to come.

After being at Camp Anaconda for approximately 2 ½ months, we were instructed by the post housing department to gut out our living area once again. Apparently, a contractor was going to reconstruct the interior of the building back to their original design. This process involved tearing out the existing walls and wiring all over again. Although our soldiers were inconvenienced by more construction, they were pleased to find a newer and better facility to live in as their building was being completed. However, our happiness was short lived when our company was informed that we were losing our new buildings and moving north. Around the 3<sup>rd</sup> month we began to haul our heavy earthmoving equipment by convoy. It took us about six to

seven separate convoys to move our entire company to our new home at the Q-West Base Complex, which was just south of Mosul.

The Q-West Base Complex as it was called was a remote Iraqi air base that was now in the control of U.S. forces. In addition, Q-West was known for its quiet perimeter with no mortars! Although this Base complex was much smaller than the crowded Camp Anaconda, it proved to provide a huge work load for a company of Engineers. Our unit was placed in 3 retired Iraqi MIG hangers for housing. These were hardened concrete structures that were equipped with air-conditioning and an outside shower trailer. Here we would sleep on cots for the 9 months that remained of our tour.

Once we started working at Q-West the time seemed to slip by much faster. As the word spread that a company of Engineers were on post, we were never without work again. Soon we were constructing a massive fuel farm for a Quarter Master Company. This fuel farm was capable of holding millions of gallons of bladder contained fuel. Our earthmovers constructed the berms which encompassed the fuel bladders. We also, were assigned to up-grade the perimeter by filling dozens of Hesco barriers with dirt for blast protection and constructing a 3 story tall wooden guard tower. We also poured concrete maintenance pads which were used for staging vehicles. Another project that we took on was by far the most interesting. Approximately one year before our arrival, a Special Forces C-130 crash landed on the Q-West airstrip. Our job was to remove the wreckage from the airfield and bury the wings and fuselage of the plane. After several days of digging a burial site and loading the plane onto flatbed trailers, we were ready for the move. Carefully we placed the plane onto our trailers and drove it at a snail's pace across the airstrip. When we arrived at the burial site we had to push the plane from the flatbed with a dozer

into the massive pit. After an unofficial ceremony, we buried the entire wreckage and leveled the remaining ground.

### Mid-Tour Leave

This time period marked the half way point of my tour and it was now time for me to make preparations to go home for my 15 days of leave. Although it was a very exciting to be finally going home to see my family, the extensive travel was something that I was not looking forward to. The trip home began by taking a flight from Q-West in a 14 passenger propeller driven airplane. This aircraft flew very slowly at an exceptionally low altitude with occasional sudden rolls to the left and to the right. These maneuvers would assist in avoiding enemy fire and detection. After an hour flight in this stomach turning aircraft, we landed in Camp Anaconda (Balad). With an overnight stay and several going home briefings, I was again scheduled to fly out on a much larger plane. However, on three occasions our flight was delayed, twice due to mortar fire and once because of a dust storm. Despite these conditions, we made our take off and landed in the sweltering hot country of Kuwait. Once in Kuwait, I had to attend additional going home meetings along with my DA 31 form processing. With another night stay in Kuwait, I was in the air again with a stop in Germany. From Germany, we flew to the United States and landed in Atlanta, GA with another hop to Pittsburgh, PA. There in Pittsburgh, I was greeted by my family and driven approximately 85 miles to my home. After 15 days of having a fantastic time with my family, I was on my way back to Iraq. Unfortunately, I had to reverse the same grueling travel process that had brought me home. None the less, my visit home was over and I was back to finish the second part of my tour in Iraq.

Once I was back in Iraq, the hard work had not only continued but somehow seemed to have increased. Being the only Engineer Company at the Q-West Base Complex, our Engineering

skills were in demand. We were now re-finishing several old structures throughout the post to provide housing for the incoming soldiers and airmen. One assignment was to gut a huge building structure that was damaged by U.S. air attack during the first Gulf War. This task involved weeks of debris removal by dump truck and endless hours of sifting through twisted metal and broken concrete.

By mid July 2005, Bravo Company was given one of the most challenging missions of our deployment. Our mission was to assist in the site location and set-up of a remote outpost named Rawah. This outpost eventually became located near the Syrian boarder and was used primarily to control insurgent movement into Iraq. Our unit provided heavy equipment hauling assets along with a platoon of carpenters to assemble prefabricated buildings. These buildings were built as kits by our company at Q-West and then hauled to Rawah. This convoy route was one of the most dangerous routes that our unit was required to travel. On several occasions, our convoys encountered I.E.D. explosions that nearly disabled our vehicles. Fortunately, after nearly a month of support for Rawah, our involvement in convoy hauling missions had ended. Our soldiers had completed their mission successfully with no losses to equipment/personnel.

#### Death of SGT Joseph C. Nurre

Although our somewhat dangerous Rawah mission was over, the remainder of our missions was located at the Q-West Base Complex. However, one last local convoy mission would prove to be terribly devastating for Bravo company and the 463<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Battalion. On August 21, 2005 while returning home from a routine convoy from Camp Anaconda (Balad), one of our M 916 tractor trailer trucks was struck by an I.E.D. Being the company Operations NCO, I received the broken message over the phone that SGT Joseph Nurre did not make it on the return convoy home. At first, I was under the impression that SGT Nurre had encountered vehicle trouble and

was unable to make the return trip back to Q-West. I was quickly corrected by being told that SGT Nurre was killed when his vehicle was hit by the I.E.D. Hearing this, I was reluctantly obligated to pass this tragic news to the Company Commander and appropriate authorities. Relaying this heartbreaking message was one of the hardest tasks that I had to do. The news of SGT Nurre's death devastated our company and changed the outlook of the remainder of our tour.

During SGT Nurre's memorial ceremony at Q-West, his closest friend revealed a letter that he was holding for him in case that he was killed in action. I have attached the letter that SGT Nurre wrote to his friends and family before he died.

#### SGT Joseph C. Nurre's Letter

"If you are reading this, then the regrettable has happened. I know your grief is heavy now, but though you are stricken with sadness, let joy enter your hearts because you can know that I am with God and am waiting for you to join me in heaven, in 40-50 years. Remember, I don't want to see you sooner, so eat smart, exercise and no drinking. I tried to live my life the best I could and truly believe that I lived it to the fullest. Please try to remember the good times that we shared, because I think of them often. Ultimately we are all just shadows and dust on this earth, but because of our faith we shall live on forever. Do not let grief control your life forever, take full advantage of all that God offers us. I know I did. If you ever miss me and think you need to see me again, reach into your heart and I will be there, loving you forever. I am at the dinner table enjoying our conversation, I am at the beach in Capitola skimboarding, I am at the many campgrounds we visited. Where you are, I am. Know that I died for something. Though it is not perfectly clear what, I did die for at least two great things, God and country. Know that I tried my best to make you proud. Look at my pictures and realize I have lived a great and happy life.

Well, I wish I could write forever, but I know I can't. Just remember I'll always love you. Don't make too much of a big deal about my funeral. Just please let my burial be a Catholic one, and that only foods I loved be served afterwards. And if you could, ask people to pray for my soul and Notre Dame football (we need all the help we can get). Love Always and Forever, Joe.”

The death of SGT Joseph Nurre made some of our soldiers question their own safety while they were finishing their deployment in Iraq. The moral of our soldiers also changed dramatically after we encountered the loss of our close friend. Nonetheless, we continued on with our missions and began to prepare for our long re-deployment process.

Some of our final missions included the interior refurbishing of several block building structures. This included, replacing damaged block and placing concrete floors inside the buildings. It also, included electrical installation, lighting fixture placements and painting. These buildings were soon inhabited by the incoming 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division as they flooded into our once quiet Q-West Base Complex.

Our final construction project that we completed affected the entire Q-West Base Complex. This project was the construction of a base post exchange that was managed by AFFES. Our vertical construction platoon actually connected two smaller buildings to create one large one. This building was complete with a new concrete floor, ceiling fans, air conditioning and new lighting. This new AFFES shopping location was a huge success at Q-West that relieved some of the boredom for the soldiers and airmen.

### Re-deployment

By this time our tour had ended, we made our way back to Kuwait and then returned to Ft. Bragg, NC for re-deployment. After about a week of medical exams, equipment turn-in and briefings we were bused back to our home station. It was there that we were released from active

duty and we headed for our individual homes and families. Although I am proud to have served my great country, I am not looking forward to leaving again any time soon. The year away from my family was emotionally trying, but unfortunately, the life of soldiers and the families of soldiers are full of sacrifices. With that being said, I would do it all again if called upon by my country.

## REFERENCES

1. All information came from my own experience, during the time of October 8, 2004 through December 28, 2005.
2. Letter of SGT Joseph C. Nurre written by himself in case of his untimely death.