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19Z5, A 1/63 AR, 173 Airborne BDE

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Abstract

I deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraq Freedom I. I will talk about my experiences deploying as part of the United States Army Europe, Immediate Ready Force (USAREUR IRF). My unit was A Company, 1st battalion 63rd Armor Regiment (Assassins). I was attached to 173rd Airborne BDE out of Vicinza, Italy. Through out the year we managed to rotate a Battalion of Soldiers in and out of theater to fill a fighting force the size of a company. I will talk about the train up prior to, upon redeployment, detail my company's outstanding job during our last mission before the 25th INF DIV relieved us. I will conclude with the tasking my company received when we redeployed.

I deployed as part of the USAREUR, IRF in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom I. As the IRF, we were a versatile, agile, tailored force capable of deploying rapidly from the central region. On 15 March 2003, we did just that. It was hard to imagine that we were actually going to war, again, with Iraq. After the IRF deployed the rumors started to follow as to who was next. Every asset that was left behind started to prepare and stage their bags for possible deployment. Once we deployed our duties were to conduct 24 hour surveillance operations and establish small governments with in our region. When we returned from Iraq my company was in for a bigger shock. We transformed our Armor Company into an Infantry Company in preparation for a follow on tour in Afghanistan. On 15 March 2003, is when I arrived in Germany and my experience began.

I arrived to Vilseck, Germany on 13 March 2006, where 1SG Coleman, who I was replacing, greeted me. Immediately he started debriefing me, as other Soldiers tossed my bags into the back of a mini van. He explained to me that the IRF had a high probability of deploying. I had a short amount of time to in process so I would be taking C co 1/63 Armor. I remember feeling really excited and pumped about the deployment; since I took an early drop to leave the 3ACR and race to Europe. Luck was not on my side as the IRF deployed two days later. I was reassigned to A co 1/63 Armor who was next to deploy. The move was fine and I had no issues since Alpha Company was deploying anyway. The question was when were we going to deploy? My company ramped up to leave and drew down to stay at least 10 times before we got the call. In the mean time, almost every Officer was deploying back and forth from the combat zone, to get a taste of the dirt; just incase the IRF was called back. I found that to be rather comical but deep down inside I understood.

The first two months the IRF deployed with approximately five Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFV), five M1A1 Tanks, a few Hummers, and a C2 cell. It had almost 17 officers in the small HQ staff. Little did we know that our mission would last the whole year? While Alpha Company was waiting to deploy, we continued to train for up coming missions. Our focus seemed to change from Armor pure operations to light Infantry operations. Instead of doing prep to fire checks on our tanks, we were working on our four man stacks. The Soldiers in Alpha Company started to have mixed feelings about deploying, after the third month back in the rear. Deployed Soldiers were returning for R&R and sharing stories about being deployed. Meanwhile, we kept deploying to CMTC for combined training with any unit that was back in theater. I started to see how the stress was starting to affect my Soldiers and their families, who had to ramp up and down as well. When 21 October 2003 rolled out, we received our mission. We started to send 10 Soldiers at a time along with any equipment that we might need aboard a C-130, headed to Iraq. I remember that my initial group of Soldiers carried 15 starters for HUMMV's. We had to rotate a whole company under the guise of "individual replacements." It did not matter, to many of my Soldiers, how they got there. What mattered was that they arrived to do their part. This is why we trained so hard. We wanted to fight, defend, or both.

When I finally arrived in Kirkut, my Commander and my Senior Platoon Sergeant greeted me. I soon found out how it sounded to receive motor fire, as this occurred almost every night. I could really see the change in SFC Evans, as he described stories from over the past week. I was the last one to arrive as part of a command and control effort. It was somewhat backwards for me, but we all have our orders. My Commander started describing our mission set to me since it changed. I was shocked when I found out that we will have

one platoon of Tanks, one platoon of attached Infantry on BFVs, one platoon will be on up armored hummers, and the last platoon cross attached to another Company living in a safe house. What a different set than what we had trained for. My Soldiers adapted well and missions began four days later. Our orders were to deploy one section (two Tanks and four BFVs), for security operations during the day, and one section in the evening. Our platoon, on up armored Hummers, would do escort missions and react to any situation that occurred during the day. The last Platoon stayed 30 miles away in a small town NE of Kirkut. We ran continuous operations until our last mission on 31 January 2004. It was a "jackpot" mission since we had a snitch who gave our S2 information about a secret meeting that was going to happen in a town close by. We received an OPORD at 2200, and only had a few hours to prepare. Stinky Town was the name our Soldiers gave the location. We named it that because it had a certain stench from the oil fields that were so close to it. Couple that with the lack of sewers, trash, and heavy rain, and you have Stinky Town. Stinky Town had about 24 adobe style houses with six primary roads.

At 0430, the operation kicked off. We were to silently drive into the village with the snitch and he would identify the homes where the arm dealers were hiding. As we drove by, I dropped a chem light and a VS17 panel outside the door to the home. We only had five minutes to mark the homes that we would hit. Shortly after, the vehicles in the raid would start executing their missions. We marked the homes and took the snitch to a safe location until we finished our business. When I returned to Stinky town, it was 0530, and the raid just kicked off. It was a simultaneous bashing of five doors. Soldiers entered the homes, headed straight to the bedrooms, and drug out ever male that looked at least 13 years old. Some cooperated, as they were still asleep, while others resisted. Those young males, who put up a

fight, were hog-tied, and eventually cooperated. This technique was done with as many men watching as possible as to send a message. Women were crying and begging the interpreters to let their men go. Every woman was claiming that their man was innocent. We had a special team search the homes for weapons, money, and any information that may help our organization. While that was going on we lined up every male that we captured along a wall. The snitch showed up in our Chevy Blazer with tinted windows, wearing a ski mask. He pointed out every man who was involved and we separated them. The day proved to be a lucky one for us, as our 12-suspected arms dealers turned into 24. Quick interrogation helped us find the locations of several weapons caches and the locations of other criminals that were running amuck. We loaded the EPW's on the back of a five-ton and hauled them back to our camp. We sent a clear message that day. Our Military operations were going to continue for a long time, even as we redeploy.

The 25th INF DIV arrived and we completed our Battle Hand Off. We explained our areas of operation, explained the personalities of key personal, and lessons learned. We started our redeployment efforts by dividing our convoys into three chalks. The convoys would leave three hours apart and take two different routes. The initial plan was to man the vehicles with skeleton crews, TC and Driver, just incase we ran into some IEDs (Improved explosive device). That plan changed for the better as we realized that our mission is not over until we reach Germany. We rolled with full crews ready to battle if any one would take the challenge. We had some unfortunate accidents with the follow on convoys. Three IED's hit their mark killing and wounding several Soldiers. Once we received the word that all vehicles' in my Company arrived in Kuwait, we loaded up in our C-130 to head home as the advanced party.

We were at the landing strip with our bags on the plane only waiting to board. The next event that happened was the airfield received a few motor rounds and the plane left with our bags. We had to return to our tents and wait until the morning. Just when you think that you have seen it all, something new happened. It actually started snowing as we were walking back to our tents. Just our luck, we had no sleeping bags and no heaters in our tents. I knew we would be in for a cold evening if we could not get any help. I went to a few units that remained and was able to gather some blankets and a heater for our tent. We took pictures, traded stories, and did everything in our power to fall asleep. We had weapons, no ammunition, few supplies, and the comfort of each other. We used what we had to weather the storm. The next day we flew out of Kirkut to find out that our Police Station just got bombed and 31 people died. Soldiers were counting their blessing, while wondering about the unfinished business that we left behind.

Every Soldier made it back and we went through seven days of reintegration. It seemed like a terrible idea at the time. Soldiers wanted to come home and have a week off. Leaders better than I, would not allow it. It made perfect sense since a lot of Soldiers have been away from their families for so long. We encouraged The Family members to attend the half-day activities with their Soldier. The reintegration was a success, and it followed with 30 days leave. When we returned off leave, we had to familiarize ourselves with brand new M1A1D Tanks. It took some getting used to as we tried to get back to our business of Tanks. That business lasted only one month because we picked up the IRF mission once again. This time My Armor Company and two separate Engineer Companies were to transform to a light Infantry Company, and we only had two months to do it. The elections in Afghanistan were approaching and we were the only units who were not on orders to

deploy to Iraq. This type of OPTEMPO became the norm in Europe. You were either on the bubble to deploy or just getting back from a deployment. It was a sign of things to come.

This was my second trip to Iraq, and a great learning experience. There are so many issues that one must be prepared for. It is almost impossible list them all. I am truly glad that we develop leaders that can think and react. We adapt too many things, and do it well. We had several combat missions and just as many peace keeping missions. Every operation I witness was done with class and professionalism. I am very proud that I deployed, conducted operations, and redeployed in defense of our nation. The lessons learned from my quick deployment are already noted. Be flexible, look like you are the meanest unit in town when you roll out on missions, and trust only the team that you built.