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Operation Iraqi Freedom I
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Abstract

This is a story about 1SG Herron's war experience. His unit had prepared to deploy to CENTCOM AOR, and conducted combat operations as the tip of the US Army spear head. They destroyed Iraqi's premier Medina Republican Guard Division and continuously fought as a part of the 101st Airborne Division's main effort. Once his unit had reached Objective Bear (Baghdad), the rendezvous with destiny pushed and defeated the remainder of enemy further north to secure the northern sector of Iraq. Upon completion of sustainment and stability operations at Qayyarah West Airfield, 2-17th CAV returned to Fort Campbell, KY with 1 Silver Star, 9 Distinguished Flying Crosses, Valorous Unit Award and other highly commemorating decorations.

Operation Iraqi Freedom I

Prologue

My life and my profession have permanently changed since 9/11. I matured from a soldier into a warrior. I went to war, fought, won, and returned to my country. As long as I wear the Army uniform, I will continue to serve my Soldiers, my command, and the people of the United States of America.

The Nation at War

My unit, 2nd Squadron 17th Cavalry Regiment was responsible for Fort Campbell Post Security Mission 24/7 since the terrorists attacked the twin towers and Pentagon. The day after 9/11, my 30 minutes commute to work became 9 hours of nightmare and it gradually shortened day by day to an hour and thirty minutes travel time. All the gates around the post were heavily protected. Countless extended working hours and performing base defense cluster, i.e., posting guards in and around the barracks, headquarter building, airfield and hangar, became the norm of a daily training schedule. Yet, all of the soldiers maintained a perfect ground and air safety record despite a highly demanding OPTEMPO. The wave of 3rd Brigade Combat Team (Rakkasan), shortly after air campaign against Taliban, deployed to Afghanistan, and an additional deployment to support Operation Anaconda became possible.

Preparation

During the sizzling summer of 2002, 2-17th CAV has engaged in numerous field exercises including the Divisional Brigade Combat Team Supports and aerial gunneries of their own. I as Condor Troop First Sergeant prepared for possible 36 hours notice worldwide deployment. My

unit went through the Brigade Command Inspection Program and continued to validate combat readiness all around. I was focusing on basic soldiering skills such as shoot, move, and communicate in accordance with STP 21-1 SMCT Skill Level 1 especially through convoy battle drill, react to contact, direct fire, avoid an ambush, react to ambush (blocked & unblocked), react to indirect fire, react to chemical attack, dismount a vehicle, evacuate injured personnel from vehicle, secure at a halt, and cross mine field. My troop also completed Night Vision Goggle driver's training along with convoy live-fire training. I assessed that my Soldiers were well trained on convoy tactics, techniques, and procedures. My training phase shifted to weapon proficiency training. Day and night we went to different types of weapon system ranges to be familiarized and qualified. At the same time, I inspected individual TA-50s and start packing and loading field equipment in recently issued QUADCON containers. Finally, our unit deployed to Joint Readiness Training Center. The main mission of my troop was conducting reconnaissance and security operations and battle handover with heavy attack unit as well as environmental trainings. Additionally, my Soldiers were proficient on reacting against enemy infiltration of assembly area and combat communication skills. Overall, we successfully completed our training and went back to Fort Campbell, KY.

Pre-Deployment

Pre-deployment for the 2-17th CAV started about three months prior to actual deployment. The Division involved in a series of movement exercises that all seemed to suggest deployment was near. The real preparations began after the holidays. We packed, banded, strapped, and ready to go for every piece of equipment we owned. C Troop Soldiers worked day and night to ensure their aircrafts and vehicles were secure, and ready for a long trip. I personally

ensured the Troop's administrative (medical, personnel, legal, and personal) preparation for deployment to the CENTCOM AOR. A detail of Soldiers was sent TDY to Jacksonville, FL to prepare and shrink wrap aircraft for the sea movement. The preparation began. 2-17th CAV was attached to one of the task organization as Task Force 8-101st Aviation Regiment and their tasks were load up not only OH-58Ds but also, AH-64s, UH-60s, and CH-47s. Meanwhile, back at the Fort Campbell, Soldiers actively involved in rail road operations. The weather was not cooperating. It was very cold and snowed hard. Despite the road conditions being red, troopers including myself spent three days working shifts to get vehicles loaded properly onto assigned rail cars. When all the vehicles and aircraft were loaded, the empty hangar had to be cleaned and secure, barracks packed, and the unit was still awaiting orders. Commanders were busy splitting their property book to ensure all equipment (deploying and stay behind) was accounted for.

Deployment

2-17th CAV received their deployment orders on the morning of 23 February, 2003. The call to move was made at 1400 hours on February 27th. All Soldiers were to be ready to go with A and B bags at 0500 hours the next day. The details opened POV storage area and started receiving vehicles. We assembled and started screening Soldiers Readiness Packet to deploy, which included the issuing of NBC equipment, filling out family separation paperwork, and finalizing shots. The process took 8 hours, and then waiting for an aircraft took another 24 hours. The flight east to Kuwait was 13 hours long. There were layovers for some in Netherlands, others in Italy, and Germany. Our aircraft landed in Kuwait City International Airport where our troops manifested and boarded buses to Camp Wolfe where we began adjusting to local time, while waiting on orders for to know where we would move next. After about nine hours, we

received our basic load of ammo and en route to Camp Udairi where we would begin preparations to move north. Various units occupied at Camp Udairi. Our unit spent time with acclimating and waiting for our equipment to arrive. As soon as 2-17th CAV set up Squadron Tactical Operation Center and Admin and Logistic Operation Center, our units initiated a battle rhythm. We reported to TOC Logistics and personnel status report twice a day and answered every guidons call. We had hip pocket training which was impromptu by platoon sergeants to strengthen their Soldiers combat skills whenever we had a spare time. A few days later, I sent a detail to Doha Port, Kuwait, to meet the ship as they arrived. Port Operation went smoothly. They downloaded and assembled all Divisional fleet within timeline and prepared to transport to Camp Udairi. We learned quickly that the weather was another obstacle. Sandstorms 'Shumal' were harsh and a huge threat. The winds climbed as high as 60 mph and carried barrels of sand grains that pelted us mercilessly. No goggles or scarves made could keep every bit of the sand from penetrating into our skin. We completely lost a sense of direction while maneuvering around our AO.

The adjustment to the time change between the U.S. and Kuwait took a few days for some, over a week for the others. Drinking ample water and getting enough rest was essential to the acclimatization of the whole troop. After a week, CAV began collective and individual training pertinent to our current situation, such as NBC, hot weather/heat casualty, field sanitation, and treating wound and shock. Morale was still high and many broke the tension and monotony with card games, dominoes, and a few Soldiers even brought out personal DVD players and play stations. Vehicles arrived from Doha and the aircraft was not far behind. I quickly realized that my task as a serial commander of vehicle movement from Doha to Udairi was a challenge since there was neither map nor communication system on the vehicles. Nevertheless, our night

convoy marched out of the port slightly after the midnight. The majority of Soldiers had no rest and I was not familiar with the route. The risk meter was high. Things worsened by Kuwaiti Escort as it was their Sabbath day every Friday morning. They rejected our request for support. For God's sake, I managed to return to Udairi with 32 vehicles within four hours of driving. All personnel and equipment made it without any mishap. Scheduled and unscheduled maintenance on aircraft and vehicle started immediately upon arrival of the equipment. All Soldiers continued to receive refreshments and in-depth training such as theater rule of engagement briefing, friend and foe identification, load plan and pre-combat check, dawned aircraft recovery team, call for fire, crater analysis, and preparations for gunnery were well under way. Our maintenance contact team at the gunnery site scheduled for check firing of the aircraft mounted .50 Caliber machine guns on each aircraft, as well as the 2.75 inch rocket systems. The check fire exercise went well for the air crews. On March 18, 2003, President Bush issued his speech to the world warning Saddam Hussein that he had 48 hours to get out of Iraq. Every Soldier had been anticipating this call to move. Preparations for convoys making the journey into Iraq had been underway, leaving one more for final touches. I started slotting my Soldiers to leave in different serial of convoys over a few days, not all at once. We packed 10 days of rations including bottles of water and hardened our vehicles. Intel we got from the grapevines claimed that Saddam Hussein offered \$15,000 for anyone who kills an American Soldier.

Displacement

On 19 March 2003, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) received marching orders to cross the border. Aircrafts launched and the maintenance forward team left on the lead convoys. The remainder of C Troop Soldiers stayed at Udairi for about a week to finish preparing

equipment, re-packing vehicles and tents, and gathering more water and food to bring with them into Iraq. During this week, there were countless SKUD alerts. Just about every night one could count on hearing an explosion, which was becoming all too familiar, reliably between 0100 and 0300 hours. However, on one occasion the impact felt had been British fighter jets mistakenly shot down by our Patriot Battery mere miles away. All of the remaining Soldiers from 2-17th CAV left Camp Udairi on 28 March 2003. The trip took two days through some of the most memorable terrain and sites I have ever seen. The convoy behind ours had a contact by ambush, but reported no casualties. Further on the route one could see Iraqis traveling in pick up trucks with white flags attached to the antennas as if in pre surrender to the influx of US Troops. Finally, the convoys arrived at the destination 'FARP SHELL' 40 miles Southwest of An Najaf on 30 March 2003, where the first convoy had already staged for a week. Upon arrival at FARP SHELL, C Troop immediately began to establish the Troop area to provide long-term support for operations in support of the 3rd and 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Teams securing FOB EAGLE and the Iraqi city of An Najaf respectively. The perimeter at the FARP SHELL was vast, Soldiers on guard had to remain ever vigilant in the wake of the war going on all around. After three days at the FARP SHELL, The Cavalry conducted attack on An Najaf. We started supporting battle tasks and jumped TAA near by the city. The unit remained in this TAA for five days to repair damaged aircraft incurred while fighting in the towns. OH-58Ds returned with bullet holes, breaking apart more than several wires, fuel cells, making holes in rotor blades, screens, and airframe in general, but the aircrafts still returned every time. The battle damage assessment and repair training from back in Fort Campbell was well divided. The next jump was to an area just outside the city of Al Hilla. Much like the time spent at An Najaf, the aircraft incurred much damage from small arms fire from the combat of Kabala, which was all repaired

and yet again all the aircrafts returned from the mission every time. The next jump was a highly anticipated move to an area just two miles south of Baghdad International Airport. The convoy through Al Hilla was very unnerving for everyone in it. This was not only because of the imminent threat which was already present, but because the number of people in the street was far more than we had seen as yet. Our M998 HMWWV was cut out in a particularly congested area. More than hundreds of people in the street surrounded the vehicle and the truck in the middle of the road blocked traffic. The situation escalated. We showed our locked and loaded weapons to the crowd to get their point across. An older man came outside from his shop getting the hint from the American Soldiers, he began shouting at the younger Iraqis to move away from the vehicle. They then listened and moved away from our M998. After catching up to the convoy the Soldiers heard shots fired from an AK-47, but no vehicle was hit. The Cavalry was finally out of the predominately sandy areas, and surrounded by palm trees and wheat fields. Of course, mosquitoes and other parasitic inconveniences were now more prevalent than before, but it still was a gratifying change from shaking the dust from our sleeping bag every time we were about to get into it. At this point, the war seemed to be dwindling down, the explosions nearby were friendly forces destroying abandoned weapons caches. The Cavalry spent 10 days in the area before the order to move through Baghdad further north to the city of Mosul. Our convoy to Mosul left Baghdad the day after Easter Sunday. The drive through Baghdad was indescribably different from the others. Although no vehicle took fire during the convoy, the reaction from the people in the streets was mixed with those for and against the American Troops. We were as vigilant as ever through the city. Some locals shouted obscenities, others smiled and waved. People burned tires in the alleys as if to signal to some omniscient force, one who never appeared. C Troop Soldiers, with the rest of the 2-17th CAV, made it through the journey

unscathed. We arrived one of foothills south of Mosul late night. From our position, we could see the fight between two forces in downtown. The City of Mosul is a town embedded in the mountain terrain in Northern Iraq. Kurdish militia controlled the north of Tigris River and they were friendly with American Troops. 2-17th CAV conducted very successful operations to support seven different Division's main effort to neutralized Iraqi resistance. For the last time, 2-17th CAV displaced to new TAA Stetson to occupy Qayyarah West Air Base to perform sustain and stability operation.

SO-SO Operations

The base was empty and badly looted when we arrived. It took more than seven days to clean and set up troop's Command Post and cantonment. C Troop Soldiers removed hazardous wastes, abandoned ammunitions and debris from their AO. Once Setting up the responsible perimeters and guard points, we continue to perform aircraft maintenance. So far, Squadron had flown more than 2,500 combat flight hours and we caught with all the required schedule maintenance. Living conditions continuously improved. Third country nationals showed up for dining and laundry facilities, and MWR center. 2-17th CAV sponsored to build new school for local villagers. We increased a daily routine ground convoy to Mosul for rations and admin run. The Squadron offered many pilgrimages and local ruins to bored Soldiers. The things are getting more stable however, the complacency became one of main concerns among leaders. Suddenly, American Troops encountered a new deadly enemy, improvised explosive device (IEDs) struck many of our vehicles traveling on the highway. INSUMs and SIGACTs suggested new TTP to avoid our new threat. Many Soldiers attempted to avoid the convoy outside of the camp from fear of exposure to IED. Some violated the General Orders #1 (No consumption of Alcohol).

Rumors arose from the home front that many were involving in adulteries that made some very upset. The Senior Leadership demanded both combat and garrison operations. The pressure from the suspense of paperwork for both admin and training were very stressful. In fact, I was very frustrated by these external requirements and internal issues. Sulfur Mine gas explosions near by Q-West lingered more than three days around the AO. We had to wear gas masks for long period of time due to this event. Some Soldiers started having inhalation problems and one of the Soldier's lung collapsed. Attacking by insurgent was increasing day by day. Quick Reaction Force found the map and other document at the rockets or mortar launching sites indicated that the insurgents are very close to connected with us or work inside the camp. I prayed daily for a safe return of my convoy and aircraft, and counted down the remaining days of redeployment to back home.

Redeployment

Finally, the date we had long been waiting for arrived. Once we received the movement orders, we started seeing the replacement unit arriving at Q-West and prepared for relief in place and transition of authority. The battle handover went very smoothly until the night prior TOA ceremony day. The bad news interrupted our commanders update briefing that we had a first killed in action during the last left seat ride flight operation. It stunned us quite dramatically. However, our mission continued on. Upon completion of TOA ceremony, we had lined up and prepared for the ground assault convoy down to Kuwait. Despite the tragic incident, morale went back high. I stressed out to all Soldiers of the organization that do not let their guards down. It could be most dangerous mission since we occupied Q-West. The convoy rolled. I prayed for our safety. When three days of an extremely risky convoy was over, we saw both flags, U.S. and

Kuwaiti, flying over the masts on top of the checkpoint at the border. Two weeks later, I finally was able to embrace my family at home after 12 months of combat environment. I look back now and have no regret in what I have done. In fact, it was a great feeling to serve the nation; I am proud of myself as an American Warrior.

References

STP 21-1-SMCT. Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks, Skill Level 1. 1 Apr 03