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My Contribution to Freedom

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Abstract

For the next few moments I would like to share my personal and professional experiences while preparing for deployment and actual deployment. When you are done you should have an understanding of my military background and events leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom II (OIF II) as perceived through my experiences. Our brigade was the only unit out of the 25TH Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks to get alerted for deployment to OIF II. This was a great concern of mine due to the fact in retention there is a standard hierarchy in which command and control, resources, and reporting must occur. I will also share the additional duty I had to perform in addition to managing the Commander's retention program.

My Contribution to Freedom

I entered the Army on March 6, 1990 as a Cannon Crewmember (13B). I attended Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. My first duty assignment was 1ST Battalion, 3RD Field Artillery located at Ft. Hood, Texas. Less than two months after arrival our unit was alerted to deploy to Southwest Asia in support of Operation Desert Shield/Storm. As you can imagine all the stressors associated with going to war slowly begin to creep into reality. Before you knew it we were deployed and writing history in the attempt to liberate Kuwait. My deployments did not end with Desert Storm it continued several years later as I was preparing to deploy to Bosnia in support of Operation Stabilization Force. This deployment was not as stressful as my first, because of the fact I knew what to expect. However it would be the first time I would deploy since my reclassification in March 1997 from 13B to a Career Counselor (79S). Now I was a SSG working as special staff, responsible for the Brigade Commander's retention program compared to being a private belonging to a field artillery section. There was not much time to research and learn what I needed to do, things just sort of fell in place. After a few weeks I developed the confidence required to brief Senior Leaders on all retention related matters. I was called upon numerous times to go out on patrols to other Forward Operating Bases (FOB's) and counsel Soldiers on their reenlistment options and desires to remain on active duty. My deployment to the Balkans allowed me to develop in what I call a combat multiplier. For the first time in my career I personally felt I was making a difference in Soldiers lives as well as taking care of our future Army. My efforts during deployment were recognized earning selection to Sergeant First Class and a hand picked job as an Instructor, with only nine years in service.

After three challenging years (Jan 2000 – Feb 2003) of performing Instructor duties at Ft. Jackson, SC I was blessed with the assignment of a lifetime, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Not that my duty was a challenge but, while stationed at Ft. Jackson I was the Troop Support Battalion NCO of the Year (NCOY) 2001, Soldier Support Institute NCOY 2001, Ft. Jackson NCOY 2001, Combined Arms Support Command NCOY 2002, Training and Doctrine Command NCOY 2002, and runner-up on the Department of the Army's first ever NCOY competition. So with that said my wife and I were very excited and full of enthusiasm as we begin our assignment process to Hawaii. We reported in April 2003 and things were going fine however our nation was in the process of invading Iraq. No unit from the 25TH Infantry Division had been deployed since Vietnam, so at no time did it occur to me that would soon change. I was appalled as the next Soldier standing in the ranks when we received the word our unit has been identified for deployment. We all looked at each other and mumbling and laughing could be heard "Hawaii has not deployed since Vietnam". After a brief pause from the Commander we knew he was serious. Immediately, I begin thinking of how to alert my wife of the news. Would I share the news over the phone, while eating dinner, or say it quickly so that she may not hear what I was saying? This assignment to Hawaii was supposed to be a relaxing three years basking in the sun and drinking umbrella drinks. However duty called and we had a mission to perform 8,000 miles around the world. I was assigned to the 2ND Infantry Brigade, 25TH Infantry Division as the Senior Career Counselor. This was not my first deployment neither my second so I knew what to expect and how to prepare mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. However this would be my first time deploying and having 7 subordinates to deploy and return home the way their families saw them depart.

One thing slightly different from this deployment and past experiences is that we had over 120 days to train and prepare. Watching the news every day we could see that the battle fields of Iraq was ever changing and we needed every bit of training we could receive. Every range I could get myself and my Soldiers on was to our benefit even if it was just familiarization of weapons other than our individual weapon. Our brigade established mandatory training that all Soldiers regardless of rank and MOS had to attend prior to deployment. Ie... How to react to an ambush, how to step up a secure checkpoint, how to search vehicles, how to properly search detainees, how to identify various mines, signals used during convoys and numerous first aid tasks. As training continued we were still responsible for day to day reenlistment actions and reviewing every enlisted Soldier's 201 file assigned to the brigade. As a Career Counselor no reenlistment or extension can occur until we have verified the Basic Active Service Date (BASD), Pay Entry Basic Date (PEBD), and Expiration Term of Service (ETS) are correct. If not we have procedures to correct these dates before the action can take place. So as you can imagine there were plenty of late nights and early mornings to accomplish this enormous task. This deployment would be like no other for the simple reason we were the only element from Division deploying. In retention we have a standard hierarchy for command and control, reporting, and resources. I immediately notified my chain of command of my concerns and realized the staff was asking the same questions. Before you knew it 120 days had passed and it was time to deploy. We arrived in Kuwait after what seemed like a two day plane ride with all the time zones we went through. We remained in Kuwait awaiting our equipment and acclimating to a desert environment. After 10 days we were given our marching orders into Iraq. Half the Soldiers were flying to our location while the other half had to perform a 4 day convoy. 1SG needed senior NCOs in the convoy and did not want to place the burden on all the SGTs

and SSGs. I volunteered even though I had little convoy experience although the Soldiers could not believe the Reup guy was apart of their convoy. After four long days and 750 miles of severe stress caused by random sniper fire, improvised explosive devices (IED's), and bad weather we arrived at our base camp with all personnel and equipment. All the Soldiers redeploying were so excited to see us coming in because they knew their time was coming to an end. Our mission was to provide security to the Sulaymaniyah province an area about the size of West Virginia. Each of the five Battalions had different sectors in which they were charged to maintain security and establish a working relationship to local appointed officials. My initial job in theater was to find out my retention hierarchy and start reenlisting Soldiers to take advantage of tax free selective reenlistment bonuses (SRB's). Under normal conditions I would report to the division element however they were based in Afghanistan and IID was the division that supported our brigade while deployed so that meant I was responsible for reporting to three different hierarchy's (25TH ID, 1ST ID, and III Corps) which made things quite difficult because each element had their own formats and suspense for reporting. Not to mention the electricity issues and network problems our FOB would experience on a day to day basis. Some weeks we may go two to three days without power, just another challenge we faced in rebuilding a war torn country. After about three months in country we were finally adjusting to our new battle rhythms and starting to get use to the nightly rocket and mortar attacks our FOB received, at least four nights a week.

One day I was working and received a message the brigade CSM wanted to see me as soon as possible. I gathered all my gear and as I moved out I kept thinking what the CSM could want with me. To my surprise and his there was a tasking requiring a MSG to perform duties as a Field Ordering Officer (FOO) pay agent. I had no clue what this meant and CSM really did not have any details except he knew I would be responsible for a lot of money. I was given a time

and location to meet the officer I would be working with for the duration of the deployment. As we met and were talking he asked what I do and how did I get tasked for this mission? I responded I was the Sr. Career Counselor for the brigade and CSM said I am the man for the job. As he was briefing me he was telling me that we already have our first money pick up and that we will have body guards and air support. I replied body guards and air support? He stated we were picking up 2.7 million dollars in cash. My mouth nearly hit the ground. He stated that this would be one of many trips but also that air support would not always be provided so be prepared for convoys. Our instructions were that this money was seized from Saddam and was to be used through out our province to rebuild the infrastructure for Iraqis. Not one dollar could be spent on or for the American Soldier. My reenlistment job did not stop so I had to establish days and times to disperse money to the local contractors. There came a time when security was very tight and the locals were taking three to four hours to come on the FOB so the decision was made for us to go convoy to them and do payouts. I was very concerned and excited at the same time because now I was going out where our Soldiers were located and could talk retention but, I was out of my comfort zone with millions of dollars. At times all I could think of was being ambushed and someone taking the cash and possibly my life. Through the grace of God I dispersed over 15 million dollars with out error for the rebuilding of mosques, schools, roads, sewer systems, health clinics, power plants just to name a few major projects. This money was also used to pay for collateral damages our Soldiers caused when they kicked in the wrong door, or mistakenly hurt or killed the wrong people. As our deployment entered the last three months reenlistments were at and all time high. We normally would do about 20-25 reenlistments a week, during this period we were doing 20-25 reups a day. This of coursed increased my blood pressure because now my Battalion Reup NCOs had to travel more often in convoys to pick up

and return contracts knowing the threat of IED's were high traveling to our FOB. After all the dust was settled my team reenlisted over 900 Soldiers and paid over 10 million dollars in bonuses. My brigade commander was proud to award me with the bronze star for the amount of reenlistments my Soldiers and I were able to accomplish and for performing the arduous job of being the FOO pay agent. Our unit was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation for our very effective means of maintaining security especially during the first public elections ever held in Iraq.