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Running Head: MY FIRST DUTY STATION: THE ROAD TO DESERT STORM

Personal Experience Paper

My First Duty Station: The Road to Desert Storm

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Abstract

I think an individual's first duty assignment is vital in molding a Soldier's perspective of the Army. This paper is an experience of my first duty station experience. I give an insight on my experiences, ranging from getting my initial assignment to deploying to the first Gulf War. This paper gives insight to the importance of NCOs to my unit and molding me as a Soldier.

### My first duty station: The road to Desert Storm

Looking back on my 18 years in the military, it is amazing how things have changed and how much they have stayed the same. I will attempt to give some insight from the perspective of a new Soldier going to my first duty station and deploying to war. I will discuss parts of my experience from getting my first assignment to my unit's involvement in Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

#### The Assignment

As a brand new Soldier with not much experience, I managed to keep a low profile through Basic and Advance Individual Training (AIT). I learned from early in Basic training to always be in the right place, at the right time and in the right uniform and everything will be fine. This is a rule I ensured I followed throughout my career. Although I had a good standing in my AIT class, I was surprised when I was selected for an assignment to White House communications. Being the private that I was, I did not want an assignment where I would have to work around a bunch of uptight individuals. I was in a dilemma and wanted out of this assignment, so I did what any slick private will do. I sat back trying to come up with a good excuse that I thought my Drill Sergeant will accept. As luck would have it, one of my classmates had an assignment to Germany and did not want to go overseas. My classmate and I went to the Drill Sergeant and asked to have our assignments switch and he agreed. I think that was the best decision I made in my military career.

Upon arriving in Germany, I was shuttled in a bus to the reception station. I stayed at the reception station for about two days before I received my orders assigning me to my unit. The morning I received my orders, I remembered the Assignment NCO saying "Private you are lucky as hell. You are going to the best place and best unit in all of Germany". Upon hearing that

statement, I became really excited and even more pumped up, but I did not understand why the NCO and his buddy was laughing so hard. I will find out soon enough. I was assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, Regimental Support Squadron, 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, Nurnberg, Germany. As I rode to the post on the back of a Cutvee, I observed that the building was riddled with bullet holes. These buildings, which would be my home for the next three years were Hitler's headquarters during the World War and were known as Merrill Barracks or Gangster Hotel.

### The Unit

As I arrived to the unit, I understood why the assignment NCO and his buddy were laughing so hard. As I rode through the quad, which is basically four buildings connected together with a tunnel entrance that opened up into a courtyard; the first comment I heard was fresh meat. The whole scene with all the guys hanging out the windows reminded me of one of those prison movies. The next morning, I immediately noticed something strange; there were no females in sight. The unit was an all male unit that had the mission of supporting the Regiment, which consisted of three tank and a helicopter squadron. The mission of the regiment was to keep peace between the East and West Germany by patrolling the border.

### Leadership

Although a Soldier is introduced to the principles of discipline in Basic and Advance Individual Training; I truly believe a Soldier's foundation for discipline is laid at his first duty station. That foundation is based on the leadership of the unit. When I first arrived at my unit, it was evident that mid-level NCOs ran the show and was very in tuned with taking care of Soldiers. This was at a time when the average Sergeant or Staff Sergeant had 15 to 17 years time in service, so they were very seasoned.

At this time there were problems at the senior NCO level due to a lack of stability at the First Sergeant level. At this time some of the senior NCOs basically did their own thing. In my first four months in the unit, we changed First Sergeants four times. The first First Sergeant packed up his things and left during a field exercise. Things were not looking too promising at that level of leadership, but a blessing would soon come in the form of 1SG Albert Williams who was a frocked Sergeant First Class. It is amazing that I still remember his name after 18 years of service; that goes to show that good leadership has a lasting effect on Soldiers.

When 1SG Williams arrived there was a betting pool on how long he will last in the seat. He was a very short, soft spoken and quiet man, but nobody and I mean nobody messed with his Soldiers. He was accredited with turning around the attitude of the unit, especially at the senior level and his focus was always Soldier based. He instilled a sense of belonging and esprit de corps, not only in his unit but the rest of the squadron. This type of attitude was pushed from the top down; unity and cohesiveness was a major part of the regimental commander's philosophy. I remember a time at a regimental formation, the regimental commander asked about a fight we had downtown at a local night club with First Armored Division Soldiers. Everyone thought we were in great deal of trouble, but to our surprise, the commander asked "did you win?" We answered "yes sir" and he said "that's what I am talking about". He went on to say that although he does not condone fighting, if one Soldier from the regiment fights, every Soldier from the regiment better be fighting. Although he did not condone us fighting, what he said laid a foundation of unity for many of us young Soldiers that will come to be the very fiber of the regiment in the future. The leadership from the top down was very in tune with taking care of Soldiers and enforcing discipline and standards.

## Training

The 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR trained year round; my unit stayed in the field for at least seven months out of the year in support of the different squadrons from the regiment. Each regiment rotated to the field for at least a week at a time. My unit lived to train, not only my unit, but the regiment as a whole trained very hard which prepared us for just about every situation. My First Sergeant was relentless with training; we had alerts at least twice a week where we would load up and convoy out for at least two hours. When there was downtime, we would pull out our crew served weapons and practice our drills. Everyone from the lowest to the highest ranking member of the team knew how to perform all team duties. The philosophy of our leadership was “a trained unit is a ready unit”.

## The Call

I remember around November 1990, preparing for PLDC graduation a few days away and getting a message for all 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR Soldiers to report to the orderly room. Once we reached the orderly room, we were told to pack our bags because we were going to war. All 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR Soldiers loaded up on several five ton trucks and reported back to their respective units to receive further instructions.

## The Brief

Upon arrival to the unit, there was a scheduled brief from the commander that afternoon. Our deployment timeline was moved up because 7<sup>th</sup> Corps that was slotted to deploy at that time was not fully prepared. We were told that the regiment’s mission was to spearhead an assault on Iraq’s Republican Guard force. We were given a month to get all our tanks and equipment rail headed and get our personal effects in order. The funny thing is as a young Soldier after hearing the brief, I still did not believe we were going to deploy.

### Rail Heading

For those Soldiers that have never done rail heading, I guarantee it is not an experience that one may want to experience. The act of nailing those chock blocks with extra long and thick nails is no fun. Amazingly the squadron finished rail heading all the equipment a week and a half ahead of schedule. This was due to an outstanding plan the NCOs came up with, which was to run three eight hour shifts daily. Not only did this plan reduce the time, but it allowed Soldiers to have some downtime to spend with their love ones. Some of the trucks that could not fit on the trains had to be driven 14 hours to the port in Bremahaven to be loaded on a ship.

### Moving Out

By early December, we were processed and ready to move out for deployment. All our bags were loaded on buses and the First Sergeant was checking the manifest against Soldiers getting on the bus. It was at this time that I saw the first chink in the unit's air of confidence. Although the younger Soldiers were a little comprehensive due to uncertainty, we all followed orders and were ready to go. To my surprise, three senior NCOs refused to get on the bus although the First Sergeant ordered them on the bus several times. I still remember the tears streaming down those NCOs faces as the bus pulled off.

The trip to Kuwait was somber and uneventful until we stopped in turkey for fuel. We stopped at an AFB and deplaned into a hanger where we had snacks and sodas for a couple of hours. At this time the Soldiers were trying to ease the tension and relax by telling jokes. I guess we were a little too loud because an Air force Major came out and commenced to rip into the Soldiers. This is where the trip became interesting. As I said before it was instilled from the top down that no one messes with the 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR. I was sitting not too far from the table where the chaplain and S3 sat. In all my years of service, I have only met two chaplains that I thought was

a little of the rocker and our chaplain was one of them. When he heard the Major ripping into us, he jumped up to confront the Major. He was stopped by the S3 before he could move. Our S3 was a short pudgy Major that was a WestPoint graduate from Brooklyn New York and he was crazy. The S3 ran over and grabbed the Major, asked him who he was yelling at. He then commenced to tell the Major in not so kind words the type of beating he will give him. He went as far as trying to get the Major outside, which the Major wanted no part of. The Major quickly retreated back to his office. Upon seeing this, the Soldiers really got fired up, and that set the tone for the rest of the flight.

### Reception

We flew into KKMC and were bused to a place called tent city. This place was huge with nothing but tents for miles. This is also where most of the units came into the country, so I was able to see many of my friends from other deploying units from Germany. We stayed in tent city for about three weeks and the troops began to get restless. There were many fights and a couple of incidents where shots were fired; one Soldier shot himself in the foot. Things got so bad that the ammunition was taken from the junior Soldiers. This is also the place where I was introduced to waste burning detail. For this detail, your tools consisted of a shovel to bury the waste after it was burned, a stick to mix the waste while it was burning, and some diesel to light the drum of waste on fire. Believe me when I say this is a detail that no one wanted and if you got on the First Sergeant hit list, this exactly what you ended up doing.

### On The Move

We finally got the order to move out in early January. The support squadron brought up the rear behind the other squadron escorted by four tanks. We rode across the desert heading toward Baghdad until about 1700 when we stopped and was directed to dig hasty fighting

positions. At about 17:45 while we setting up our positions, a call came across the network saying eight Iraqi tanks were heading our way. As we hunkered down in our positions, our tanks went out to meet them only find out it was a false alarm. As the Soldiers continued working on our hasty fighting positions, I was selected for guard duty. About an hour later I saw several of what will come to be known as B-2 bombers fly overhead. It seemed like only seconds after, the sky lit up from bombs being dropped. The sound of the bombs going off really scared me; the war had officially started.

The next morning, we were escorted by one tank and some Military Police. The other tanks went forward to fight the war. As we moved forward, one the trucks in the convoy got lost which was a blessing in disguise. The lost driver spotted about 12 Iraqi tanks heading our way. Our tank escort got his coordinates and went out to retrieve the driver. It was very impressive to hear the NCO give commands to his crew as they laid down kill after kill while calling for support from the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron. A few minutes later a few Apaches flew overhead and laid waste to the rest of those Iraqi tanks. To witness those Apaches in action was an amazing experience. That was the closest call that I had in combat. It was at that point when I understood as a young Specialist why we trained so hard. It all came into play during the war. The 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR did its job and did it well. The regiment was praised and awarded several unit awards for its role in the war. The regimental commander, who postponed a promotion so he could go to war with his troops, was promoted to Major General in a big ceremony in Iraq. About three months after, we returned to a hero's welcome in Nurnberg, Germany.

### Conclusion

In summary, I gave you insight into my experience of my first assignment and the events leading up to Desert Shield and Desert Storm It was a hell of an experience for a young Soldier

and I was glad to have experienced it with a well trained, discipline unit with very competent NCOs that took care of Soldiers.