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Running head: OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM 05-07

2nd Battalion, 77th Field Artillery Operation

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Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07 12/05/2005-12/10/2006

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15 February 2009

NRC Class 35

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Personal Experience Paper (PEP) Outline

THESIS: Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07, 2nd Battalion, 77th Field Artillery was activated and prepared for deployment within 12 months. The unit had a variety of nontraditional missions and was successful in all of them.

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Abstract

The 2nd Battalion, 77th Field Artillery was activated and ordered to stand up and deploy within a year. The unit trained to provide artillery fire support as well as escort duty for the Department of State and a variety of other missions. The unit trained; deployed and adapted to every mission it received and brought everyone back alive.

Activation

In the summer of 2004 I had recently returned to Fort Hood, Texas from Operation Iraqi Freedom I and I was getting my battery back into garrison mode. I was the first sergeant for Alpha Battery 3rd Battalion, 16th Field Artillery at the time.

I had been in the field artillery for over 17 years, serving in various units around the world and on almost every howitzer in the Army inventory.

After physical training one day, I was in my office getting ready for formation when the battalion commander, LTC Mike Hilliard, stopped by unexpectedly. He informed me that the 4th Infantry Division was going to stand up another brigade combat team. Within that brigade there was going to be a field artillery battalion. I had been selected to be the first sergeant for one of the batteries. I was allowed to select two howitzer sections and one fire direction section and we moved down the road to build a unit from scratch. I was the new first sergeant for Alpha Battery, 2nd Battalion, 77th Field Artillery. We were the first battery to stand up.

I slowly started to receive Soldiers and then one day about 60 showed up at once. They had all gone to basic training together. It was at about that time that we learned we were deploying to Iraq within a year. We had a lot of work to do.

We started receiving equipment and began our individual training. We received our howitzers and started training the new Soldiers on crew drill. We were making a lot of progress when we found out that our mission was not going to be the typical field artillery mission. We were also going to man gun truck platoons and escort State Department personnel from the International Zone, sometimes referred to as the Green Zone, to the various ministries in the

Baghdad area. Not only did we not have a lot of time to build and train a unit but we were going to have a dual mission.

There was not enough space on our calendar for us to pack everything up and go to one of the training centers so the Joint Readiness Training Center sent the observer/controllers to us.

We had Soldiers being evaluated on firing a Paladin howitzer one day and on convoy procedures in armored vehicles the next day. I was proud of how well my Soldiers adapted to the changing mission and performed to standard.

I had a meeting of the battery Family Readiness Group. I told the family members that taking care of their Soldiers was one of my top priorities. To me taking care of them included working late or on the weekends if we had to. I wanted them well trained on their weapons and equipment as well as tactics and techniques. I know the families wanted more time with them at home but my goal was to bring them back from combat alive.

A couple of months before our deployment we learned that we would be moving into the former Baath Party Headquarters on Forward Operating Base Union III. We would operate out of this large building. Oh, and by the way, Saddam Hussein's trial would take place in the back of the building. We were also going to be tasked with providing guards for the courthouse during the trial as well as the only entry control point into the base.

Deployment

We packed up all our equipment and shipped it off. We flew to Kuwait and spent a couple of weeks there getting more training. There were fewer distractions for the Soldiers in Kuwait than back at Fort Hood.

When we had completed all of the mandatory training we flew up to the Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). After spending a few hours there we were flown in helicopters to Landing Zone Washington which is across the street from the old US Embassy in the International Zone. From there we were moved to FOB Union III in trucks.

We were replacing the 1st Battalion, 76th Field Artillery from the 3rd Infantry Division out of Fort Stewart, Georgia. They were the same type of unit we were.

Things were a little cramped as both units switched out but we managed to make it work. As the Soldiers from my unit were becoming comfortable with their new duties, the Soldiers from the outgoing unit slowly started to go back home. Our Soldiers started filtering into their patrol vehicles to observe. During one of these patrols I had Soldiers from two of my platoons mixed in with Soldiers from the 1-76 FA. They were escorting personnel from the Department of State to another base outside the International Zone.

The enemy had come up with a new type of Improvised Explosive Device (IED). It was called the Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP). It was a shaped charge with a copper disc that changed shape with the force of the explosion and sliced through armor like a knife through butter. They were deadly.

They were still running the missions so my Soldiers were in the back seats of the vehicles. On this particular mission an EFP was detonated and killed the driver and vehicle commander of one of the vehicles. The gunner and my two Soldiers in the back were wounded. A medic from a vehicle towards the rear of the convoy ran forward to help the wounded and a second EFP went off as he ran by. He was killed also.

The insurgents had set up a video camera under some rocks on the side of the road. Their intent was to get footage of the attack to use as propaganda. We found the camera first though. I was in the Tactical Operating Center listening to the radio traffic. I had four platoons out on missions and two platoons on the base learning the FOB security mission. I was frantically looking through the battle roster numbers to see if the dead Soldiers were mine or from our sister unit.

My Soldiers were medically evacuated back to the International Zone. I met them at the hospital. Their injuries were not life threatening. They ended up spending a few days in the hospital.

The Soldiers that were killed in action were on their last mission. They were due to go home three days after the attack. I remember thinking that it was going to be a long year. I already had two wounded Soldiers and we hadn't officially taken over the mission.

The following week we officially relieved 1-76 FA in place and we were responsible for everything from that point. The attack definitely helped the Soldiers focus on the mission. We were determined not to have anyone else hit. The outgoing unit had lost a total of ten Soldiers during the year that they were there.

One of my platoons ended up moving to Forward Operating Base Falcon to man two howitzers that were serving as hot guns. They fired harassment and interdiction fire to deny the enemy territory at certain times as well as counter fire. Occasionally they fired a targeted mission and they did have one confirmed kill on a terrorist leader. I rotated that platoon out every 90 days.

The other platoons had various missions. One would be the Quick Reaction Force for the base. Another would be on FOB Security to include manning the entry control point. The International Zone post office was on our base so we had a lot of traffic. We did have one of the large machines that can see through clothes to determine if someone is trying to smuggle something in. All personnel and vehicles were checked.

When personnel from the State Department or other civilians at the embassy went on leave my Soldiers took them to the Baghdad International Airport in midnight runs. They would be in armored buses and my Soldiers would escort them.

The main mission we had was picking personnel up from the embassy and escorting them to the various ministries. The ministry of oil, health, electricity, interior, etc...

We also escorted prison officials from the United States to the various prisons in Iraq. They were trying to ensure that the Iraqi's were running them properly. There is a women's prison that houses the children of the incarcerated females with the mother. That is only if there was no other family willing to take the children. There were newborn babies in that prison. We used to take donated clothing and toys to hand out to the kids. Being a grandfather, that was one of my favorite missions.

Another favorite mission of mine was to take two platoons to the Central Bank to escort a couple of large trucks loaded with cash. We escorted them to BIAP and guarded them while the money was loaded onto a plane. There was so much cash, it filled the plane.

Saddam Hussein was tried in the courthouse in the back of our building. He would regularly be flown in from Camp Victory. We would bulk up our perimeter security and guard various locations around the building when he was there. The US Marshalls were in charge of that part of the building. They gave us a tour of the courtroom and I sat in Saddam's seat as well as the judge's chair.

I made sure my Soldiers remained focused and I think the wide variety of missions helped keep them on their toes. We had one other Soldier that was wounded in the hand by an IED but none of our Soldiers were killed in action. I achieved my goal of accomplishing our mission and bringing all my Soldiers back alive.

It is amazing how the American Soldier can take any mission given to him and adapt as needed to get it accomplished. Defending freedom is not easy but these Soldiers did a great job of it on this deployment.

Photographs

