

Personal Experience in Iraq
September 2007- October 2008
First Sergeant
October 2009

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SMNRC Class 35 Phase II

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Abstract

Individuals enlist to serve for various reasons, some join for the sheer thrill of fighting, others for the enticing benefits of such as: job security, a bi-monthly pay check, education, medical, retirement, a place to live, opportunities to travel and see the world. I joined for personal change. I needed to be on my own to prove my worth as a young man. I would not say the Army was the right choice for me, but I will say it has positively impacted who I am as well as my spouse and children. Growing up I would always say I would never join the service, because that is what we called it back then.

In this paper, I will discuss my accomplishment that highlighted my 27+ years as a Soldier, more importantly a leader in combat supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom and what that meant for me a Soldier wearing America's uniform.

I. INTRODUCTION:

During the course of my military career I have had many assignments. Each assignment was unique and challenge. In this paper I will discuss the assignment that was most challenging for me. My personal experiences, during my first deployment, as a U.S. Army First Sergeant assigned to Iraq from September 2007 to October 2008.

After 26 years of service, this was the first time as a combat soldier, in foreign country, and I was looking forward to my role as a leader in a real combat environment leading Americas Soldiers.

II. ASSIGNMENT:

a. **Assignment Verification.** I received assignment instructions with less than three month remaining in Korea. The only information I was privy to was that I was on assignment to Fort Lewis, Washington, unit unknown. I contacted my branch manager and was informed that I was being assigned as a First Sergeant in the 22nd Personnel Services Battalion on Orders for Iraq. Upon learning this, I attempted to contact I-Corps, G-1 Sergeant Major. It was unbelievable, the obstacles I encountered while trying to obtain information on my PCS. I wanted to verify the rumors that this unit would be deploying shortly after my arrival. This may seem inconsequential but when one has a family to consider moving and then after the move the family is left along in a strange new environment it is not so inconsequential. I could not believe the G1 would not speak with me to deny or confirm the rumors. As, a Soldier and a Senior Noncommissioned Officer this information was vital to my decision making regarding to my family.

Professionally, I now had the opportunity to support the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), by doing my part as a Soldier. Eventually, it was confirmed by the G1 Sergeant Major

that PCS assignment unit was deploying in support of Iraqi Freedom. Let me say this “the Army personnel management system has an obligation to be upfront and candid with each Soldier they support by providing them with any and all information that is pertinent to decision making in regarding options for family member during wartime deployments. Anything short of this is should be totally unacceptable. :

b. **Family Preparation:** As a husband, father and a Soldier I now had the most important question answered and was armed with the information necessary to make an informed intelligent decision in regards to my family. My wife and I decided, family stabilization was important and the family should remain at Fort Jackson so we promptly purchased a home in Columbia, SC. This would allow our daughter to remain in the same school without any interruptions to her education and provide an opportunity for my wife to progress in her career. With all family matters settled I was now able to concentrate on my upcoming PCS.

c. **PCSing:** I departed Columbia, SC by POV and arrived at Fort Lewis on an extremely foggy night after a seven day cross country trip, which took me through eleven states. I went to sign-in at the famous Waller Hall, a building named for a prominent Adjutant General Officer. After traveling through the fog and thinking I could rest awhile turned out to be wishful thinking. To my disappointment, I was informed there were no rooms for senior enlisted personnel and I had to acquire lodging off post and report back on Monday at 0800 to in-process.

I was looking forward to Monday and eager to begin my tour of duty as the First Sergeant for the 175th Postal Company, 22nd Personnel Services Battalion. To my surprise my Battalion Command Sergeant Major was my classmate at the Drill Sergeant School at Fort Jackson. She assigned me as the 175th Postal Company, as the First Sergeant due to my pervious postal experience.

Serving as the First Sergeant of a Postal Company was rewarding and eventful to say the least. I found myself in the middle of a growing unit and serving with a very immature confrontational and uncaring company commander. Fortunately, I had three young motivated platoon leaders, one with combat experience. The unit was heavy with junior enlisted Soldiers, three having combat experience. I was very fortunate to have a platoon sergeant with prior deployment experience which I was able to lean on for his experience and steer the training process for the mission that awaited us. Both the commander and I were inexperienced in combat tours. I had to quickly get on board with the tactical training curve. Before wheels were up for Iraq, this is where I enlisted the advice and combat experience of one of my platoon sergeants. Not only did I have a unit that was untrained for combat but, very undisciplined, the discipline part I had no issue with combating. The unit was not qualified to perform the postal mission in accordance with the unit mission essential task list (METL). The commander and I were charged with the task of getting the unit from an untrained METL status to a trained status in preparation for our deployment to Baghdad Iraq in two months.

I had to rely on my prior experience as a former postal Soldier and the former Series Training Chief for the 42A course at Fort Jackson. I sought and received approval for the Soldier Support Institute to send a Mobile Training Team (MTT), to Fort Lewis to train and certify nearly 40 Soldiers on Postal operation and procedures. This training was critical to the unit, and the battalion and mission in Iraq. The training lasted two weeks and saved the Army approximately \$12,000.00 of temporary duty (TDY) training dollars. The unit, not only completed all postal requirements, but also all mandatory pre- deployment tactical training. I also had to deal with Soldiers that did not want to deploy, but gave all sorts of reasons to stay in the Army.

III. Arrival in Iraq:

On 8 September 2006, my commander, my Human Resource Sergeant, my Supply Sergeant and I deployed as part of the unit's advance party, leaving the two platoons behind to join us a month later. Our journey took us from our home station to Baltimore Washington International Airport (BWI), to Germany for a brief stop, and then into Kuwait. The three of us stayed in Kuwait long enough to in processes and complete the mandatory training and briefing requirements before continuing forward to Camp Liberty, Iraq which would be our home for the next fourteen months. Upon arrival, we were met at Baghdad Airport by the 55th Postal Company command team we would be replacing. As faith, for me would have it, I was replacing one of my former battle buddy from Fort Jackson; the reunion was a good one. We began the Relief in Place and the Transfer of Authority RIP/TOA process immediately with the 55th Postal Company from Germany. They were as eager to redeploy as we were to start our journey. Through the RIP/TOA process, I began to understand the full mission at hand and I actually, for the first time began to question my preparation for the company to take on the mission. At that moment I realized the challenge would test my personal and professional skills to a whole new level as a leader. The changing of the guards went smoothly thanks to the outgoing 55th Postal team and the 502nd Personnel Services Battalion. Although we were only attached to the 502nd for one month they made us feel that our presence was needed and critical to the mission at hand.

a. **Challenges:** The commander and I received our mission statement which read "provide world class Direct and General Postal Support to Coalition Forces, to include Department of Defense Civilian contractors, supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom in the Baghdad

Area of Operations. Responsible for providing all phases of postal support, to include: Postal Finance, Mail Processing and Distribution, and Mobile Postal Support Operations (Rodeos).”

As, the lead postal element we were solely responsible for providing postal support which covered the Southern two-thirds of Iraq. Our company was based out of Camp Liberty, we had eight postal units attached to us geographically dispersed throughout Iraq for the mission of providing postal mail support.

The changing of the guard was complete and after adapting to incoming mortar rounds landing in and around the Forward Operating Base (FOB), it was time to get down to serious business. Not only did we adapt to incoming mortar we had to adjust and adapt to the new Battalion leadership from Fort Hood, Texas, the 15th Personnel Services Battalion which arrive two weeks after we arrived. At times, I could not tell who the enemy was. My commander and I had many late night talks about the new organization but we agreed on three, support the command, complete as mission, and bring our Soldiers home safely to their love ones

b. **Responsibilities:** By November both of my organic platoons were in theatre, first platoon was on Camp Liberty with me and second platoon on Camp Adder assigned to another organization but same battalion. We had two Air Force units attached to us which served for six month intervals providing outstanding postal support services for the International Zone. The Air Force Postal unit’s ability to work under the Army command and the ability to perform was critical to a joint mission, which they did time after time despite a fire that broke out in their living quarters.

We had numerous Reserve units attached to the company. Our Reserve units were individually augmented from different Reserve unit throughout the United States. Working together as a cohesive unit, not knowing one another was a challenge to the leadership abilities,

but not to the mission. Our Reserve units provided postal support to numerous FOBs including; Camp Rustmiyah, FOB Falcon, FOB Taji, and one active duty from Fort Bragg, providing postal support to FOB Victory. My organic unit First Platoon from Fort Lewis was assigned with me on FOB Liberty. FOB liberty handle more mail than any of the other units assigned. The challenges that I faced was not so much on the mission side but being able to get out to the various location and visit with the 165 Soldiers and Airmen assigned to the unit. In a 14 month deployment I logged over 150 flying hours during my fourteen months deployment visiting the Soldiers.

My first helicopter ride was during the RIP/TOA, I was sitting by the window scared to death when I saw flares shooting from the aircraft, I thought we were under attack, my heart was racing but in reality there was nothing I could do. My counterpart reach over and told me to it's all good with this big grin on his face, actually he was laughing at me. Later, when we land he told me it was a counter measure, like that was supposed to make me feel better. At that moment, I realized how dangerous it was to be in Iraq, not just me but how dangerous it was for all of us. This was the second time I told myself whatever it takes I will bring my Soldiers home. The first time came when we depart Fort Lewis on that early September 8th morning while saying good-bye to families and friend.

My later flight visits came on the after math of a late night mortar attack on FOB Falcon. I received a call via cell phone from the platoon sergeant informing me that the FOB had been hit and the Platoon Leader, a young motivated well trained second lieutenant was wounded, extent of his injury were unknown. Suddenly, the phone went dead. I woke up the commander to alert him and he in turn woke up the Battalion Commander to inform her. The nerve racking ordeal that followed was unspeakable. The FOB went n "black out" mode and communication was little

to none for hours at a time. Once communication was restored we were able to receive an update on our injured platoon leader. The report was positive; he suffered minor shrapnel wounds to his leg. His motivation and drive drove this young warrior back to duty within days of his injury.

The rotation of units coming and going under our command were good on one hand and challenging on the other hand. The joy of seeing one unit board the aircraft for home was great, and the challenge on receiving the replacement unit was always a challenge for the commander and I. We made it a point to be at the flight line to meet each unit and brief them before we manifested them on the flight that would take them to their new home in the fight. I made it a point to stress to the platoon sergeants and platoon leaders that being here is real and that the lives of my Soldiers meant more to me than mail and I directed them to take care of my “Soldier” first, the mail will take care of itself.

I remember, the night we picked up the 747th Postal Platoon (reserve unit). This unit was going to the hottest spot in our footprint FOB Rustmiyah. The platoon was led by a black female platoon leader and a white female platoon sergeant. The platoon leader was a IBM big wig, and the platoon sergeant was a wife and a mother of two girls. These two leaders were the best command team assigned to us. I instructed them both that I would be flying down to Rustmiyah in the upcoming days. I made no bones where they were going, and that was into the mouth of danger. I gave them all the latest intelligence on their new location as they boarded the C5. That same night I was woke up to the info that their FOB was hit heavily with mortar rounds. Once again black out mode was in place and the floor pacing for me began again. When communication restored I was able to speak with the platoon sergeant while the commander was speaking with the platoon leader and the feedback was all good news, only then did my heart

then stop racing. In a way it was good that this happen on their first night in country. This brought about a complete mission focus for the entire platoon for the rest of the mission.

I was very fortunate to have well trained and qualified noncommissioned officers doing what noncommissioned officers do best, taken care of Soldiers and accomplishing the impossible missions that were given to them. We had the support needed to accomplish our task of providing postal support to nearly 2/3 of Iraq. Our units received several combat awards ranging from one Purple Heart to numerous Combat Action Badges. My platoon received three Combat Action Badges for doing what Soldiers do best “standing in harms way to defend the nation” My human resource sergeant and one of our postal clerks received theirs while standing near the impact area of an incoming mortar round. I received mine on October 10, 2007, while walking to the DFAC. The incoming siren went off a little too late, I could actually hear the rounds overhead. I began to run toward the nearest bunker before a round landed approximately 10 feet behind me, throwing me and our Executive Officer (XO) into the bunker, where I hit my head on a chair that was in the bunker.

IV. Recommendation: As a leader, my only recommendation during wartime, is to hold all leaders to a higher standard of accountable. Training should be paramount and safety must be adhered to. The loss of life during war is expected but, what is expected is lack of training. The America public demands that when we send their love ones of to combat, that we as leaders have done everything possible to prepare them.

V. Conclusion: This was the first combat operation in Iraq for me and I can only say that the noncommissioned officers I served with in Iraq were the finest noncommissioned

officers I have ever served with in 27 years of service. These were the Soldiers that truly understood their mission and how it fit into the Army's big picture, and selfless service and the bond that only one Soldier has for another in difficult times when death is always lingering one second away.