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Operation Iraqi 1

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Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Strike Brigade -

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During Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), I was initially assigned to HHC 2/502d IN, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Air Assault. During the operation I was promoted to the grade of MSG and subsequently moved to the Forward Support Battalion that supported our brigade to assume duties as the Charlie company 1SG. Let me begin prior to the deployment back at FT Campbell, Kentucky.

January had come and gone and we still did not have our deployment order for the Iraqi theater of operation. The division knew they were going the question was when. At the time, I was a SFC assigned as a Medical Platoon Sergeant. I had been in the unit for about seven months. The unique issue with my situation was that my Platoon Leader, 1LT Seth French, was TDY at FT Sam Houston for our entire load up and preparation for deployment. Not only did he miss that operation, but our entire MDMP process as well. Prior my Platoon leaders TDY, he was fulfilling duties as the HHC executive office for three months. Needless to say I learned alot during the five months leading up to our initial deployment. It is now 20 February 2003, and our Battalion Executive Office, MAJ Kunk, informs me that he wants me to go on the Brigade's advance party to Kuwait, in five days. The day I was to begin my departure from FT Campbell was the day that my platoon leader came back from TDY. We passed each other in the doorway as I departed for the airfield. This is the point in time where I realized just how squared away my guys, the platoon were. Since I had little to no time till my departure there was a lot that I had not accomplished. I took care of all my admin stuff, but as far as everything else, that was another story. A couple of soldiers from my platoon stepped up packed my apartment and took care of my vehicles for me. That in and of itself was a major burden lifted from my shoulders.

Our advon arrived in Kuwait about three weeks prior to the main body arriving. My driver, SPC Jeffrey Vollmer proved himself worth his weight in gold. He created a new top for my vehicle and squared it away, since it came off the boat missing a few components. We staged in Kuwait

for about two to three weeks before we got the order to move North. The Ground Assault Convoy (GAC) north was a two-day operation. We rolled in MOPP level 2 and several times went to MOPP level 4 at the hint of any incoming fires. As we rolled through border towns in Iraq we would come across mobs of people that would swarm our vehicles. This made for a very uneasy and very difficult passage through these areas. This was at the initial onset of the war when Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) was still not something readily seen. We continued our trek North towards Baghdad. We continued our journey passing through Karbala, Anasaria, Iskandaria, until we hit Baghdad. This part of our movement north took approximately seven to ten days. Once in Baghdad we occupied the city for about 10 days. After that we launched further north to the city of Mosul. This ultimately became our Area of Operation (AO).

Our occupation up in Mosul, not only for my battalion but for the brigade as well, is when things really began happening. We occupied Mosul at night so by first light things looked quite different. Our Aid station was split, as it had been during the entire operation thus far. That morning a soldier had come to our location with a deep laceration to his left thumb. The irony in the situation was that I happen to be the senior guy on site and had not sewn a stitch for several years. Needless to say between a couple of my medics we get this Soldier squared away. The Soldier's name was Sergeant Christian. I had a long talk with that Sergeant that morning. I apologized for what appeared to be an excruciating ordeal, but he politely said no problem, it is all good. That being the first morning in a new Area of Responsibility (AOR), I had a feeling of being content and that all was well after talking with the Soldier. Sergeant Christian was an 11B who was working in the support platoon as a driver / squad leader. The reason I am explaining this incident in such depth, is the SGT Christian was our first KIA while deployed to the theater. I remember the day well.

We had been in Mosul for about six weeks. I was located at the TOC location, which was the Mosul Hotel. Now this hotel had been damaged quite extensively by Iraqis during the invasion. We were in our aid station conducting business as usual when a call came over the net, that a convoy had been hit with an IED. At the same time the Charlie Company Commander and Executive Officer came to the aid station. since we were all in the same location. We were at REDCON 1 within 60 seconds and moving in 120 seconds. When we got on scene they were still attempting to secure the site, the medics assigned to the company that was hit were on the ground rendering treatment. My job on the scene was to direct, give guidance for the treatment the medics were giving, and just trying to keep order. I attend to the Light Medium Tactical Vehicle (LMTV) that still had some injured Soldiers in it. In the drivers seat was SGT Christian, he had taken a direct hit to the side of his head, which snapped his neck as well as took half of it off. Needless to say he was killed immediately. I was shook up for a brief second when I realized who it was, but then continued to march. The issue with this day is that after that morning I ended up taking care of all the aspects with Sergeant Christian's body until we got him to the morgue. Then I had to escort our Battalion Commander and Command Sergeant Major to the morgue to verify the body. Two issues stand out to me reference that day. The first is our quick and immediate response time to this incident. That was the first real test of all the training and battle drills that I had been training my medics on. As unfortunate as the situation was they reacted as they were taught. That gave me a sense of fulfillment in all we had been trying to do. This ability would be tested over and over again in the coming days, weeks and months. The second issue is my having to deal with SGT Christian. It was as if I could not get away from having to deal with him. Not that I was trying, but I just kept on being the guy who needed to deal with him. As I reflected back on that day, I thought of our first day in Mosul and my interaction with SGT Christian. In retrospect I

believe that I was meant to have that encounter with him so that I could better appreciate the days that were to follow.

The next incident that stands out was while we were conducting our daily rounds to all the company locations throughout the city. During that time our battalion was located at various sites so sick call was an issue. We addressed this issue by bringing sick call to them. Every time it was my team's turn to conduct sick call I chose to lead the mission. This day we had our three-vehicle convoy. While enroute to Bravo Company we had to take a routine turn around and come back into the compound. We had gone under an over pass when we were hit with an IED. My gunner turned and returned fire as we continued to the compound. Fortunately we had sustained no injuries and only minor damage to our vehicles. The interesting thing about this day is that once we left Bravo's compound we came across three more IED attacks. We not the subject of those attacks, but we came across them moments after they had happened. That seemed a little unusual that day. As we conducted our AAR that evening, as we do with any mission, we realized that the early morning IED attack we received had prepared us for the days events. All the Soldiers were operating at an extremely heightened sense of awareness and readiness on that day.

A few weeks later on 01 July 2003 I was promoted to the rank of Master Sergeant. I stayed as a PSG for the next three months doing my job. I had no desire to leave during the operation but a position had come open in a FSB in our sister brigade. I was scheduled to depart at the end of the month of September. The night before I was to leave I received a message that I was going to the FSB in our brigade instead. This began the second phase to my Iraq experience.

I was now the First Sergeant for Charlie Company 526 Forward Support Company. This unit was the Medical Company that supported 2<sup>nd</sup> BDE, Strike. My dealings with C co 526 had been very minimal up to this point. The unit was a Combat Health Support (CHS) level II

provider, but due to proximity, many casualties were taken directly to 21<sup>st</sup> Combat Support Hospital (CSH), located on the Mosul Airfield. The challenges that I faced were getting a company, who had been in theater for over six months, to act and conduct business as such. In this new compound we faced something I was not quite used to. Nightly we received indirect fire in the way of mortar attacks. This was a problem because the company had no programmed response to such attacks. After a few days of battle drills and rehearsal the company quickly began to take shape. The Soldiers in the company began to see how they were progressing or, as I like to put it, becoming seasoned. This set the stage for our few remaining months. It was rewarding to see the pride and progression that a company of 85 Soldiers took in every mission they were given. This by far was one of the more rewarding periods of my military career.

In retrospect the experiences that I gained from my first unit during the deployment, greatly enhanced my ability to deal with my second. Though I questioned my assignment as a First Sergeant, it was for the best.