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FAMILY OR FRIENDS: A LOOK AT MY FIRST UNIT

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Pre-Deployment to Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Fort Bragg, North Carolina

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Pre-deployment to Operation Desert Storm,

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## Abstract

The period between August 2, 1990 and October 3, 1990, changed my life and set me on the path of selfless service. I was a young, newly promoted sergeant awaiting my turn to support the nation and people of the United States of America in their effort to protect and defend the nations of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait against the advancement of the Iraqi army. For my friends and I, the time was both electrifying and frightening as we prepared to leave our families and test our mettle. Despite our apprehension, we prepared our unit, our families, and ourselves for the unknown and proved to ourselves that teamwork, exceptional leadership, and sincere concern for one another were the secrets to organizational success. In the process, we developed a bond that would see us through the deployment, our careers, and our lives. We became a family.

## The Party's Over

August 2, 1990 was a humid, summer day at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. My unit, the 257<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment, was hosting its second annual pre-school dental health fair. The atmosphere was joyous and the sound of children's laughter filled the air. Drawn by the excitement, new arrivals between the ages of four and six scampered past my feet on their way to the Vietnam-era general-purpose tent and the "party." When they entered the reception area, the festive sight of Soldiers blowing up balloons for eager hands and teaching proper brushing and flossing techniques to curious minds greeted them.

The commander, LTC Robert C. Leeds, tasked SGT Nathaniel Lee with organizing the fair, and he quickly delegated it to his Soldiers. Despite our recent return from a two-week mission in Costa Rica, we took on the task enthusiastically. Specialist Maria Dungey supervised the hygiene tent, Specialist Welton oversaw the x-ray tent, and I managed the reception tent. Along with SGT Carrasco, who the commander promoted the day before, the three of us arrived at the unit four years earlier within weeks of one other and bonded immediately. Since arriving, we worked effectively together on many deployments and training exercises, so our leadership considered our team the most cohesive.

As the day ended, LTC Leeds, who went on to command worldwide dental operations, called for a formation. The atmosphere was upbeat, but it soon changed when we learned our unit was on alert. Our detachment, an element of 44<sup>th</sup> Medical Brigade (the primary medical support for 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps), had participated in many alerts in support of training exercises but this was the real thing. Iraq had just invaded Kuwait and the entire 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps was preparing for war. Our unit, with its long history of service that spanned from World War II to

Just Cause, was joining the fight once again. As we sat in the bleachers listening to our leader, I looked at the faces of my friends and knew they felt the same apprehension I did. Seeing it in our eyes, the Commander tried to ease our fears by reflecting on our accomplishments. As the only full-time TO&E dental company in the active Army, in the last three years we deployed eight times to five foreign countries including Costa Rica, Honduras, Peru, Panama, and Guyana. The latter was our nation's first "official" mission into that country since the tragic day in 1978 when Jim Jones and 913 of his followers committed mass suicide. His speech relieved some of our tension but we left that day with a feeling of solemn uneasiness as we prepared to tell our families the news.

#### Preparing to Deploy

We returned to work the next day with a sense of purpose. SGT Lee had been preparing us for that day since our first training exercise back in 1987 when he assigned each of us a mentor from among the most experienced junior enlisted Soldiers. Young and eager to be a part of the team, we ran behind them learning everything we could about the unit, the mission, and the equipment. We had made a few mistakes over the years. On one occasion, we left all the dental hand pieces in the warehouse and deployed to Costa Rica. Another time, we forgot to release the brakes of the 15kw generator and dragged it from COSCOM to west of Gruber Road. However, in the time between then and now, we had become the experts. As we prepared for this deployment, we worked with the confidence and diligence that only comes with experience and within five days, we inventoried and loaded our equipment, acquired and palletized our supplies, and loaded and drove our vehicles to the port in Wilmington, North Carolina.

As we prepared to depart, our spouses came together and established a support network that would serve them well in our absence. My husband agreed to serve as the short-term provider for SPC Dungey's daughter. Sharon Carassco volunteered to watch my son before and after school. PFC Zigler's new bride, who just arrived from Honduras and spoke very little English, moved in with Sergeant Terrazzo's wife. Their solidarity eased our burdens and allowed us to focus on what lay ahead. Meanwhile, the unit swelled from 55 to 80 Soldiers, as dentists who normally worked in fixed facilities filled pre-established positions in our unit. Many of them had no TO&E experience, so we quickly integrated them into our teams and our spouses greeted theirs with open arms.

By August 8, the first elements of the 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps deployed from Pope Air Force Base to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Within five days, our brigade's advance team, which included elements from our unit, joined them in the desert. Slowly, Fort Bragg and the surrounding town of Fayetteville became ghost towns as units departed and their families moved back home. Fort Bragg's impact on the community's economy became painfully obvious when stores once filled with customers liquidated their inventories and closed their doors. Despite the financial hardship, the civilian community supported the corps. I recall one unit notifying their Soldiers with the assistance of the local movie theater. When the theater manager announced the one-hour recall over the intercom, nearly 20 young Soldiers jumped to their feet and headed for the door. As they exited the theater, I felt both sorrow and jealousy. It saddened me that they were leaving their homes, but I envied them because their wait was over.

During that time of uncertainty, I became the unit's newest noncommissioned officer. My first, real test as a leader would be leading Soldiers in a combat zone and that unnerved me. I had

no idea what to expect; however, I knew that whatever came my way, my unit would support me. I was in uncharted territory but as long as I traveled with them, I would be fine. We had become more than a unit, but I didn't yet have the words to describe what we were. In our preparation for Saudi Arabia and the subsequent months that followed, we had become more than friends. We shared a common past, present, and future that we couldn't measure. We found new heroes in our leaders as they compassionately guided us through that troubled period. In it together, we began to depend on, confide in, and trust one another, as we'd never done before.

#### Boots on the Ground

Six weeks had passed since the advance team departed and those of us still at Fort Bragg remained on one-hour recall. Each day we heard we'd get the call tomorrow. At first, every time the phone rang, my heart dropped to my stomach in anticipation. Repeatedly the calls were my friends inviting Nate and I to dinner, a movie, the club, or some other celebratory occasion. Then one evening while I was washing dishes, the phone rang. Hanging up the phone, I walked to the door and looked at my beautiful family. They looked so peaceful, I decided get ready before I told them. When I emerged from the door in uniform, my five-year old son asked where I was going but my husband didn't need to ask. It was time. That one-mile trip to the barracks was the longest ride I had ever taken in my life. Neither of us knew what to say, so we didn't say anything. The tears rolled down my face, as I thought of how much I'd miss them. I wasn't afraid to go; I was terrified I'd never come home.

The scene at the barracks was chaotic as Soldiers and their families exchanged hugs, shed tears, and said their farewells. After kissing my family goodbye, I loaded a bus destined for Pope Air Force Base. All the way to Green Ramp, the occupants of the bus were quiet as the reality of

the situation sank in. The holding area was dingy with long wooden benches and an empty vending machine in the corner. Like Soldiers in basic training, we propped up against one another, dozing off from time to time. Some time early the next morning a Northwestern Airlines 747 arrived and we made the manifest. The trip across the Atlantic Ocean was uneventful; however, somewhere between Frankfurt and Riyadh, I remember looking out of the window and seeing us fly into the dawn. Then the pilot announced that we were one hour from landing and the loud thunder of conversation ceased. The silence was deafening. I had never traveled that far from home before and as a young noncommissioned officer, I became unsure of my training and myself. Would my training allow me to perform without hesitation? Did my chemical protective outer garments and gas mask really work? Would I ever see my family again? Was everyone feeling this way? My butterflies were back again and I couldn't shake them.

As we landed at King Fahd Military Airport in Jabal, Saudi Arabia on October 3, I had many unanswered questions. Stepping into the doorway to disembark the plane, the heat hit me like a furnace and sweat immediately ran from the nape of my neck down my spine. The sun was glaring and for a brief moment, I was blind. Stepping out on faith, my eyes adjusted slightly and I saw a tall, lean figure at the base of the stairs. As the person came into focus, I realized it was my commander, extending his kind hand and welcoming smile to each new arrival. SGT Carrasco stood next to him and offered each one a bottle of cold water. As he handed me mine, he greeted me with a friendly, "Sergeant Taylor, what took you so long? I've been waiting for you guys forever." It was in that moment that I knew what we had become; we were a family.