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OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM-I

First Sergeant Experience: 15 Month Deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom-I

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Camp Pioneer, Baghdad, Iraq, 15 April 2003

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### Abstract

My name is Willie D. Shinholster; I have deployed three times during my 25 years of military service. I want to share a deployment experience during Operation Iraqi Freedom-I from 15 April 2003 to 18 July 2004 in Baghdad, Iraq. I was the First Sergeant of Alpha Company, 47<sup>TH</sup> Forward Support Battalion from 15 May 2002 to 10 June 2005; 15 months of that I served in Bagdad, Iraq. The hardest task during this deployment was keeping the young Soldiers focused on the mission and being safe at all times. The young NCOs and Soldiers kept the morale high and accomplish the mission. We all returned home on time and safe to our families.

On or about 15 April 2003 with the First Armored “Old Ironsides” Division, My company was under command and control of the 1st Armored Division Support Command “Support First” and the Second Brigade Combat Team “Strike Hard” Brigade 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. My company, Alpha Company, 47<sup>TH</sup> Forward Support Battalion of Baumholder, Germany arrived at Camp New Jersey, Kuwait during the month of April 2003, where the temperature was in the high 90’s. The unit consisted of headquarters, maintenance, Ammunition, Petroleum and Supply Storage Activity section, with a total headcount of 78 Soldiers and Officers.

I had many of inexperienced Noncommissioned Officers and Soldiers assigned. We train and waited for our call forward time. We worked very hard and late hours on preparing our vehicles and equipment for the long and hot 36 hours convoy to Baghdad, Iraq. As the First Sergeant, I know I had to step up and down a level to push the troop leading issues to platoon leaders, platoon sergeants and squad leaders to accomplish the maintenance prep task. I was very hard and fair on troop leading procedures.

The company commander had lots of knowledge and experience in the logistical arena, and he handled the meeting and coordination of the company mission. I tried very hard to keep the morale and training on track. My job was to accomplish this mission and return every Soldier back to home station in one piece without bodily harm. We stayed at Camp New Jersey for one week getting things ready for the long road march to Baghdad, Iraq. We had to walk about one mile to the Dining Facility and shower area in full battle gear.

This was really hard on the Soldiers, and they were losing weight. We finally got the call to move forward and stage. The Soldiers were ready for this mission in everyway possible. I could see fear in some of the young Soldier’s eyes that never were on a mission like this before. I got everyone together for a pep talk and prayer from the Battalion Chaplain.

We had about five hours before Start Point. The commander and I conducted the final pre-combat inspections of all the trucks rolling in our series for the road march. We had trucks and personnel from throughout the Brigade Combat Team.

We use Soldiers from other units because we did not have enough trained drivers in ours. We had more trucks to operate than drivers. We are talking about vehicles like 5000 gallon fuel tankers and 40-foot semi-trailers with the tractor. The Army just shipped in about 30 new Soldiers fresh out of Advance Individual Training consists of 92A's, 92F's, 63B's, 89B's and 88M.

We did not have the time to train them new Soldiers on their assigned equipment. My battalion commander requested experienced drivers from the Brigade to help the company drive the equipment into Baghdad, Iraq. The Soldiers are resting in the cab of their truck and getting their mind right for this once in a lifetime experience in today's Army. We left Camp New Jersey around 2100 on 24 April 2003 headed for Baghdad, Iraq.

The convoy was rolling very smooth down the road for a while. I was in the rear of the convoy for command and control with the maintenance crew trailing behind me just in case vehicles had maintenance problems. If we did have a vehicle stop for any maintenance problems, we had 10 minutes to stop and fix the problem or move on in the convoy. In some cases we had to leave the vehicles with another vehicle to wait for the main convoy rear maintenance team to handle the maintenance problem.

The convoy commander decided to halt the convoy for a three hours rest period. I had driver's performance during maintenance check on their equipment before taking a nap. I got with the platoon sergeants to establish a roving security guard force. We were awakened by the guards that it was time to hit the road again because of the different time zone we were in.

The convoy commander did not know that we were still in Kuwait or had crossed the Iraqi border. We all woke up crazy in mind trying to figure out what was going on. The company commander called me to give me the latest situation report. The convoy was back on the road and we were entering the early morning hours. You can see the difference between Kuwait and Iraq living conditions as we crossed the border. The drivers and assistants were well alert and taking in the view of scenery that you would only see on CNN news coverage.

We continued down the road for hours driving about 25 mph. We stopped and performed during maintenance checks and refueled our vehicles. We lost about five vehicles from the convoy from maintenance issues. After about five to eight hours into the convoy, Soldiers began to become fatigued. This was no doubt the hardest phase of the convoy. It was hot as hell and the vehicle radios are going out because of the heat. Temperatures exceeded 100 degrees. I could see in front of the convoy that drivers were swerving left and right of the road as a result of fatigue.

Keep in mind we are in full battle gear with the interceptor body armor vest. Your clothes are scold and wet from your sweat. You must continue to drink water and Gatorade to keep the body hydrated. I could see fear and pain in the younger Soldiers faces, asking themselves, what in the hell have I got myself into by joining the Army? The commander estimated that we had about five more hours of driving before we reach the half way point and rest stop.

So far the convoy operation was going well with the young Soldiers maintaining that self- motivation. We finally reached the rest halt point. The convoy entered this big maintenance and refueling operation off somewhere in the middle of the desert. We drove thru this 24-point refuel on the move station to top off each vehicle. We completed the task of refueling the vehicles, and drivers were guided to the larger sand staging area.

They dismounted from their vehicles and started maintenance checks of their vehicles. We rotated Soldiers for personal hygiene and chow. I walked around the maintenance site talking and checking to see if Soldiers are doing the right thing to continue on with the convoy. We stayed at this location for about six hours waiting to get back on the road. I walked around the site talking to my Soldiers. The Soldiers were still motivated and ready to finish this convoy.

I am a true believer that if you teach, coach and mentor young Soldiers, they will succeed in the military and become a good NCO in the future. We as leaders need to understand that our duty is to prepare young Soldiers for a different war out there on the battle field. We have young Soldiers planning on making the military a career. But we can still prepare them for the life outside the military; if that is the road they wish to take.

We must keep in mind that we have young NCOs that do not have a clue on some thing. My type of leadership style will help, aid, and assist young leaders to grow and become better military leaders in the future. It's all about how much you love your job and the things you do everyday for your Soldiers. The convoy commander informed us that it was time to move out. Now we are back on the road heading to Baghdad. We are now approaching the heavy secured check point into Baghdad area of operation.

We moved into this stage area waited for a battalion representative to escort the convoy into our location for the next six months. We reached our location near the Baghdad International Airport. We have the battalion XO and escort team directing us where our vehicles will stage until further instruction. It's the same day after arriving at our future home for the next six months. We had the 3<sup>RD</sup> Forward Support Battalion from Fort Stewart, Georgia already set up if you want to call it that.

They have the same unit structure as my battalion. The biggest surprises to the young Soldiers were, the site had no running water or modern day latrine. I had my formation for

accountability for all sensitive items and personnel before showing the platoon sergeants our living area. The commander and I with the key leadership walked the site and reconed the living area. You could not believe what we had to move into. This was unbelievable.

The places were not that bad, just moving into a trashed out and rodent infested building was really bad for my Soldiers. At least we had a nice roof over our head. My advance party cleaned out five rooms for the company to occupy. The building had about 20 separate rooms in it. The other 15 rooms had trash, human waste, and dead rodents in it. Each room had about 80% of trash in it. One of the young NCOs asked me about the plumbing.

The building had their country culture type toilets, just an open hole in the floor. I explained to the entire company that you cannot use the hole in the floor because it will cause health and sanitation problems. You will use the make-shift wooden out-house outside. One young Soldier asks me how we will dispose of the waste. I told them we will burn and bury the waste. I shared my experience during Operation Desert Storm/Shield on how we had to do it during that deployment. The Soldiers were not happy with my answer in reference to the burning the waste.

But they adapted and over came every tough task given to them. The next morning we got up early and went to breakfast at this make-shift dining facility 3<sup>Rd</sup> Forward Support Battalion had set up. After breakfast we tackle the nasty, smelling, infested, and trashed out rooms to make it comfortable for our next home away from home. It took us about a good week to get this task completed. The results from this hard work paid off big time. The Soldiers and NCOs were not pack in 20 people deep in one room.

Now we only had two to six person to a room depends on your rank. We also had a room left over to create a company dayroom. We finish with the common area and living area improvement. We started hosting cards games tournaments every Friday and Saturday night,

depending on the mission. The Soldiers were now well settled and relaxed in their living quarters. The companies were brief on the mission and battle hand over from the 3<sup>RD</sup> Forward Support Battalion to my battalion. Our battalion was the supporting element for the 2<sup>ND</sup> Brigade Combat Team area of operations.

We had to set up our unit maintenance support, petroleum section, ammunition section, and supply support activity operation. I had an experienced Sergeant First Class in my maintenance section. The petroleum section had a very good experienced Staff Sergeant. The ammunition section had a young inexperienced NCO that just made Sergeant. The young NCO had superb assistance from the III/V platoon sergeant to accomplish the mission. The Storage Support Activity was the biggest of all.

This is where I had to put my knowledge and experience into action with setting up the outdoor warehouse support activity operation. I had four inexperienced Staff Sergeants in the SSA platoon. I am a true experienced warehouseman old type 76V Handling and Storage Specialist under the old Army MOS configuration. We had this young Warrant Officer that just converted over from the NCO Corps. I really believe that if you want to become a Warrant Officer in any field. You should have worked in that field for some time and know the basic of that field.

I had to sit down with these NCOs, one warrant officer, platoon leader, and map this operation out. We mind mapped this open storage warehouse layout of the operation and where small sections operate. We presented it to the company commander and battalion commander. The chain of command was please with it, and wanted this operation up and running as soon as possible. We brought the other platoon members together and set up the open warehouse operation. We had a superb operation, but just had one little small problem. We had nothing to provide over head cover protection for the Soldiers from the sun.

Keep in mind that it's around May thru August time frame. We finally got two larger over head covers complete for the receiving section and custom pick-up area. Then we encounter another issue when females begin getting pregnant. This was a big deal, because we were not getting replacements from home station until the early part of 2004. The shortage of man power was killing this platoon. I had no problem with the issue of females getting pregnant. It's a beautiful thing to experience for women.

The problem I had with this. We provide the necessary protection and training for this issue. I could not understand the young females that join this great organization to get training, skills and college education for a better future in life and wind up making decisions to become pregnant while in combat. It's hard on the chain of command to explain to higher about pregnancy during combat and General Order Number #1 No Sex policy. But the platoons overcame and accomplish the mission.

The logistical pipeline was pushing all classes of supplies to our warehouse. We supported over 500 customer units in our area of operation. The battalion commander tasked my petroleum section to operate a main support company water mission. We had never done this type of mission at home station Gunnery. The main support battalion was located right across the street from us during the deployment.

It was not a problem for my III/V Platoon Sergeant to handle this mission. This NCO was very reliable and completed every mission thoroughly. At this point, we were in the heart of the deployment thinking that we would be doing a six month deployment. But, that hope was killed by the chain of command informing us that we will do a 12 month deployment. The Soldiers did not take this news negatively. The money was very good during the deployment. We continued to teach, coach and grow together as a family team.

The other sections and companies started to help out on every mission. I know one thing

about this unit; we worked hard and played hard to keep the morale very high. I wouldn't trade this young company for nothing in the world to serve with in combat. The mission started to pick up and the morale began to drop due to hot weather, homesickness and missing family during the Holidays. The weather cooled down and the sand storms began blowing with a fine thin sand taste in your eyes and mouth.

We were tasked to push a small logistical element forward south to support the combat mission of the Brigade Combat Team. The enemy threats were growing everyday. The insurgents had IED devices out there taking convoys out left and right on the road. We trained and re-trained on convoy reaction during contact with the insurgents. I had to push about 10 Soldiers with their equipment out as a forward logistical element. The young Soldiers appeared to be fearful.

I told them they are in good hands and always use what you have learned to survive in the environment. Always stay alert and watch out for things that do not look right. Always go with your first instinct. We waited on information on their movement to go south. They reach their objective and set up a base support camp without any problem. I took some convoy trip to visit each and every Soldier with their care packages and mail they wanted.

We should all take life for what it is. But there are people in this world are in worse situations than you think. We welcome the Holidays with open arms. The morale was getting better as time went by. The Army started the mid tour 15 days R&R leave program. The priorities were sending single parents first, married and single Soldiers last.

The battalion also remodeled the dining facility and better food was flowing from the Brown and Root food service. The Base Exchange got better and bigger for Soldiers to spend more money. We had all the barracks remodel, and the Soldiers were living more comfortable. The life support was great and we also had portable latrines.

The shower unit was built by an Engineer Company. The Soldiers were really enjoying their self and accomplishes the mission. The Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner were outstanding. The battalion got the word to start preparation for redeployment back to home station. The Soldiers were more excited to hear the good information from the chain of command. We started receiving empty 20-foot containers to load up for return to home station.

The battalion started working very hard to accomplish this mission on time for the pick-up date. We started preparing vehicles for the long hot convoy back to Kuwait for port ship-out. The Soldiers were in high spirits to get back home with family and friends. The battalion sends out the advance-party people back to home station to get things in place to receive the main body. We are sitting around after the end of a hard days work talking about what we were going to do once we get back home and on leave after redeployment.

The good time went bad after this bad rumor got out about the 1<sup>ST</sup> Armored Division will be extended for additional 90 days for Iraqi security reasons. After rumor was clarified by the chain of command, the Soldiers morale across the battalion went to hell. We as First Sergeants went to the battalion CSM with some great ideas to get the Soldiers morale back up. The battalion CSM wanted us to hold those great ideas until all the battalion containers are downloaded and section operation are up and running again. The battalion conducted a walk thru with key leaders to ensure things were back in place and running.

The supply support activity section had a hard but easy time getting things back in place and made the transition back to operations. The time was right after setting up things and running full force to support the Brigade Combat Team area of operation? We needed to get the Soldiers morale back on track. The First Sergeants in the battalion considered this our job. We had this old theater that was converted into a small AAFES store and club environment.

This were the best idea for the Soldiers to enjoy their off duty time for talent shows, dancing, listening to good music, and different refreshments. This idea was a success to the Soldiers living on Camp Pioneer. We hosted a big New Year's celebration in the club. The Soldiers were very creative with colorful chemical lights, balloons, shred paper and packing materials.... What a way to bring the New Years in Bagdad, Iraq! We continued our mission for the next six months without serious safety or health issues. My Soldiers received over 50 General Officers coins during deployment.

We reversed the deployment events to redeployment events to get back to home station with family and friends. I have always dreamed as a young Soldier to be a First Sergeant or Sergeant Major leading Soldiers in a combat environment. I have and will always lead from the front. The lessons learned from this are having a solid foundation of family support, care and enjoy your job. Always set a good example for young Soldiers and be the standard bearer in your unit.

### References

My references are from experience and having those good leaders teaching, coaching and mentoring me through my 25 years of military service. You really do not need any paper materials to be a successful leader in any job. Its all starts with your family values, beliefs and people that care.