

**THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM
OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM**

**323rd ENGINEER DETACHMENT
(FIRE FIGHTING)
(El Dorado, Kansas)
January 2003 – May 2004**



**Office of Army Reserve History
United States Army Reserve Command
Fort McPherson, Georgia**

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Dennis M. Hatcher

Introduction/Lessons Learned

Kathryn Roe Coker

Editor



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2008**



DESCRIPTION: On a dark blue disk the bust of a Minuteman (Captain John Parker) in cocked hat on a pedestal, between two branches of olive or within a dark blue designation band with gold inner and outer borders inscribed UNITED STATES ARMY RESERVE in gold.

SYMBOLISM: The minuteman has traditionally been used to represent the citizen soldier. The wreath signifies achievement and accomplishment. Gold is symbolic of honor and excellence and dark blue signifies loyalty.

BACKGROUND: The emblem was approved for use as a plaque in 1972 and is used as an unofficial identification device of the United States Army Reserve. (US Army Institute of Heraldry.)

First Printed 2008
OCH PUB 4-6

Copies obtained from the Office of Army Reserve History
United States Army Reserve Command (USARC)

Foreword

The Global War on Terrorism-Operation Iraqi Freedom: 323rd Engineer Detachment (Fire Fighting) is one in a series of histories of Army Reserve units deployed in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). This includes Operations Noble Eagle, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom. The histories are based on primary sources collected by the Office of Army Reserve History's GWOT Military History Task Force. The task force provides program management, central collection, and archiving of unit histories. The former Chief, Army Reserve Lieutenant General James Helmly, stated the importance of this collection effort:

The Army Reserve is experiencing a time of great transition to meet present and future challenges to our national security. The events of this transition, while still fresh, must be captured and documented to preserve the story of the Army Reserve's contribution to this unprecedented war. The result will be a unique archive of the wartime accomplishments of all mobilized Army Reserve units, not only of this war, but for all future defense commitments. Nowhere else within the United States Government does an official archive of the Army Reserve exist.

The records collected include narratives with a mission statement, after action reviews or lessons learned, personnel rosters, mobilization orders, demobilization orders, unit briefing slides, photographs, and autobiographical sketches. This information is used to record and to preserve the Army Reserve's contributions to GWOT. This volume and other unit histories included in the series, as compiled from these records, provide an invaluable resource for the Army Reserve and its Soldiers to

learn from their own experiences and retain lessons learned for future operations.

Fort McPherson
Atlanta, Georgia
August 2008

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Army Reserve Historian
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Introduction

"Through their service, Reserve personnel play an important role in our efforts to advance democracy, peace and freedom across the Nation and around the world. These dedicated men and women train vigorously and work closely with our active duty forces, serving as equal partners in our integrated Armed Forces." President George W. Bush (11 August 2002)¹

11 September 2001 was a watershed in the history of the United States. The terrorist attacks had a profound affect on the country. In his address to the nation that night, President George W. Bush said the attacks had moved "a great people . . . to defend a great nation." Bush set the tone for his evolving doctrine by stating the US "will make no distinction between terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." On 20 September 2001 in a joint session of Congress, Bush further defined his policy by stating, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."²

On 15 September, Bush ordered a partial mobilization of reserve forces with the first call-ups starting on 22 September. The Army Reserve quickly reacted to the largest deployment since Operation Desert Storm. Even before the official call-ups, eighty-five Soldiers from one Army Reserve unit, the 311th Quartermaster Company (Mortuary Affairs), were on the scene at the Pentagon by 17 September 2001.³

In New York after the attack on the World Trade Center, Army Reserve Soldiers aided in the recovery efforts. Emergency Preparedness Liaison Officers were quick to answer the call for assistance. Army Reserve Soldiers provided equipment, reserve center space, and other logistical support. Like the Pentagon recovery effort the actions of Army Reserve Soldiers at the World Trade Center preceded official mobilization.⁴

Military intelligence determined that Osama bin Laden's Islamic al Qaeda was responsible for the 11 September attacks. Al Qaeda's base of

operations was in Afghanistan where the fundamentalist Taliban regime controlled the country and harbored al Qaeda. A loose coalition, the Northern Alliance, opposed the Taliban. On 7 October 2001, less than a month after the 11 September attacks, the US, with support from Great Britain, launched an air and naval attack as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. The campaign pinpointed airfields and air defenses along with command and control centers. In a national address Bush said the military action was aimed to "cut the military capability of the Taliban regime." Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld explained that the assault was intended to "make it increasingly difficult for terrorists to use Afghanistan as a base of operations."⁵

The ground war or "boots on the ground" began on 19 October 2001 with a number of twelve-man Special Forces Operational Detachment A teams who joined the Northern Alliance in fighting the Taliban and al Qaeda. By November 2001 over 50,000 American forces involving ground, sea, and air operations were in the theater. "The fighting in Afghanistan," wrote Brigadier General John Brown, director of the US Army Center of Military History, "fractured into several miniature campaigns as each allied Afghan warlord advanced on his own objectives, carefully protecting the tiny contingent of Americans who gave him . . . awesome firepower."⁶ The fall of Kabul and Kandahar and the "destruction of organized resistance in Tora Bora" spelled doom for the terrorists. By late 2001, American Soldiers working with Afghan forces were successful in "decisive[l]y defeating the Taliban and their al Qaeda allies and in liberating Afghanistan."⁷ Operation Enduring Freedom "marked the first commitment of American forces in what would become simultaneous combat operations across multiple theaters of war since World War II."⁸

In his state of the union address on 29 January 2002, President Bush told the American people "in four short months," the country had "rallied a great coalition, captured, arrested, and rid the world of thousands of terrorists, destroyed Afghanistan's terrorist training camps, saved a people from starvation, and freed a country from brutal oppression."⁹

But, as seen later the terrorists rallied, albeit in a weakened state. By January 2002, the US and its allies began to set the stage for Operation Anaconda which lasted from 2 March through 19 March 2002. Its mission was to destroy remaining al Qaeda forces. Although the operation was successful, a number of al Qaeda fled into the nearby mountains and into Pakistan. While the terrorists suffered substantial losses, fighting still persists in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Operation Enduring Freedom continues as does the mobilization of Army Reserve Soldiers.

The Army Reserve played and is playing a vital role in these operations. According to Lieutenant General James Helmly, Chief, Army Reserve, "What was once a force in reserve has become a full partner across the spectrum of operations to satisfy the demand and need for Army Reserve Soldiers and units around the world. Wherever the Army committed forces in the world . . . Army Reserve Soldiers are an integral part, providing critical specialized capabilities and augmentation."¹¹

Army Reserve Soldiers were there in Afghanistan serving alongside active component Soldiers. For example, the 911th Forward Surgical Team supported the 10th Mountain Division during medical assistance missions in Afghanistan. The 310th Psychological Operations Battalion served in the isolated mountain regions of Afghanistan determining the needs of the people and organizing the delivery of non-perishable food, bottled water, and medical aid.¹² The 345th Military Intelligence Detachment assisted the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) in intelligence operations leading to the identification, location and targeting of the Taliban and al Qaeda. What Army Reserve Soldiers accomplished proved "vital to the war on terrorism." "We," said one Soldier, "helped out the active duty forces that were there and needed the augmentation." Some civil affairs units, known for their distribution of humanitarian aid and assisting in rebuilding projects, found themselves on the front lines working on combat operations with the infantrymen.¹³ In fighting terrorists there often was no clearly defined front line.

The concept for what later became Operation Iraqi Freedom was long in the making dating back some viewed to 1 March 1991, the day after Desert Storm. Based on intelligence that Saddam Hussein had developed

weapons of mass destruction President Bush decided that a regime change in Iraq was warranted. He also based his decision on Iraq's probable connection with terrorists and the belief that Iraq posed a danger to the stability of the Middle East. As some of America's allies questioned the threat of Saddam, Bush was prepared to act alone to crush what he included in his "axis of evil." Others wanted to wait on the results of recently readmitted UN weapons inspectors. Britain sided with Bush as his determination for a regime change in Iraq increased.¹⁴ In a statement to the United Nations General Assembly on 10 September 2002, Bush said:

My nation will work with the UN Security Council to meet our common challenge. If Iraq's regime defies us again, the world must move deliberately, decisively to hold Iraq to account. We will work with the UN Security Council for the necessary resolutions. But the purposes of the United States should not be doubted. The Security Council resolutions will be enforced -- the just demands of peace and security will be met -- or action will be unavoidable. And a regime that has lost its legitimacy will also lose its power.¹⁵

Seven days later on 17 September 2002, Bush released his administration's National Security Strategy which, in short, set forth the reformulation and posture of America's foreign policy. It was a major shift from a "shape, respond, prepare" posture to the new posture of "assure, dissuade, deter forward, and decisively defeat." It affected how the Army was to reshape itself and went hand in hand with the Army's ongoing transformation. The new posture included preemption to handle rogue states and terrorists with weapons of mass destruction. As Bush said, this was "a matter of common sense and self defense."¹⁶ It would set the stage in 2003 for the invasion of Iraq.

When Bush made this address to the UN plans were already in the making for a campaign against Iraq. In fact on 4 December 2001 General

Tommy Franks, commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), briefed the secretary of defense on the first draft war plan. By 1 February 2002, Franks had plans for a four-phased war involving deployment of troops into theater, air strikes, a ground war, and reconstruction.¹⁷

On the eve of the campaign, the Turkish parliament decided not to allow the 4th Mechanized Infantry Division to pass through the country and thereby set up a front in northern Iraq. "This obviated a major feature of the preferred war plan, left the division's equipment out of play as it hastily transshipped from standing offshore from Turkey to Kuwait, and perturbed deployment schedules because the ships carrying the 4th Mechanized Infantry Division equipment were not available for other purposes for a prolonged period of time."

Franks and the ground forces commander, Lieutenant General David McKiernan, had to reassess their strategy in the light of the impending conflict. Franks had several contingency plans. One called for a "rolling start." According to this plan, the campaign would begin by using forces already in theater and supplementing them as needed with "reinforcements as they arrived. Iraqi dispositions and circumstances," wrote Brown, "did not suggest significant resistance much south of Baghdad, so why not sweep up relatively uncontested terrain with a lesser force and feed in further forces as they arrived?"¹⁸ The plan was tactically driven given a twelve-year air campaign dating from Desert Storm with the no fly zones, American ground forces "acclimatized for operations in Iraq" with experienced defensive operations protecting Kuwait, and intelligence reportedly pinpointing Saddam's location.¹⁹

Operation Iraqi Freedom began with an air assault on 19 March 2003 in the "shock and awe" phase. Within twenty-four hours the 3rd Mechanized Infantry Division, 1st Marine Division, and the British 7th Armored Division were on the move. They quickly traversed the theater without much opposition, moving along the west side of the Euphrates River toward Baghdad, reaching the vicinity of Al Najaf with minimal resistance, overrunning the Rumaila oil fields and securing the facilities "virtually unscathed," capturing Umm Qasr and mounting other offensive operations. Western and northern Iraq had virtually been neutralized.²⁰

However, "the campaign did not stay easy." The Fedayeen, special Republican Guards, and other forces mounted a counterattack "with a vengeance." They proved to be "wily and ruthless opponents," ambushing US forces, sniping, attacking the extended supply lines, firing shoulder air defense weapons, and using suicidal tactics. "They knew the American rules of engagement and exploited them to their advantage." An Nasiriyah was one of the most "hotly contested" areas. The expected moral support from the Iraqi Shiites did not materialize as they "seemed to present an overall attitude of sullen indifference." Lieutenant General William Wallace, the V Corps commander, responded to the "troubling surprises" when he remarked that the Iraqis were "'not the enemy we war-gamed against.'" Strategy and tactics had to change to combat the "dynamic battlefield."

The Army Reserve responded by mobilizing primarily combat service and combat service support units. Army Reserve Soldiers were involved in providing military police protection, operating ports and ammunition facilities, repairing equipment, building bridges, hauling fuel, and supporting the theater on a broad-spectrum.²¹ Army Reserve units like the 802nd Ordnance Company (Ammunition) received mobilization orders and deployed to Kuwait and then to Iraq.

By the end of 2003, the Army Reserve had mobilized a total of 2,322 units (AA UIC's and derivative UIC's).²² The total number of Army Reserve Soldiers serving on active duty for the Global War on Terrorism was 71,587 incorporating Operations Noble Eagle (home front), Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom.²³ Helmly described the mobilization as "for percentage wise the largest mobilization we've had since World War II."²⁴ In a message to Army Reserve Soldiers and their families, Helmly told them: "Today the nation is asking Army Reserve Soldiers to be prepared to serve on active duty when called. Just as the generation of World War II answered the call to service, we are being called upon to sacrifice in defense of our Nation in the Global War on Terrorism."²⁵ He described 2003 as an "absolutely volatile, tumultuous year."²⁶

Major combat operations in Iraq officially ended on 1 May 2003 when President Bush declared "mission accomplished."²⁷ However, as

with Operation Enduring Freedom, the insurgents were relentless. The Global War on Terrorism continued with the nonstop mobilization and deployment of Army Reserve Soldiers.²⁸ The Army Reserve remained committed to the warfight and to the warrior ethos. For the 323rd Engineer Detachment (Fire Fighting) that meant, among other duties, extinguishing fires, such as an oil pipeline fire, serving as a base fire department, and inspecting structures.

Lineage and Honors

Constituted 15 June 1944 in the Army of the United States as the 2946th Engineer Technical Intelligence Team

Activated 26 June 1944 at Fort Riley, Kansas

Inactivated 12 November 1945 in France

Redesignated 17 March 1948 as the 323d Engineer Technical Intelligence Team and allotted to the Organized Reserves

(Organized Reserves redesignated 25 March 1948 as the Organized Reserve Corps; redesignated 9 July 1952 as the Army Reserve)

Activated 2 April 1948 at Buffalo, New York

Reorganized and redesignated 30 September 1953 as the 323d Engineer Detachment

Ordered into active military service 15 October 1961 at Buffalo, New York; released from active military service 2 August 1962 and reverted to reserve status

Inactivated 31 January 1968 at Buffalo, New York

Redesignated 1 March 1974 as the 323d Engineer Platoon and activated at Seneca, Kansas

Location changed 15 September 1976 to El Dorado, Kansas

Ordered into active military service 17 June 1996 at El Dorado, Kansas; later released from active military service and reverted to reserve status

Reorganized and redesignated 16 September 1998 as the 323d Engineer Detachment

Ordered into active military service 24 January 2003 at El Dorado, Kansas

Released from active military service 4 May 2004 and reverted to reserve status

Campaign Participation Credit

World War II

European-African-Middle Eastern Theater,
Streamer without inscription

War on Terrorism

Campaigns to be determined

Decorations

Valorous Unit Award, Streamer embroidered AL ANBAR
PROVINCE 2003

Army Superior Unit Award, Streamer embroidered 1996¹

¹ Statement of Service (Lineage and Honors), subject: 323rd Engineer Detachment, Center of Military History, Feb 07, unit history file, Global War on Terrorism Historical Collection (GWOTHC), Army Reserve Historical Research Collection (USARHRC), Office of Army Reserve History (OARH), US Army Reserve Command (USARC). Unless otherwise stated, all information is from the GWOTHC, USARHRC, OARH, USARC.

Heraldry

89th Regional Readiness Command



Left Shoulder Sleeve Insignia

Description: On a blue disc 1 5/8 inches (4.13 cm) in diameter and within a white annulet 3/16 inch (.48 cm) in width a white letter “W” formed of curved lines 3/16 inch (.48 cm) in width and joining the annulet, all within a 1/8 inch (.32 cm) red border. The overall dimension is 2 ¼ inches (5.72 cm) in diameter.

Background: The shoulder sleeve insignia was originally approved for the 89th Division on 25 October 1918 by telegram but not officially announced by the War Department until 23 June 1922. It was amended on 21 December 1948 to change the colors and reword the measurements. The insignia was approved for the 89th US Army Reserve Command on

26 July 1974. On 16 April 1996 the insignia was reassigned and approved for the 89th Regional Support Command.²

² Heraldry, subject: 89th Regional Readiness Command, US Army Institute of Heraldry, May 07. The 89th Regional Readiness Command, formerly the 89th Regional Support Command, is the detachment's parent company.



Distinctive Unit Insignia

Description: A gold color metal and enamel device 1 1/8 inches (2.86cm) in height overall consisting of a red enamel octagon (two vertical sides longer than the other six sides which are all equal) charged with gold torch between two gold fleurs-de-lis, in base two white enamel chevronels in front of the torch base with the internal area blue enamel. The insignia was redesignated for the US Army 89th Regional Readiness Command effective 16 July 2003.

Symbolism: The elements of the design reflect the history of the 89th Division, for whom the insignia was originally authorized. The gold torch symbolizes the 89th Division's peacetime role as a training unit. The two fleurs-de-lis allude to the Division's service in France during World Wars I and II. The chevronels represent support and also simulate the letter "M" for "Midwest," the geographical source of the Division's original personnel. The chevronels over the blue background also allude to the crossing of the Rhine River by the Division in World War II.

Background: The distinctive unit insignia was originally authorized for the 89th Division (Training) on 29 May 1969. It was authorized for the 89th US Army Reserve Command on 26 July 1974. On 16 April 1996 the insignia was reassigned and authorized for the 89th Regional Support

Command. The insignia was redesignated for the US Army 89th Regional Readiness Command effective 16 July 2003.³

³ Heraldry, subject: 89th Regional Readiness Command, US Army Institute of Heraldry, 07.

Chronology

- 24 January 2003 Twelve members of the 323rd Engineer Detachment (Fire Fighting) (unit identification code WR0GU1) mobilize in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.⁴
- 27 January 2003 Unit's twelve Soldiers arrive at Fort Riley, Kansas, mobilization training site.
- 3 February 2003 Unit validated for deployment, assigned to 4th Infantry Division Task Force Iron Horse.
- 10 February 2003 Eight additional Soldiers from the 323rd are mobilized.
- 12 February 2003 Unit's eight Soldiers arrive at Fort Riley mobilization site.
- 19 February 2003 Unit's additional eight Soldiers validated for deployment, assignment unknown.
- 13 April 2003 All detachment members are recombined and deployed to Kuwait as a whole detachment for Operation Iraqi Freedom.
- 14 April 2003 Unit arrives in Kuwait.
- 15 April 2003 Unit is assigned to holding area, Camp Virginia, Kuwait.

⁴Permanent Orders 21-26, Headquarters Fifth United States Army, subject: US Army Reserve Units Ordered to Active Duty, 21 Jan 03.

- 1 May 2003 Unit is assigned to the 4th Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment.
- 4 May 2003 Equipment starts arriving.
- 17 May 2003 Last of equipment arrives.
- 21 - 23 May 2003 Unit departs en route from Camp Virginia, Kuwait, to Al Asad, Iraq, Forward Operating Base Webster.
- 7 June 2003 Unit is relocated into former Iraqi crash station.
- 10 June 2003 Unit extinguishes power generation bunker fire after two days.
- 15 August 2003 Two unit Soldiers extricate injured Soldier trapped in vehicle wreckage.
- 28 August 2003 Unit provides support to the 101st Airborne Division for an operation.
- 13 September 2003 Unit is ordered to remain in country for a total of twelve months.
- 18 September 2003 Unit is assigned directly to the Headquarters, 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division and OPCONED to the 4th Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. This assignment remains until completion of mobilization.
- 2 November 2003 CH-47 helicopter crashes; unit members perform heroically at scene.

9 February 2004 Airfield mission now supports heavy fixed wing aircraft.

26 February 2004 Unit is officially relieved of mission.

9 March 2004 Unit moves to transient holding area to await departure.

16 March 2004 Unit departs Kuwait.

19 March 2004 Unit arrives at Fort Riley, Kansas.

26 March 2004 Unit attends welcome home and awards ceremony back at home station, El Dorado, Kansas.

4 May 2004 Effective date of unit demobilization.⁵

⁵Memorandum, SSG Lance McCune for PAO, 89th RRC, subject: After Action Report, no date and Mobilization Order, Department of the Army Message 091830Z Apr 04, subject: DA Demobilization Order 114-04 ONE/PEF/OIF.

Operations

Preparation and Mobilization

The 323rd Engineer Detachment, hereafter referred to as the detachment or simply, the 323rd, is a fire fighting unit home stationed in El Dorado, Kansas, and is a subordinate unit of the 89th Regional Readiness Command (RRC).⁶ The city of El Dorado is approximately 100 miles directly south of Fort Riley, Kansas. The unit mobilized on 24 January 2003 to support Operation Enduring Freedom. Commanded at the time by Captain Lawrence Britton, with Staff Sergeant Lance McCune as the first sergeant, the detachment consisted of twenty-six personnel, twenty of whom were mobilized under separate sets of orders.⁷ This caused speculation that the unit would be split up for different missions, something the Soldiers did not want since they always trained as a team and felt they were most effective only if they remained as a single unit. The six stay-behind Soldiers were non-deployable for not being MOS (military occupational specialty) qualified.⁸ Rather than leave those Soldiers unattended, they went to the 387th Replacement Battalion headquarters in nearby Wichita. Three of the six later transferred and deployed with ordnance units.⁹

The 323rd is a multipurpose firefighting unit. As well as having been trained at the Department of Defense Fire Fighting School, Goodfellow Air Force Base, San Angelo, Texas, at least half the members were professional firemen in their civilian careers. All deployable members, except for the commander, attended the thirteen week school prior to mobilization. Each student earned the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress certification upon successful course completion

⁶Re-designated as the 89th Regional Readiness Command, effective 16 July 2003.

⁷Permanent orders 21-26, 21-27, and 38-70, Headquarters Fifth United States Army, subject: US Army Reserve Units Ordered to Active Duty, 21 Jan 03 and 7 Feb 03.

⁸Military Occupational Specialty, the career or job fields in which Soldiers are trained to perform.

⁹Commonly called "cross-leveling," it is the transfer of Soldiers to fill vacant positions in other units.

which qualified them in fighting aircraft, structure, hazardous materials, wild land, and EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) fires. Since September 2002, unit members had an idea they would mobilize and were well prepared by the time the commander received the telephonic alert message, followed shortly thereafter by official orders. “With the support of our higher headquarters,” McCune explained, “we had been making all efforts to be as ready as possible. Fortunately for us, this was a good path to follow because once our actual mobilization order came down, we had very little time to act on it.” The commander understood the unit would be assigned to the 4th Infantry Division with a mission to deploy to Turkey and then move southward into the war theater. Eventually this would not be the case, but as McCune stated in his after action report, “It did initially get everyone in the right ‘go to war’ frame of mind.”

Equipped with four M2500L Amertech fire trucks; four M916 Army tractors with 6,000 gallon water tank trailers; and three HMMWVs,¹⁰ the first twelve mobilized Soldiers prepared to road march (convoy) these vehicles northward to the designated mobilization power projection platform at Fort Riley, Kansas.

Fort Riley

According to Captain Britton, the road march to Fort Riley was uneventful. Once there he found that housing was immediately available for his firefighters. Compared to many Army Reserve units that reported to mobilization stations at places such as Fort Stewart, Georgia, or Fort Drum, New York, where Soldiers lived in old World War II styled wooden barracks, the 323rd lived in the lap of luxury. In recent years, Fort Riley underwent massive reconstruction, modernization, and expansion so that there were few of the older buildings remaining on the reservation except for those sturdy and aesthetic buildings on the historic and pristine “Old Post.” For this reason, the 323rd lived in 1st Battalion,

¹⁰High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle also called “HUMMER” or “HUMVEE” in military vernacular.

5th Field Artillery's modern, red brick facilities. "They were very professional, well-organized, and thorough," Britton recalled fondly of his unit's host.¹¹

Mobilization training began in earnest, encompassing common task training for all Soldiers, which included marksmanship; nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) defense; first aid; map reading, etc. The initial group of twelve Soldiers completed training and validation in just eight days. When the other group of eight Soldiers arrived for training, they finished in seven days.

The most difficult part of the mobilization training process was the extended delay after completion of training, waiting for deployment orders. "Effectively," wrote Britton, "we waited two months after validation for movement. This was a difficult time for the Soldiers. Keeping the Soldiers busy and actively engaged was difficult. Staff Sergeant McCune kept the Soldiers busy with sustainment training." And a good thing it was, too, as McCune explained: "We found out later the actual validation was not all realistic and would not have been enough to prepare us for war if that's all we had done. The training we conducted ourselves is what really got us ready." McCune's self-conducted training ensured everyone in the unit became proficient in communication, land navigation, small group tactics, and physical training. During this "down time," Soldiers were given ample time to spend with their families, many of whom traveled to Fort Riley on weekends, since the Soldiers were restricted to a fifty-mile travel radius.¹²

Britton and McCune cited some "morale hurdles" at Fort Riley to overcome. "CIF [central issue facility] issued interceptor body armor (sic) to active duty [Soldiers] and not to the reserves. CIF issued four DCU (desert camouflage uniform) sets to active duty [but only] two DCU sets to the reserve forces," Britton reported. "Validated units [who were] 'squared away' were not allowed passes even when there was not a movement order published. The perception of my Soldiers was that they were

¹¹ Memorandum, CPT Lawrence Britton For Commander, 89th RRC, subject: After Action Report, no date.

¹² Memorandum, McCune, subject: After Action Report, no date.

required to be squared away and proactive [while] no one at Riley was competent.” McCune was more forthcoming in his criticism of the way his Soldiers were treated. “The personnel encountered at Ft. Riley didn’t seem to want to go out of their way to assist the many reserve and guard troops being mobilized. We were often given the cold shoulder and directed to wait until the active duty troops were done.” The many events they planned for us and others were bungled and it was obvious everyone there wanted to be in charge.”¹³ In his after action report, McCune did say that things were different when they returned from Iraq. “Apparently between then and the time we returned there was some sort of change, they were fantastic”¹⁴

During this time, the 323rd prepared its fire trucks and tractor-trailers for overseas shipment through the port of Beaumont, Texas, just east of Houston. Their 6,000 gallon water tankers were emptied as were the 600 gallon storage tanks on the fire trucks. The 323rd only shipped two each of its four fire trucks, tractors and water tankers, but took its full complement of three Humvees. The equipment left behind was eventually reissued to other engineer units and was never again in the possession of the 323rd. In a way, this was something of a blessing, since the fire trucks, though relatively new 1990 year models, were considered junk by the firefighters because the company that manufactured them, Amertech, went out of business shortly after the unit took delivery of them; repair parts were difficult to find. These trucks were the relatively rare modified versions that used electronic switching instead of the pneumatic operating system of switching hoses, pumps and tanks. This would later prove to be a burden in the sand and dust of Kuwait and Iraq.

When the twenty-four hour travel alert came, it was a welcome relief to all but family and friends who came to say farewell. The 323rd’s nineteen men and one woman Soldiers boarded chartered tour buses at approximately 2200 hours on the night of 12 April for the one and a half hour bus ride to Forbes Air National Guard Airfield, at Topeka, Kansas.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴Memorandum, McCune, subject: After Action Report, no date.

Shortly after 0100 hours on the morning of 13 April the chartered commercial jet airplane carrying the 323rd and several other units, totaling approximately 250 people, took off from Topeka, en route to Kuwait. The first stop was at New York's John F. Kennedy airport, then on to Shannon, Ireland, where the Soldiers were allowed to get off, stretch, and walk for about two hours while the plane refueled before reboarding for the hop to Ramstein Air Base, Germany. They were again allowed off the plane for two hours while the flight crew came under military control for the final legs of the journey: a refueling stop in Rome, Italy, where no one was allowed off the plane, and the last leg of the flight to Kuwait International Airport, arriving there at 0830 hours on the morning of 14 April 2003.

Kuwait

A short bus ride of less than ten minutes transported the Soldiers from the airplane parking apron to the tents at Camp Wolf. Camp Wolf, the theater's processing point for all incoming and outgoing Soldiers, was located between the two main runways at Kuwait City International Airport. Typically, units had but a short wait of a few hours before moving on to their final unit of assignment. Depending on who is telling the story, the 323rd's stay at Camp Wolf was for as little as six hours, or as long as fourteen.¹⁵ Regardless, the stay was just long enough for Soldiers to get an idea of their surroundings and take in the strange sights, smells and sounds of the Kuwaiti desert before boarding contracted Kuwaiti busses for the ride to Camp Virginia, a border staging area for units preparing to push north into Iraq. The detachment arrived around 0230 hours on the morning of 15 April, tired and ready for sleep.

For the next five weeks, the 323rd lived in a large tent, waiting for its equipment to arrive by cargo ship. Temperatures at Camp Virginia consistently topped 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Dust storms were common and the camp was extremely crowded. Despite what McCune described as

¹⁵ The chronologies of events differ significantly between the accounts of Captain Britton and First Sergeant McCune. McCune's chronology appears to be most accurate due to its detail and is used as the source whenever a conflict is evident between the two sources.

“miserable” conditions, these Soldiers were lucky they could shower and wash the sweat and dust off their toughened bodies about every two days. When their equipment arrived after the third week, it was for the bored Soldiers a welcome relief to have something to do, to look forward to a mission now that they had something with which to perform a mission. That mission, for now was simple: prepare to move north into Iraq.¹⁶

The 323rd became the Camp Virginia Fire Department, a very important responsibility for the men from Kansas. As such, it responded to several vehicle crashes, trash fires and at least one tent fire, not all caused intentionally. Any camp with a large population was in extreme danger from fire every minute of the day, and Soldiers’ lives hung in the balance.

Iraq

By 21 May, the 323rd was ready to move north into Iraq. Captain Britton convinced the V Corps Engineer Command cell, under whose authority the 323rd found itself, to dispatch his unit forward as a complete detachment. The destination was Forward Operating Base (FOB) Webster, also known as Al Asad, a former Iraqi air base where the 323rd would come under the command of 4th Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), from Fort Bliss (El Paso), Texas. The “Third Herd,” as it was affectionately known, was no stranger to desert operations.

Teaming up with the 122nd Engineer Battalion, which was also heading to Al Asad, the little group of firefighters moved to the rally point, just south of the Iraq border and was in place by afternoon. Immediately there were problems when they discovered one tanker had a flat tire and the lights were inoperable. One of the fire trucks leaked anti-freeze coolant, and while freezing was not a concern in the desert, cooling was; but there was no way to fix anything there. The crew, determined to push on, would have to rely on the security of others in the convoy. The 323rd rallied with the 122nd and at 2000 hours (8:00 pm), the convoy crossed into Iraq. Britton gave the order to lock and load personal

¹⁶ Memorandum, McCune, subject: After Action Report, no date.

weapons as the convoy crossed the border into Iraq. All night long the convoy moved slowly along Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa, a generally good road resembling an interstate highway. The night passed uneventfully and by sunrise the convoy reached its refueling point. The Soldiers were tired and stopped here to catch a few hours sleep. “We awoke to a dust storm with visibility at the fuel point of only about ten feet,” McCune vividly recalled. “Our convoy was able to creep out slowly and get back on the highway and start moving north. Progress was extremely slow but we were finally able to see what Iraq looked like. Evidence of fighting was everywhere; blown up tanks, burned out vehicles. We stopped for fuel twice and the convoy stopped for maintenance reasons once, in the middle of an unnamed city. Iraqis crowded around us, wanting handouts or to sell stuff.” Things got worse quickly after that. “We continued on, [the] dust storm getting worse. [We] stopped once more for fuel and rest; once again Iraqis tried to sell us everything to include hash and heroin. We rumbled on into the night, hot and tired. We suddenly stopped about half a mile from a bridge overpass. The convoy in front of us was taking fire and we halted until [the way] could be cleared. Everyone was nervous; we could see the exchange of tracer fire and hear the shooting and explosions. Throughout the rest of the night we would see tracer fire and hear shooting; we were constantly on edge.”¹⁷

On the morning of 23 May, the convoy finally rolled into the former Iraqi air base of Al Asad, more than 500 miles north and forty-eight hours since leaving Camp Virginia. “For the most part, the base was in good shape, some bomb damage but otherwise all right,” McCune remembered. After reporting to their new command, the Third Herd, the 323rd initially set up its fire station beneath an old maintenance overhang. There were no walls, no protection from wind and sand. “We also inherited a broken shower facility that was part of the maintenance facility,” said McCune. “It took almost one week to scrounge enough parts to get the shower

¹⁷ Ibid.

working, and then had only cold water. We had no latrine facility so we were forced to dig cat holes for the first month.”

After proving their skills to their new command by reacting to a simulated OH-58 helicopter crash, the firefighting Soldiers of the 323rd became the Airfield Crash and Rescue Team as well as the base fire department. In just twenty-four hours since their arrival, the 323rd was operational. By 7 June, the detachment moved again, this time into the former airfield crash station and once again the firefighters faced the task of repairing showers, sinks, wiring, windows and doors; a project that took several weeks. Often the building’s water source would be cut off. When that happened, the men took to bathing from water out the back of their 6,000 gallon water tankers.

The following months saw the unit performing many tasks, some of them that can only be described as non-standard. Once, a large bunker covering an area of two acres was covered in several hundred gallons of burning diesel fuel. The fire was the result of EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) teams disposing an unexploded US cruise missile warhead that penetrated the structure’s roof. “The building was critical,” wrote Britton, “because it housed the entire power distribution network for the [base]. Extinguishing the fire before it could damage the wiring and [electrical] busses¹⁸ was critical to [the base’s] operation. The 323rd extinguished the fire without injury or incident.” It took the firefighters two days to extinguish that fire.

Another notable event, the first of several yet to come, involved a Soldier trapped in the wreckage of a 5-ton Army truck, near the Iraqi town of Hit, on 15 August 2003. When it appeared the only way to free the Soldier was to amputate his leg, McCune and Staff Sergeant Jason Kindt flew to the site in a medical helicopter and managed to free the Soldier and his leg, intact.

Many other noteworthy accomplishments marked the 323rd’s time in Iraq, such as **traveling seventy miles to extinguish an oil pipeline fire**

¹⁸A conductor or group of conductors serving as a common connection in any high current application, often in the form of a bar. Also called bus bar. *Webster’s New World Dictionary, Third College Edition, 1989.*

southeast of the Haditha Dam. The pipeline had been blown up. When they arrived the oil had flowed down hill to the Euphrates River; there were small fires burning for miles. The Soldiers controlled and then contained the fire within ninety minutes.

In other duties, the 323rd conducted building and structure inspections. The unit performed base security operations. The Soldiers also carried out reconnaissance missions to ascertain needs and facilities within the Al Anbar region. There were usually three to four missions a week. Another action involved a burning MIG that was parked some two miles outside the gate. The Soldiers also extinguished the fire of a burning shack full of ammunition and magnesium aircraft parts. The unit extinguished fires in an abandoned bombed out hanger being disassembled. The local nationals started the fire while using cutting torches to raze the building. The Soldiers advised them to clear the area of combustibles before using the torches. The unit assumed additional responsibilities when wide body aircraft arrived at the base: Soldiers had to prepare for the support and certification of the airfield. The 323rd helped other engineer units with various construction projects. The unit also supplied security water distribution to homes and medical clinic services for women and children. All these actions occurred while the Soldiers participated in drills and continued training.¹⁹

Perhaps the single most remarkable and heroic act performed by 323rd Soldiers, took place on 2 November 2003 near the city of Fallujah. The lead helicopter in a flight of two CH-47 Chinooks, having just taken off from Baghdad International Airport, took fire from an insurgent's surface-to-air missile and was forced to land. The trail helicopter, with 323rd Staff Sergeant Charles Elliot and Sergeant Ken Miller on board, immediately landed to render aid and assistance to the downed aircraft. At first, Miller provided site security by manning the helicopter's machine gun against any new attacks. After handing the gun over to a subordinate, he removed injured Soldiers from the wreckage and provided aid to others. Elliott, a trained emergency medical technician and professional fireman,

¹⁹ Weekly SITREPs, Captain Lawrence Britton, subject: Operations, no dates.

took charge of medical treatment by directing removal, aid, and triage of the injured until relieved by the commander of the 571st Medical Company. For these actions, both Soldiers would later receive the Soldier's Medal, the highest military award for heroism in a non-combat situation. Miller seemed to shrug off his actions. "I just felt like I was in auto-drive, doing what needed to be done."²⁰

When not performing feats of heroism on humans, the detachment's two civilian-life mechanics performed heroics on their aging fire trucks. "We had a fire truck break, and of course, there [were] no spare parts just hanging around, but we got lucky. We got wind that there was a wrecked fire truck close by and with a little hard work, we were able to obtain the parts we needed and get our truck fixed."²¹ The electrical switches installed during the earlier upgrade modifications were not sealed against sand or dust and many became inoperable, forcing the fire fighters to bypass those switches to keep the systems operating manually. "The maintenance units on our base had no operational knowledge about how our fire trucks worked . . . so we did the work ourselves," McCune explained in a letter: "We were fortunate our Soldiers who were civilian mechanics brought their own tool boxes as we ended [up] having to do most vehicle repair work ourselves."²²

Mission Completed

By early February of 2004, the 323rd's mission focus rapidly changed as replacement units from the United States Marine Corps began arriving at Al Asad. The end of their deployment was close at hand. The tragic crash of an OH-58D helicopter that killed two people provided a somber exclamation point to fulfilling an otherwise adventuresome deployment; the following day saw the 323rd officially relieved of its mission when its replacement unit arrived. The 323rd's fire trucks, tractors, water tank

²⁰News article, http://www4.army.mil/USAR/news/2003-12-02_002.php, subject: "Reserve Soldiers Aid in Rescue Attempt in Iraq," 30 Nov 03.

²¹Memorandum, McCune, subject: After Action Report, no date.

²²Email, SSG Lance McCune to Mr. Dennis Hatcher, subject: 323rd Info, 9 Feb 07.

trailers and two Humvees remained in theater for the new fire fighting unit. The commander did not see this as a problem since he understood that the unit would get new fire trucks and tankers within months of its return.

On 9 March, the weary but proud firefighters of the 323rd departed Iraq to the transient departure area at Camp Virginia, Kuwait, and a week later moved back to Camp Wolf at Kuwait International Airport. On 16 March 2004, the 323rd Engineer Detachment bid farewell to Kuwait and to new friends left behind; friendships forged, literally, by fire.

The unit arrived back at Fort Riley, Kansas, on 19 March to begin demobilization briefings and reintegration, the process of easing Soldiers back into the life and culture left behind nearly a year before. On 26 March 2004, back at home station, the 89th Regional Readiness Command and the town of El Dorado officially welcomed home and honored the 323rd with a public ceremony and individual awards. Britton's final command was to dismiss his troops to return to their homes and loved ones. That was probably the happiest command he ever gave.²³

²³ Memorandum, McCune, subject: After Action Report, no date and Memorandum, Britton, subject: After Action Report, no date.

Lessons Learned

Britton and McCune included in their after action reports a number of lessons learned. Among them were issues concerning mobilization. Britton believed that fire fighting units “should have as part of their METL [mission essential task list] the capability to “operate as individual teams without a headquarters present.” A team needs to understand that it can and most likely will be mobilized as a “separate entity and that is the standard not the exception.” The existing headquarters may not be the one the team knows or mobilized with. Units need to know that the regional readiness command is there to support them before they arrive at the mobilization station. A unit should understand that it has “responsibilities to report prior to mob.” Stay behind soldiers should not be a part of the mobilization plan.²⁴

A related lesson learned pertained to the size of the detachment and its resourcing. According to McCune, “Detachment sized elements are not equipped to be fully self-sustaining though all doctrine says that we are.” Units should receive adequate equipment before deployment, since in theater resources are at a premium. “We constantly had to borrow equipment to be able to perform assigned missions. We also did not have the capability to provide our own maintenance above user level. Our wartime command would seldom order repair parts for us and would seldom perform the work.” McCune recommended that “similar detachments. . . be better equipped and manned to be able to conduct 24hour wartime operations.”

Some of the problem with repair parts reportedly stemmed from the fact that active duty units did not want to pay for reserve unit parts. “We often requested supplies organic to fire fighting,” wrote McCune, “and were told that they could not be funded.”²⁵

As noted before, the attitude toward Army Reserve Soldiers affected getting new gear. “All of the active duty units on our base, even those that

²⁴ Memorandum, Britton, subject: After Action Report, no date.

²⁵ Memorandum, McCune, subject: After Action Report, no date.

never left base,” wrote McCune, “had the Interceptor Body Armor by late summer 03, we received ours in JAN 04 and the plates in FEB 04.”²⁶ Britton also singled this out in his after action report, stating, “It is very important that reserve soldiers not be treated differently than active duty soldiers.”²⁷

There were problems with other supplies. “Uniforms for reserve soldiers were hit and miss; active duty troops got priority for the uniform issues, and we got what was left which often meant size problems. A lot of other items came into the base, but never made it [to] reserve soldiers (i.e., good goggles, camelbacks, new boots).” McCune attributed this to the fact that “active duty counterparts seldom recognize reserve units as fully capable organizations.” The unit had to be “tested” first. He admitted that “many reserve units are less than capable.” This was “something that has to be changed throughout our organization.”

“Not having any kind of MOSQ [Military Occupational Skill Qualification] supply or admin soldiers” on the modified table of organization and equipment, opined McCune “is almost a mission Stopper.” Fire fighters were “often tasked to do the best they could in those arenas.” The lack of relevant training meant having to repeat the given tasker.

McCune made several other observations and resulting lessons learned. Purchasing generators before deployment would prevent relying on in theater generators which sometimes were without power resulting from enemy attacks. Being attached to one unit while OPCONED to another creates command and control issues. Being overly involved in the day-to-day activities of running a household while in theater leads to the frustration of Soldiers and their families.²⁸

Both McCune and Britton commented on communication systems. They were, adjudged Britton, “inadequate for mission support. Range of the organic handhelds was minimal for unit use and not compatible with

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Memorandum, Britton, subject: After Action Report, no date.

²⁸ Memorandum, McCune, subject: After Action Report, no date.

higher” level equipment. Fire fighting units received “handheld motorola radio sets with programming equipment and software.”²⁹

The lack of the Internet for the first six months was problematic, especially concerning a Soldier’s pay. “Finance assumes,” wrote Britton, “that Soldiers can check MyPay regularly. Also, Finance in Theater would only produce 1 LES [leave and earning statement] per month.” This prevents the soldier from getting a “clear picture” of his pay. Identified pay problems were not corrected while in theater.

Britton pointed out other lessons learned and concerns. Alcohol and drugs were “readily available [while] Drug testing and Blood Alcohol Tests (BATs) were not.” He recommended the establishment of a consistent routine and battle rhythm. Boredom is an enemy. Training, he opined, was continuous in a combat zone.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid and Memorandum, Britton, subject: After Action Report, no date.

³⁰ Memorandum, Britton, subject: After Action Report, no date and Telephone Interview, Major Lawrence Britton with Dr. Kathryn Roe Coker, subject: Lessons Learned, 23 Feb 07.

From A Soldier's Perspective

“We were able to do our mission by having fire trucks that were in good working order and good protective gear, rescue equipment and the knowledge to do the job.”

“Good times had by all.”

“No spare parts...Junk always a problem.”

“I only used an M1025 to do my job. It ran well but was falling apart.”

“...bare minimum equipment and support. . .that had to be modified weekly as to old parts and dusty environment.”³¹

³¹ Autobiographical Sketches, subject: Personal Reflections, no date.

Photographs



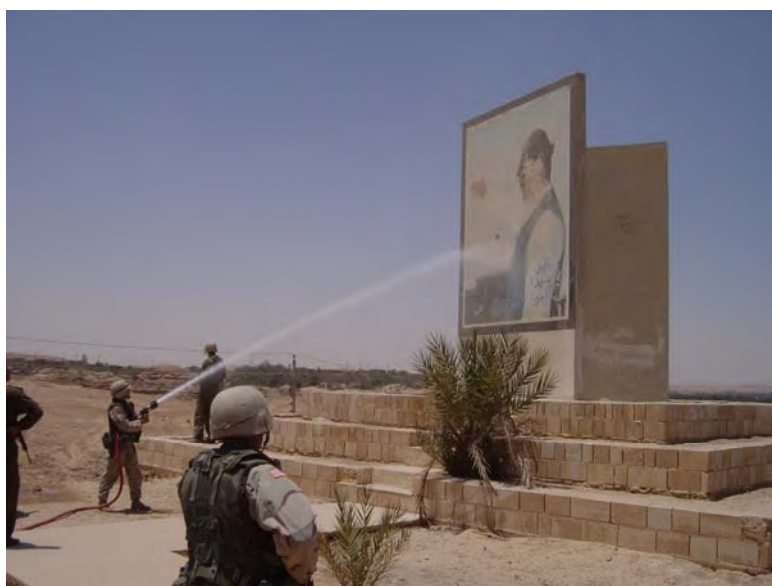
Moving north through Baghdad during a dust storm, May 2003.



An unidentified member of the 323rd stands during a typical dust storm. The sky would often get red like this during storms. Al Asad, Iraq, May 2003.



Members of the 323rd carry a casualty to a waiting MEDEVAC helicopter, June 2003.



Sergeant Summer Guerrero washes down a picture of Saddam Hussein prior to it being painted over. This was on a hilltop overlooking the community of Khan Al Baghdadi and the Euphrates River, June 2003.



Specialist Chris Ricard (left) and Specialist Doug Robertson (at gun ring) outside of Hit, Iraq, July 2003.



Members of the 323rd wear full gear in 120 degree-plus temperatures. This was a typical training exercise to stay sharp. Al Asad, Iraq, August 2003.



Flames from the controlled burn of the airbase perimeter silhouette one of the 323rd's fire trucks. Al Asad, Iraq, October 2003.



Oil pipeline fire near Hadithah. Spraying down the bulldozers with water kept them from lighting up. Hadithah, Iraq, October 2003.



Soldiers of the 323rd Engineer Detachment (Fire Fighting). Top to bottom, left to right; CPT Lawrence Britton, SSG Steve Nye, SSG Lance McCune, SSG Rich McDaniel, SSG Charles Elliott, SPC Nick Fleming, SPC Chris Ricard, SPC Doug Robertson, SGT Ken Miller, SPC Nathan McCaskill, SPC Jeremy Blair, SSG Jason Kindt, SGT Lance Koslowsky, SGT Norman Docter, SPC David Yale, SGT Ricky Hyche, SGT Tony Massaglia, SPC Brandon Haling, SGT Summer Guerrero, SGT Mickey Frazier.

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