

Dispatch 4: Back with the Screaming Eagles

Tuesday, March 21, 2006



Put some miles on since arriving in-country ... a sore rump is testimony to that. Traversed a fair portion of Iraq by various means: C-130, Blackhawk helicopter, and by motor convoy in an armored Humvee. Preferred mode of transport? The Blackhawk. Hands down.

From Baghdad on to places like Balad, Tikrit, Sammarra. From Camp Anaconda to FOB Speicher, FOB Summerville and FOB Remagen. Then on to several places I couldn't begin to spell, much less pronounce.

It's good to be back with the Screaming Eagles. There's an easy comfort that comes with being back with the unit despite many years of separation. Many things have changed in the Army since I wore the patch, but many things remain the same.

It's still a hardcore, ass-kicking division. Those who wear the Screaming Eagle patch take a lot of pride in belonging to it. They're mindful of the division's long and rich traditions and its history. Today's generation of 101st troopers have earned their own chapter in the history books. They are hard and tough soldiers doing a hard and tough job. They don't flinch, wince or balk at any mission thrown their way.

But no one ever writes about the clerks, cooks, truck drivers or maintenance people who go off to war. Sans Private Ryan, combat was/is usually glamorized by Hollywood ... characters and events loosely based on the actualities.

Stories recounting bravery and valor on the field of battle seldom depict the people who ensure the soldier, sailor, marine or airman have what they need, i.e., the ability to conduct and fight the engagements.

The story is always the same. Always about Special Forces types - Army Rangers, Navy Seals, etc. Even the common Joe - the Private E-1 - seems to possess enough bonafides to occasionally grab a paragraph (or at least a line or two) in someone's storyline.

No one writes about the majority of people who serve in the military - those who have a

supporting job - unless it's in a disparaging way.

Pogues, REMFs, Remington Raiders.

I'm going to write about one of those so called REMFs. He deserves it. Not sexy enough for you? Don't read it. Go away.

Sgt. Mike Kaufman hails from Cranston, Rhode Island. He's been in the Army 11 years. Mike enlisted seven days after graduating from Cranston East High School. He wasn't the best student in the school, but he wasn't at the bottom of the class either. Carried B's and C's. A hell of a lot better than I ever did.

Mike did what every enlistee has to do. He went to Basic Training and AIT (Advanced Infantry Training); did both in Ft. Jackson, S.C. His MEPS (Military Entrance Processing Station) test determined his military occupation: 75 Delta-Personnel Specialist.

Sgt. Kaufman traveled a bit during his stint. Two and a half years in Ft. Lewis, WA; one and a half years in Korea; five years spent stationed in Germany. Then, he was ordered to Ft. Campbell, KY., home of the 101st Airborne.

Ninety days later he deployed with the 101st to Iraq.

Since then, he's been doing his job as Assistant NCOIC of the 3/320th Battalion Personnel Action Center seven days a week. He's had one day off in the past six months. Seven days a week of processing combat awards for other soldiers. Seven days a week of keeping emergency notification records updated and preparing personnel accountability records.

Eleven years in the Army, but never feeling quite complete, Sgt. Kaufman wanted to feel like he was really soldiering. Especially after being deployed to Iraq. His job requires him to sit through the morning briefs - he's been doing that every day.

He knows all the places in the AO (Area of Operations) by name, by heart. But he had never seen them. He never had the opportunity to leave the personnel office.

A REMF he may be, but Sgt. Kaufman was determined to get the hell out of the office and outside of the gate ... at least one time. He was determined to put his boots on the ground of some of those places he knew about but had never seen.

A couple of days ago, Sgt. Mike Kaufman made it off of FOB Remagen. He volunteered - hell, he practically begged - to go on the same patrol I was being allowed to go on. I suggested to his CO that he might be able to help me out (since I'm so helpless and all) and his CO relented. Mike made his patrol. He put boots on the ground in Al Hambra, Al Sequor, Hamadi-Shab, Shab, Maysen and Maskarat.

When his patrol ended, Sgt. Kaufman said, "I finally felt like I was part of the effort ... that I had taken the same chance as the rest of the group does everyday. I feel like a soldier."

So that's my story about a REMF. A REMF with the heart of a warrior.

