



The Desert Voice



03 – 09 May 2004

Commander's Corner

TIKRIT, IRAQ & AO

DANGER – Greetings once again from Southwest Asia. Let me begin by wishing all our readers who are mothers a belated Happy Mother's Day. Your sons and daughters that make up the Signal Task Force are doing a magnificent job. I continue to be amazed by their ingenuity and professionalism.

We got a little taste of the Iraqi heat this week as the temperature crossed the century mark for the first time during our deployment. Our recent emphasis on getting ECUs (Environmental Control Units – Army jargon for air conditioners) into the signal shelters and work spaces is paying off though we've still got some work to do to be 100%.

The most often asked questions recently have to do with the R&R program. I will try to explain what I know to be true about the program and hopefully dispel some of the unpleasant rumors associated with it. For starters, the R&R program has not been canceled. It is operating under reduced allocations theater wide. The Signal Task Force received 16 slots for the month of May. 6 soldiers departed on 9 May, and 10 will depart on 15 May.

Because we have so few allocations, they were given to the soldiers with the most compelling reasons to return home. I am the person who decides who goes and who doesn't, so send all "hate mail" to me. For the month of May those who have had babies

since we deployed and those who have children graduating from High School were given priority. These categories consumed most of the slots. The remaining few slots were also given to soldiers with unique circumstances requiring their presence either in Germany or in the States.

You should also understand that the Signal Task Force includes many soldiers that are not organically part of 121st Signal Battalion. The National Guard units in our force get equal consideration for the R&R slots and will be allocated a proportional number of our total slots for R&R.

The reason for the reduced number of allocations is transportation. There simply isn't enough air-lift capacity to move the number of soldiers that we had hoped to. Commercial air is being utilized to the maximum extent possible, and the Division is leveraging every possible means of transportation to afford as many soldiers the opportunity for R&R it can. Having said that, the fact is that not everyone will get the chance, and at the current rate, it would be safe to assume that most won't.

We solicited input from every soldier on their desired dates to take R&R should they get the opportunity. This in no way assured them of a R&R slot. It was only to help build an Order of Merit list. Families should not make financial commitments based on this input. Do not buy tickets, make reservations or anything to obligate you fiscally because I

can't promise your soldier will be available for a specific period of time.

R&R should be viewed as the privilege it is and not a "right" or promised reward. Just be thankful that there is such a program and know that we will work hard to get as many soldiers as possible the opportunity.

I mentioned earlier how the temperature is rising here. Not surprisingly, the heat affects different people in different ways. As an example of how the heat can impair one's judgment, I offer to you the case study in Captain Mike Tobias. Folks, this guy truly believes that the PAC-10 is the strongest NCAA, Division I, football conference. Being the senior mentor to the officers in the battalion, I have patiently worked with CPT Tobias to see the error in his logic. We've reviewed the history of college football and we've studied the statistical data, both of which would lead anyone of sound mind and body to be completely convinced that the SEC is far and away the strongest conference. All to no avail with Mighty Mike. Even though he has been a Captain an entire month and should certainly know better, he remains stubbornly wrong. I can contribute this poor judgment to nothing other than the heat. More amazingly, he insists that he is right knowing full well his boss is an Arkansan, a diehard Razorback fan, and that in matters such as these that the TRUTH has a rank! Thank you for your thoughts and prayers, it does make a difference.

Alpha Company

Alpha company has enjoyed temperatures with lows in the 60s and highs in the mid-90s this week. With the sun shining so bright that it almost defies description and the wind blowing a warm breeze, it really is a little slice of paradise here. There is nothing more refreshing this time of year than an afternoon combat patrol, on a warm sunny day, in a HMMWV with the bullet proof windows closed and no air conditioning. We are truly looking forward to summer, when the weather is even more delightful.

In light of the fact that previous editions haven't focused on FOB Speicher, I wanted to use this week to focus on the people and goings-on here. Here at the main compound, we have been busy putting up HESCO barriers, which are big fabric and wire containers that are filled with dirt and cement walls known as T-walls. 2nd platoon has also constructed a bunker, consisting of a plywood structure reinforced by a lot of sandbags. And a lot of 2nd Platoon soldiers with bad backs. Most of the structures here are plywood, but not wanting to feel like the "have nots" when compared to FOB Danger, we refer to it all as the Signal *Palace* complex.



SPC Tolino in the Ops Palace

Some crucial members of the team are the ones found in the Maintenance *Palace* complex, which suspiciously resembles two maintenance tents and a plywood

shanty. They ensure our generators run, our air conditioners provide cold air, our vehicles perform in top condition and we get our replacement parts. Without our maintenance crew we wouldn't be able to perform any of our functions. Ensuring that our vehicles continue to be ready to roll is crucial for combat patrols. They are the unsung heroes of Alpha Company. OK, now they're sung, but still...



Motor pool crew: SFC Sadler, SGT Hernandez, SPC Kramer, SSG Johnson, SGT Harris in the palace garden



SPC Queen unhooking a vehicle from the wrecker at the Maintenance Palace

The other section of the palace grounds contains the Node Center *Palace* complex. That's where 2nd Platoon's Node Center 51 is located. You've read about and seen these young men and women during their promotions and reenlistments. They provide a communications hub second to none. They also brew an outstanding cup of coffee. If you're here touring the grounds, I suggest you stop in and try some. Just tell them the CO sent you and they'll take good care of you. Or

try to poisoning you, I'm not sure which.



SGT Rivera, SGT Cornell, SSG Prado and SPC Ethington from NC 51

Not on the palace grounds, we also have Small Extension Nodes (SENS) out supporting our division units. While not able to enjoy the opulence of the palace grounds, they continue to do an outstanding job for the Big Red One. They're mission is keep the Colonel's happy by ensuring the phones and the internet work 100% of the time. Impossible you say? It certainly is, but these guys and gals make it happen and make it look easy. And they'll tell you, keeping a Colonel or Lieutenant Colonel happy is like trying to teach a pig to sing.



PFC Civatrese, PV2 Cantrell and PFC Franco looking beautiful as always



SPC Gonzales and PV2 Ruiz about to be attacked from above by a plastic bag

In closing, by the time you read this Speicher, Dagger and Remagen will be enjoying lunch served in the dining facility again. Summerall, Brassfield-Mora, and McKenzie, who have always eaten MREs for lunch, will continue to do so. Mail continues to be unpredictable. Packages and letters mailed a week apart arrive a day apart, or the one mailed last gets here first. But, mail does continue to flow and is always appreciated. Overall life is good. Wish you were here...

Bravo Company

This week's newsletter is going to be a little different than the previous issues. This is my last one. Next week,



CPT Donley will be Commander of the company, and author of this update. Towards that end, I would like to talk about this company, not in the last week, but over the last two years, including last week.

This company has done amazing work. It has accomplished some amazing tasks. –And it has done so, not because I made the company do it, but because the leadership in this company from the Platoon Leaders and Platoon Sergeants all the way down to the Specialist team chief knew what needed to be done. It was on the individual soldier level that the soldiers of this company earned the slogan “Excellence is our trademark.” Please allow me some space here to briefly mention some of THEIR accomplishments.

Motorpool / HQ Section: Never before has such a small and underappreciated group of soldiers made such a profound difference

within an organization. This small group of people kept our vehicles moving, our equipment communicating, our air conditioners cooling, and our company operating. It was the motorpool, and the individual soldier's preventative maintenance that earned this company's 98.5% Operational Readiness rate, which is the best in the battalion. They earned the USAREUR Oil Analysis Program Award for Excellence two-years in a row, which is the best in the battalion. They maintained an Overages Recoveries turn-in rate of better than 98%, once again best in the battalion.

For the platoons, very little can be said without highlighting the leadership and accomplishments they made for themselves. Not only did the platoons operate without a higher headquarters or a local SYSCON for several field problems and mission rehearsals, but their performance in the desert has been exemplary. And let's take just a second and point out that this is their SECOND deployment in as many years, as all of our equipment and most of 1st Platoon's soldiers deployed to Turkey a little over a year ago for a mission that never happened.

NC53 (now attached to Charlie) was given the mission to serve as the “hub” of this distributed network. They were the focal point of the network, the single point of failure. What their mission lacked in flash, it made up for in complexity and importance. They have performed admirably.

NC52, operating out of Warhorse was given another important mission. They were given the mission to install their systems in a separate province from the rest of the battalion, over the most geographically distributed area of

responsibility, and within the most dangerous region. They are currently providing rock solid and stable communications that even the network planning terminal said was impossible. They literally do this every day.



Sunset over NC52 in Warhorse

It is true to say that we lost the Battalion's prestigious Commander's Cup at the Organizational Day two years ago. – But we got it back last year.

Now for the most impressive statistic that I can come up with: In the last two years, not a single soldier from this company allowed their service commitments to expire. Not one soldier ETS'd during this command. Some soldiers were Chaptered, to be sure, and the STOP LOSS may have helped in this regard, covering the last couple of months but every single soldier eligible to re-enlist in the Army did, right up to the deployment. Not only did they serve their country admirably for the length of time that they promised to do so, but when their time was done, they came back for more. Excellence, indeed.

It would be easy for me to say that I did all of these things, but I didn't. It was SGT Thompson, who not only serves as a Team Chief (a more than full time job), but he also serves the company well as the Company NBC NCO, taking care of thousands of dollars worth of equipment to keep us alive in a chemical environment, all as an

additional duty. It is SSG Washington, who is not just an Extension Section Sergeant, but also the Company Unit Movement Officer who, along with 1LT Prudhomme, brought this company through the deployment process and into Iraq with little or no issues what so ever. It is SSG Wold and SGT Bryant, who had there hands full with Node Center Operations, but who also handled all of the company's Controlled Cryptographic Items and kept us all out of trouble when dealing with COMSEC. It was SGT Coss, SGT Sanchez, and SSG Proctor who served as the battalion's point of contact for the 30m mast, who on several occasions went outside the company to teach battalion soldiers how to make it work. These people, and so many others, made this company what it is. It is THEIR accomplishments that we count as OUR accomplishments.

I could not have asked for a better company to command, and couldn't be more proud of what it has become.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Company Convoy Team. I put the lives of these individuals on the line every time I have a road trip I need to make. Every site I visit, every part I deliver, SFC Teriipaia and his team goes with me and keeps me safe. They weren't given any formal training for this. They are not MOS qualified to perform these tasks, but they do it, and they're good at it. When all is said an done, they kept me safe and accomplished the missions that they were given to accomplish. I could not have been successful in Iraq without them.



MOST of the convoy team, from left to right: PV2 Scherger, SGT Johnson, SPC Sargeant, SPC Alexander, me, SPC Graves, PFC Kubilis, SSG Pedroza, SPC Doty, and SFC Teriipaia. Not pictured above, but who made every trip with the team is ISG Johnson, whose help I appreciate more than he could possibly realize.

Charlie Company

Greetings from Charlie Rock! We have enjoyed another exciting week in beautiful Tikrit, Iraq. This week we saw the temperature rise into the 100s for the first time since we arrived. Of course everyone states that it is a "dry heat", but to us 118 degrees is a 18 degrees.

We were lucky enough to have the opportunity to promote some deserving soldiers this week: PFC West to the rank of Specialist PFC Storni to the rank of Specialist PV2 Gutierrez to the rank of Private First Class and PV2 Hyland to the rank of Private First Class. Congratulations to each of the recent promotees!



Newly Promoted Private First Class Gutierrez gets his new rank wet.

Charlie Company also took a diagnostic physical fitness test in order to determine how well each of us had been maintaining our physical fitness. All of the soldiers did an outstanding job with a few soldiers exceeding the Army's maximum score of 300. Those soldiers were: SGT Growden – 309, PFC Jones - 314, SPC Druckemiller – 317, 1LT Gunther - 324, and SPC Palmer - 334. Some exciting photos from the action!!!



SSG Washington shows some of the younger troops how it is done.



SGT Sanchez leading the way on the 2-mile run.

In other news, it was announced this week that Charlie Company has won another major award. The Department of the Army has selected Charlie Company, 121st Signal Battalion as a First Place finisher in the 2004 DEA Operational Deployment Small Unit competition. This award recognizes deploying units for outstanding mission accomplishment, which meet or exceed the established deployment standards. Congratulations to all the soldiers in Charlie Company

for an outstanding job during this deployment.



HHC

Greetings all, and to all you Mothers out there "Happy Mothers Day!". This week's article will be conglomeration of pictures and soldiers doing the one thing we all love. Firing weapons and taking a Physical Fitness Test. Here is 1SG Cromartie doing the push-up event, what a minute, that isn't the rest position.



After this grueling push-up event, which is pretty much how many push-ups you can do in 2 minutes comes the sit-up event. All participants get about 10 minutes between events, so they were well rested for the next event. Here is a picture of the next event with PFC Romas doing the sit-up event.



SGT Thompson is in DCU's grading her performance, standard and proper count of repetitions performed. The next event is the 2 mile run. This is the one event that can really challenge the mind.



Above is SPC Ross getting an extra helping hand by SPC Evans pacing her on the 2 mile run. Soldiers often improve one another's time by pacing each other.



SPC Neeley seen here is sprinting the last 50m of the 2 mile run. The company is taking a Physical Fitness test each month and the soldiers' performance is getting better and better!!

The next group of photos are of our convoy team at Objective Midland. Once a week we travel to midlands to re-supply them on Food, Fuel and other supplies.



SGT Briggs our Jedi master is here preparing the .50 cal machine gun for firing. SGT Briggs is our DFAC NCOIC here at FOB Danger. Like always he has a way of getting things we need...Coffee, Soda's, and Cereal.



PV2 Jennings and SPC Bowen are here on HHC 6 firing the MK-19 40mm grenade launcher. And lastly I leave you with this picture of a Blackhawk coming in for fast landing across from our CP Tent.



1SG and I wish you all a good beginning to summer. It was 95 degrees yesterday and it is getting hotter and hotter. We miss you all! Tough 6 out.

Chaplain

Imagine if you will, that you have bank that credits you each morning with \$86,400. It is there

for you to use in any way you see fit, but carries over no balance from day to day. Whatever portion you failed to spend is lost. But the next morning, you get another \$86,400. What would you do?

In a real way, each of us has such an account. It is called time and each day we are credited with 86,400 minutes. Every night it writes off what we did not invest for good purpose. It carries no balance. It allows no overdraft. Each day a new account is opened for you and each night the unused balance is lost. There is no drawing against tomorrow. We must live in the moment and invest our time as it comes.

Time is a very valuable thing. To realize the value of ONE YEAR, ask a student who failed a grade. To realize the value of ONE MONTH, ask the mother of a prematurely born baby. How about ONE WEEK? Ask the editor of a weekly magazine. The value of ONE DAY, ask a truck driver. ONE HOUR, a dental patient. ONE MINUTE, someone who just missed a train. One SECOND, the one who barely avoided the accident. To realize the value of ONE MILLISECOND, ask the silver medal winner at the Olympics.

Time is a truly valuable thing. And the Bible encourages us to use the time we have to do good for one another. God puts it this way in Galatians 6:9: Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

A/115 SIG

Alpha Company of the 115th Signal Battalion is honing new skills here in Iraq. Aside from convoys, guard duties, and the primary mission of signal, the soldiers are becoming very

proficient as carpenters. In past weeks, troops have added doors and floors to tents here at FOB Danger. This week, construction began on a building to be used as a company MWR (morale, welfare, and recreation).

The project is under the direction of SSG Charles Newton. At home in North Alabama, Staff SSG Newton runs his own construction business. Here, he's training a new crew of workers. All available Alpha Company members have spent this week wearing tool belts in place of ammo packs. Their hard work is paying off. Already the structure has a floor and four outside walls following two days of actual building. Prior to hammers and nails the soldiers worked clearing and leveling the area, which is located next to what is commonly known as soldiers' palace.

The plans are for the Alpha Company MWR building to be a "hang-out" spot for off-duty soldiers. There will be a TV and DVD player, possibly a pool table, and more. At the current rate of construction, it should be finished and settled into long before the fall football season. After all, football may very well be the driving force behind the entire project. Among the many accomplishments that Alabama is famous for, college football certainly ranks toward the top. Not even a war zone can keep Bama fans from watching the Crimson Tide roll.

Specialist Sonya Harris



Raising the walls of the new A/115 MWR building.



Members of the Alpha Company building team.

C/711 SIG



Another week has come and gone! Charlie Seven Eleven continues to keep our spirits high. Thoughts of home and family, pride in our jobs and a little air conditioning go along way to keep us smiling. Air conditioning?? Some of us are still on the waiting list, but we are a patient bunch. Most importantly, we are getting air conditioners to keep our signal equipment from overheating in the hot months yet to come. Some of you may not give much thought to electronic equipment generating heat, but they do! Add that with what Mother Nature has to offer here in Iraq and it's a rough combination. Radio melt down is a term we talk about jokingly, I think. This week we would like to focus on some of our unit members on small extension teams providing communications to other units like the Field Artillery, Engineers and Special Forces. SPC Lincoln Irvin is a proud Remote Access Unit (RAU) operator which allows soldiers to use a military phone from their vehicles while traveling. SPC Irvin served 4 years in the Regular Army as an Infantryman before signing up with the National Guard. He will be celebrating his 8th Anniversary in the military on the 19th of May! Being called back

to active duty in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom has caused SPC Irvin to give some serious thought to joining the regular army again. Best wishes Lincoln.



SGT Robert Fiala is a Small Extension Switch (SEN) Operator and has been in the unit since June of 1993. Prior to that, SGT Fiala also spent 4 years in the Regular Army as a Track Vehicle Mechanic and is a Desert Storm veteran. SGT Fiala is famous for being popular with the girls. His comrades in arms have quoted girls saying, "SGT Fiala?" Yeah, I know him!" What's up with that SGT Fiala? We're glad to have both of these soldiers as members of Charlie Seven Eleven!



B/125 SIG

An interesting phenomenon occurred over the past few days.

We had a job to do that required both electronic maintenance personnel and motor maintenance personnel to live and work together in close proximity for an extended period of time. In layman's terms, we had grease monkeys and computer geeks in the same house for a week. In a signal company we need both skill sets to survive and succeed, but rarely do we get to just see them hanging out. This is a paradox that requires both an explanation and some insightful revelations on the distinct difference in both the demeanor and personality's of these different soldiers. Basically, I am comparing the jocks versus the nerds.

I have to begin by explaining the average electronic maintenance technician and the average mechanic. We have four electronic maintenance techs with us here in Kirkuk. They are SGT Jeff Holloway, SGT Kent Brust, SPC David Peabody, and SPC James Short. SGT Holloway is the leader of the pack. He does not fit the



SGT Holloway working on the switch on FOB Warrior
average geek mold, as he is physically fit and likes to surf and at least claims to be the best surfer in the company. Do not let this fool you, however, as he is all nerd, just

King Nerd in this case. His crew of soldiers is a talented bunch straight out of "Revenge of the Nerds", with skills that are utilized every day to accomplish the company's mission. They have large heads, to hold all of that brain power, wear glasses, and have strong thumbs from video games, but wear out quickly in the sun and heat. One soldier fainted after an hour on the road. Like a magician from an old Dungeons and Dragons game, not much good in a close fight, but can bring down some serious power from afar, or at least that is what they keep telling me.

Mechanics, on the other hand, are like warriors of old. Our mechanics are SSG Marcus McNear, SGT Brandon Cruz, SGT Ricky Horne, SGT Octavius Miller, SPC Taiwan Cleveland, SPC Wendell Reyes, SPC Randy Nunez, SPC Kevin Moore, PFC Christian Vasquez, PV2 Gregory Prevo, and PV2 Tino Bryant. Physically fit as a group, used to hard manual labor, more at home using their hands and muscles to accomplish a task, then using experience and common sense to get the job done all of the time. The average mechanic rarely touches a computer, rarely writes, reads only FHM and Maxim for the articles and fashion advice and actually believes them, listens to loud music, and prefers contact sports to any other activity. Trash talking and chest thumping get these soldiers through the day, and gets them into trouble when they fail to perform as well as they say they can.



SPC Miller working in the motor pool

This brings me to the irony of having these two different personality types in close living and working in close proximity. One group talks about hard manual work including ripping engines apart and hoisting trucks apart to lift. The other group talks about pinning out cables, replacing fuses, soldering connections. One group gets up every morning to work out at the gym and even works out a second time in the evening. One group sleeps until the last possible second and gets up to go to breakfast, and prefers playing video games to any sort of physical activity at night. That one makes you think. One group eats steak and eggs for breakfast, the other group eats cocoa puffs and muffins. Explanations on which group is which are not necessary, I am sure.

So what is my point? Well, I do not have one. Both groups of people are outstanding at what they do. Both groups perform functions that make all that we do possible. We need engines to run and electronic equipment to function. But only one of the two groups feels a need to wear flight suits to

look cool. Now who would that be?



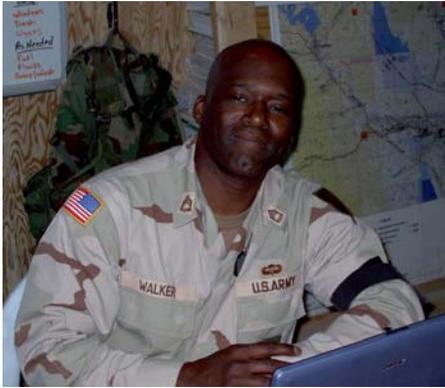
SGT Cruz working on a truck on FOB Warrior

B/279 SIG

This is the first in a weekly profile of each team of Co B 279th. As we move through the AOR we do not have a real perception of what unit the teams are from. C41 consists of SSG Roy Bonds of Albertville, AL, SGT Chris Hess of Auburn, AL, SGT Alan Lambert of Boaz, AL, SGT Jeffery Cowart of Albertville, AL, SPC Nathaniel Cunningham of Albertville AL, and SPC Christopher Lemaster of Albertville, AL. The team was assigned to Co B from Co C 279th with the exception of SPC Cunningham who is from Co B. Recently the team has experienced first hand that the old cliché that Signal Soldiers are not just signal. SSG Bonds was preparing to make a logistical run to the main FOB to pick up mail and exchange his support vehicle for another that had been armored. He was asked to go by another FOB and provide transportation for a soldier that needed dental work which could only be provided at the main FOB, SSG Bonds was glad to be of assistance. Upon arrival to pick up the soldier he was asked to provide transportation for a detainee and the assigned guard to the main detention facility. SSG Bonds agreed to be of assistance to them as well. However he soon learned it entailed much more than what he

had anticipated. Upon arrival SSG Bonds was informed that he had to process the detainee before the detainee could be released into their custody. SSG Bonds took the responsibility to process the detainee as well as addressing the logistical issues he originally set out to accomplish. It was a painstaking process but SSG Bonds persevered and accomplished the additional task as well as his original mission and still made his return SP time. SSG Bonds is a prime example of the modern day Signal Soldier. They are diverse in performing whatever task is necessary to accomplish the overall mission. OIF II is an indication of a change from a linear battlefield to one that remains stationary without clear battle lines. The Signal Soldier has discovered an entirely new set of requirements to sustain operations in this environment. Signal soldiers are conducting patrols in order to provide for a network that is divided by hostile terrain on all sides and in the mean time become entwined with missions of other elements moving in the same direction thus minimizing the amount of travel through potentially dangerous terrain. Signal soldiers of today perform their duty in and out of their realm from day to day to contribute to their overall mission as well as others. They are Soldiers first who happen to provide Signal resources. Thank you to SSG Bonds and SEN team C41 for a job well done and a tribute to all the Signal Soldiers serving in OIFs past, present, and future.

SOLDIER SPOTLIGHT



Soldier Spotlight: SFC Palmer Walker

Duty Position: Movement Control NCOIC

Forward Operating Base: Danger

Home State: Texas

Family: Married to Maggi and two children; Jesse and Alicia

What he has to say about serving in Iraq: The country is more beautiful than I thought it would be, especially the river valley area. But I miss my family and can't wait to get home.

MWR PHOTOS



SPC Whitehead receiving her award for placing second in the bench press contest on FOB Danger



SGT Horn on FOB Warrior



SSG Abbott performing a comedy routine at comedy night on FOB Danger



CW2 Gilyard and WO1 Walters enjoying a coke at a commander's BBQ on FOB Danger



The entire G6 section in front of DMAIN on FOB Danger