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Engineer support company builds legacy of leadership

By 2nd Lt. Michael Chigbrow
Task Force Dolch

LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – The lights of the gym shone down upon the formation of Soldiers and civilians as they stood watching their new commander march to take her place in front of them in Grafenwoehr, Germany April 24, 2009. In the audience, an Army captain's proud parents watched their daughter make her way to the front and assume command of a company they knew well.

While a change of command is a scene played out continuously all across the Army, the 535th Engineer Support Company one was special. When Capt. Jessica Durbin from Shippensburg, Pa., assumed command of the 535th ESC, she was taking command of the same company her father, retired Lt. Col. Terrence Durbin, commanded 36 years earlier.

"It was a high honor and a privilege for us to be present when she commissioned, when she graduated EOBC (Engineer Officer Basic Course) and when she assumed command in Grafenwoehr," said retired Lt. Col. Durbin.

"My father was very surprised when I became a platoon leader in the 535th," said Capt. Durbin, "I didn't tell him that I would be taking command of the 535th until it was locked in. I hope that I have made him proud."

The 535th has changed a lot over that time period. From 1972 to 1973, the 535th was stationed at Tompkins Barracks in Schwetzingen, Germany. Primarily, they were tasked to provide support to combat engineer battalions. When retired Lt. Col. Durbin assumed command in May of 1972, there was no change-of-command ceremony and not a lot of guidance about what he was going to be required to do.

"I should have known that the challenges would be many," said the retired lieutenant colonel. "The only guidance (I) received was to tell me where the company orderly room was located and, by the way, your company will be travelling by road convoy and train to Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels in 30 days."

Back in the early 1970s, the mission was quite different. The main threat in the world was the Soviet Union.

"We had to be ready to move out of garrison within two hours of a call to meet the Soviet army pouring across the East German border," recalled retired Lt. Col. Durbin.

There was also a difference in the ways they could conduct training. To get Soldiers out to work on construction projects, they had to partner with local villages.

"The village had to agree to house and feed the troops and provide fuel at no expense to the U.S. government," said the elder Durbin. "It was good training and good for the troops to experience the local culture."

When Capt. Durbin took command on that brisk April day, she did not know what trials and tribulations would lay ahead. As soon as she took command, she was tasked with conducting a unit move from Grafenwoehr to Bamberg, Germany. Their higher headquarters at battalion and brigade were deployed at the time, making the logistics of the move all the more difficult.

"We had a four-month window to move everyone from `Graf,'" she recalled. "We had to work hard to process all of the personnel actions while conducting change-of-command inventories and turning in 30 years-worth of equipment."

Fast forwarding from the move in April 2009 to August 2010, the 535th ESC was charged with concerting from a construction mission to conducting route-clearance operations. This was a huge adjustment but one that the company was able to accept and eventually excel at.

"I was very impressed with how the company reacted and readily embraced their new mission," commented Capt. Durbin.

When asked what advice he gave his daughter, retired Lt. Col. Durbin said, "Mission first and people always. The golden rule applies. Treat everyone with dignity and respect."

Capt. Durbin took her father's advice to heart and has continued to live by it throughout her time in command. This month, she will be leaving command of the 535th ESC to return to Germany and continue in her Army career.

The 535th ESC has been deployed to Afghanistan since December 2010 and is based in Forward Operating Base Airborne and FOB Ghazni in Regional Command-East. Their Soldiers continue to conduct route-clearance missions with the same professionalism and dedication they always have shown as they look back on their long history with pride.



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BAMBERG, Germany – Capt. Jessica Durbin (center), company commander of 535th Engineer Support Company kneels in front of the Soldiers of her company at Ramstein Airbase, Germany, Dec. 1, 2010. The 535th ESC is deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. (Photo courtesy of Cpt. Jessica Durbin, Task Force Dolch)



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BAMBERG, Germany – Capt. Jessica Durbin, company commander of 535th Engineer Support Company salutes during the unit's deployment ceremony in Bamberg, Germany, Nov. 12, 2010. The 535th ESC is deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. (Photo courtesy of U.S Army)

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