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Soldiers of 1st Armored Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team reflect on hard times, good times of unit's third tour in Iraq

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BAGHDAD, Iraq -- The "surge" of five additional brigades into Iraq was announced in January 2007, and Soldier deployments grew from 12 to 15 months. Since then, coalition and Iraqi forces and local citizens have seen Iraq rebuilding and communities becoming safe to live and work in once again.



PFC EVAN LOYD

Spc. Robert Cooper (kneeling) and Maj. Travis Thompson of the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, call in a report during Operation al-Sakar, in Owesat, Iraq, April 12. The 1-6th, part of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, partnered with the Commando Battalion, 17th Iraqi Army Brigade, to search the area for insurgents, weapons and explosives caches. The 2nd BCT is currently returning to its home station in Baumholder, Germany, after its third Iraq deployment.

Today deployments are once again 12 months. The 2nd "Iron" Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division is one of the last brigades, if not the last, in Iraq to be deployed past 12 months.

The brigade deployed from its home station in Baumholder, Germany, to Kuwait in April 2008. This would be the brigade's third deployment to Iraq since March 2003, totaling 42 months in the combat zone.

Just a few weeks after arriving here last spring, the brigade's troops moved to Forward Operating Base Hammer, just outside the southeastern edge of Baghdad, and assumed

responsibility for missions in the Mada'in area from the 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division. The 2nd BCT was the only brigade combat team to replace a "surge" brigade.

"This is my third deployment to Iraq, but this deployment was more organized than (previous ones)," said Staff Sgt. Victor Perez, training room NCO-in-charge for the 2nd BCT's Headquarters and Headquarters Company. "I guess the first few deployments were more of a learning experience, and now we've gotten more organized."

Six months into this deployment, 2nd BCT Soldiers began relocating their battalions from FOB Hammer to Camp Striker on Baghdad's Victory Base Complex and expanding their area of responsibility.

In November the brigade conducted a transfer of authority with the 3rd Brigade, 101st Air Assault Division, and eight days later the 2nd BCT transferred to Multi-National Division - Baghdad and expanded operations to encompass the Mada'in and Mahmudiyah areas, also known as Baghdad's "Southern Belts." By the end of November the brigade had forces east and west of the Tigris River.

Established in their new location, the 2nd BCT's Soldiers operated throughout the entire southern half of Baghdad. With the addition of two new battalions -- the 1st Combined Arms Battalion, 63rd Armored Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, and the 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division -- their area of responsibility expanded again, adding the Rashid district of Baghdad.

The Soldiers of 2nd BCT performed combined security patrols across southern Baghdad with their ISF counterparts from the 2nd National Police Division, 9th Iraqi Army Division, and 17th IA Division, finding and disposing of numerous improvised explosive devices and caches of weapons and homemade bomb-making materials.

Sgt. Jacqueline Reynolds of HHC, 2nd BCT, spent four months training her Iraqi security forces counterparts.

"Considering this is my first deployment, I can only judge off of what I see now. They're (the Iraqi security forces) eager to learn. I spent quite a period preparing to train the (Iraqi army) and then I went and conducted training with three different units at their division and battalions. They were really eager to learn and increase their capabilities," Reynolds said.

Other Soldiers who had been here on previous deployments said that cooperation was something new.

"The mission has changed for the coalition forces since my last deployment in Iraq," said Sgt. Brian Gordon, a tracked vehicle mechanic with HHC, 1st Battalion, 35th Armor.

"The (coalition forces) unit operations were independent of IA forces in 2006 to 2007 for the overall mission because of the conflict with al-Qaida forces in Ramadi and throughout Iraq. The mission during this deployment focused on combined operations

with IA units providing more security in Iraq with the drawdown of CF troop levels and operations,” said Gordon.

In addition to security operations, the 2nd BCT also worked to improve communities through embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams and civil-military affairs efforts to rebuild schools, workplaces and key small businesses. Even during routine patrols, the brigade’s Soldiers did what they could to improve the communities they protected.

“When we went and talked to them (Iraqi citizens) we would ask them about their sewage, their electricity, how their water was, security around that area, and their general concerns that they may have or how we could improve their lives,” said Spc. Dustin Niehuus, a tank driver turned dismounted team leader and machine gunner with Company C, 1-35th. Niehuus spent most of his year in Iraq outside Sadr City at Joint Security Station Comanche, where his platoon went on daily eight hour patrols in the city right outside the gate.

“I think we made a difference in the area. By the time we left it was quiet. There was nothing going on there, and we could definitely see the improvement,” said Niehuus.

After 12 months in Iraq, the 2nd BCT moved once again, this time to Forward Operating Base Falcon, where they partnered with the 30th Heavy Brigade Combat Team, North Carolina National Guard.

Now, as the 2nd BCT is begining flowing home to Baumholder, its Soldiers seem filled with a mix of nostalgia and excitement

“There’s a lot of anxiety, probably, I would say, that’s building up in the preparation, and a lot of young Soldiers not knowing what to do when they go back,” said Perez. “So everything has been speeding up and there’s a lot to do before we get going, prior to the (conclusion) of this mission, but we’ll get through it.”

The memories each will carry home are as diverse as the brigade itself. For Sgt. Jamal Davis of the 4th Battalion, 27th Field Artillery, the memorable moments of this deployment included small pleasures and new challenges.

“Drinking beer on Super Bowl day, first time ever,” Davis said. “This is my first time to be able to drink during a deployment. The past two deployments we weren’t able to do that. But even if it was just for one day I was able to have two beers,” he said with a smile.

“This is my third deployment, the first two all I did was patrol and go out into the operational environment and door-kicking and all that,” he added. “But this time, going from that to working in the tactical operations center, it’s kind of like culture shock for a guy who’s never done it before. But working with the staff, actually being able to brief the brigade commander on what my task force is doing is another good thing that I’ll always remember.”

Although some times were good, this is still a combat zone, and there is always the other side of the coin, when a Soldier was killed in action.

“The biggest memory -- and it’s not a good one -- is when we lost a gunner (Cpl. Tony Gonzales) on (a Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle) I was on to an EFP (explosively formed projectile),” said Niehuus somberly. “He was a good friend. He was in our platoon. He was a good guy all around, who would help you out when he could.”

Niehuus said and his fellow Soldiers made it through those dark times of the deployment by sticking together and staying strong as a team.

“It was hard, but we had great leadership who helped us channel our anger and our fear, so to say, in a positive way, and give us extra motivation to get out there and find the guys who were planting those things and get them off the streets,” said Niehuus.

“I think the only thing I could say is that it’s all what you make of it over here,” said Niehuus. “If you’re thinking it’s horrible then you’re going to be horrible and miserable. But if you have a chain of command that really cares, like ours did, and that helps you out and makes things better for you when they can, [it helps a lot], but it’s all what you make of it.”

After more than a year of round-the-clock operations, the closeness of home and the comforts it brings are something Iron Brigade Soldiers can almost taste. Leave request forms are piling up on the desks of company commanders across the brigade as anxious troops think of home more than ever.

“I’ll be honest, the number-one thing I miss is the weekends,” said Davis with a laugh. “Being able to take two days off and just have it down and relax. Yeah, we get four hours off on Sunday, but we work seven days a week, so just being able to have time to relax and chill is what I miss the most.”

“I’m looking forward to spending time with my wife. And my daughter, she was born while I was out here, so it’ll be good to get to know her,” said Niehuus.

“Just relaxing and taking it easy, and I’d like to do some travelling around Europe.”

(Sgt. Daniel J. Nichols of the U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office is currently completing a deployment with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division.)

