127th MPs near home stretch of Iraq mission

Soldiers train, support Iraqi Police, take out insurgents in Baghdad

By David Ruderman
104th Area Support Group Public Affairs Office

If elections for a national assembly to draft an Iraqi constitution went off with less violence than feared Jan. 30, it was due in large part to the hard work of American Soldiers on the ground, among them Hanau's 127th Military Police Company, training Iraqi Police units to keep the peace, said Capt. Erik S. Archer, the company's former executive officer.

"The IPs did a great job learning to check vehicles, do cordon and searches. The Soldiers take that to heart. They know if the United States is going to get out, if Iraq is going to become a self-sustaining and free society, it's going to be up to Iraqi Police," he said.

"I think the IPs have been given an incredibly difficult job. They have to make friends with the Soldiers and with the public and fight a determined enemy. Imagine telling a police station chief back home that in 30 minutes his station is going to be attacked by insurgents with rocket propelled grenades – IPs bravely fight that fight. It's a fight our police officers in the United States would struggle with.

"The election is another step in the right direction," said Archer, noting that 127th Soldiers were on the streets more than ever to show their presence and reinforce a sense of control leading up to the vote. "The company has been surging in the area lately to show the Iraqis we're there to safeguard them. That's fairly routine."

The company left Hanau last April and flew to Kuwait, where they qualified on their weapons, tweaked their gear and then flew directly into Baghdad, saving the Soldiers the perils and discomforts of an overland convoy, said Archer, who returned to Hanau in December to work for the 709th MP Battalion.

"We're stationed at FOB Falcon, but we're responsible for IP [Iraqi Police] stations all over West Baghdad," said Archer. "That went from about 12 at the beginning to about 28 now. Our sector grew vastly in size." That was because of the changing missions and relocations of other units working in the capital, he said.

Like many Iraq veterans, Archer said the media are missing the story in Iraq, focusing on the evils of the insurgency and missing the less sensational developments that are inching the country of 26 million toward stability.

"It's like a plane crash. The insurgent attacks are publicized, and the whole world hears about it. We defeat them soundly whenever we fight them though. I would say they're successful in getting media attention when the real focus should be on the Iraqi people."

Photo by Sgt. Cole Kimzey

Members of the 127th MP Company conduct a walking patrol through the al-Shoula neighborhood market.

Archer said 127th MPs worked intimately with their Iraqi colleagues to bring them up to speed on fulfilling their vital role in the emerging society.

"The IPs are as passionate in their jobs as we are. It's especially real for the IPs and the Soldiers working together everyday … we get attacked and fired on together. We're working together to defend their country. Those guys do the same mission we do, but without armored vehicles, with out the type of body armor we have, and they have to go home at night. We sleep inside the wire at night, but the IPs are prone to attack around the clock," he said.

"They come to work in cabs and cover their faces and stuff," said Spc. Vena Wagner, a 2nd Platoon Hellraiser. "I saw a lot of crazy stuff down there. What shocked me most was the way people lived, what they did day to day. It was just a different lifestyle than what we're accustomed to, living in the States and then coming over here to Germany, then seeing how they build houses out of anything they can find."

Wagner's husband, Sgt. Dustin Wagner, is with the company in Baghdad. She is back in Hanau on medical leave, pregnant and expecting their first child, a girl, in June.

"It was quite an experience just being over there and learning about the culture. One of our interpreters used to talk a lot about the different cultures and religions. They're not all the same. I didn't know anything about it, but I learned a lot just being down there and talking with our interpreters. They were educated," she said.

Watching the IPs learn and grow

"We went out everyday to the IP stations. We'd work with the IPs to make sure things were OK, listen to their concerns. We'd go out on patrol, set up checkpoints and see if anything was out of the ordinary. If the IPs needed help we'd help them, but mostly we let them do everything so they could learn the job. The IPs came along slowly. From the time I first started to when I left, I saw a big change. Some of them are trying to learn what to do and improve their country," said Wagner.

"There are some people who don't want you there, who would like the Americans to leave because they're scared," said Archer. "But there are a lot of people who want a better Iraq and they want you there. We'd make an effort to make a friendly gesture, to say a-sala'am aleikum, to let them know we're not there as occupiers. We have the same long term goal — a peaceful Iraq. It's going to take a lot of joint effort and take a lot of time."

Archer described the experience of distributing crayons and Etch a Sketch drawing pads to Iraqi children. Some who had never seen a crayon before tried eating them, thinking they were candy.

"I hope it gets better for the kids coming up down there, for their future," said Wagner.

The 127th has been covering a huge swath of territory, all of West Baghdad north of the airport road. And it is a war zone. The governor of Baghdad Province and the police chief were both recently assassinated. Archer described an Aug. 13 attack on the al-Shoula Police Station that 127th MP Soldiers repulsed.

"The station was attacked by about 60 insurgents all dressed in black. It was like out of a movie. There was just wave after wave of heavily armed insurgents and they were firing mortars from behind one of the buildings."

Sgt. 1st Class Jimmy Stogner, platoon sergeant with the 127th's 1st Platoon, organized the defense of the station that repulsed the attack. He received the Bronze Star with Valor for his actions.

Photo by Capt. Erik S. Archer

Sgt. Cole Kimzey hands a beenie baby to an Iraqi family squatting in a bombed out remnant of a building near Abu Ghraib, Baghdad.

Photo by Capt. Erik S. Archer

Staff Sgt. Thomas Roth (left) and Sgt. Alfredo Armenteros pull security on the roof of al-Shoula police station.

"MPs usually don't fight like that," said Archer. "The Soldiers fired hundreds and hundreds of rounds. It was a long, sustained fight for the MPs — and they soundly defeated the enemy, they just tore them up. The MPs can walk with their infantry brothers and hold their heads up high because they've seen the elephant."

"We got there kind of in the middle of it," said Sgt. Cole Kimzey, who served as company commander Capt. Kevin Hanrahan's driver in Baghdad. "Just arriving on the scene is something I'll never forget. It was like out of a movie: the burning tires and vehicles and chaos. The gunfire — I didn't really even pay attention to. I was just running around, staying by the commander's side, providing security. I didn't even do any firing. The main thing I remember was the heat. I was just surprised how relaxed the atmosphere was through the whole time. People were just walking around cracking jokes while a firefight was going on."

Kimzey returned to Germany on medical leave in mid-November. While the doctors tried to determine whether he could rejoin the 127th downrange, he assisted with office work in the meantime. "It's a big change of pace for me. It's been driving me insane. That's the hardest part of being back," he said. Since then Kimzey re-deployed to Baghdad and rejoined the 127th Military Police Company.

The deployment has been challenging, and Soldiers have drawn strength from one another to cope with it, said Archer.

"The Soldiers go out everyday, and they're still their goofy, old selves. We all live in one building; it's like a big family there. You come home and there's a whole bunch of Soldiers playing Halo and talking trash, a whole bunch of Soldiers at the Internet cafe, emailing home. That family atmosphere is extremely helpful, being able to joke with your buddies, talk it out, de-stress every day."

"We saw each other all the time," said Wagner. "They'd play X-box all the time. On a day off we'd go down there and watch movies and clean our weapons."

"The thing about our rotation is it's much more comfortable than OIF I, but it's much more dangerous: that's the trade-off. We get hit with mortars and rockets routinely, but every night we are able to unwind and ease the stress away with a game of Halo or with a phone call home," said Archer.

"It's not a normal war. I think the experience matures Soldiers. You come back with a higher understanding of the valuable things in life: family, friends, and a good German beer," he said. " It helps you appreciate each other. Those guys down there are doing an incredible job. Their family members should be proud of them because they're really making a difference in the Iraqis' lives. And they'll be home soon."

When they return the Soldiers will have a little something extra to brag about, said Archer. "The 127th MPs were named the most outstanding MP company in the Army's Central Command area of operations by a board of MP command sergeants major and brigade commanders," he said.

'I miss those guys'

"I'm glad to be back with my wife. I missed her and she's number one in my life, but I miss those guys," said Archer. "I email them as much as I can without harassing them. I watch the news, and if something happens, I know that's our sector, and I email them. Now I know what it's like being a spouse. I can't wait till they get home."

The 127th is scheduled to return to Hanau in the late spring, though as everyone knows, no date is chiseled in stone. Anything could happen to extend their deployment, but when they do return they will have something to be proud of for the rest of their lives, said Archer.

"I leave Iraq with complete respect and awe for the Soldiers of the 127th Military Police Company and the American Soldier as a whole. We could never have imagined what we saw and did there. In my eight months the Soldiers never fired a round that didn't need to be fired, and they never treated an Iraqi without respect. Every single Soldier saddled up and did what needed to be done," he said.

"I'll always remember the Soldiers: more than the Iraqi people, more than the heat, the stench and the violence. I'll remember the Soldiers. I couldn't have imagined the caliber of the American Soldier: the might, the power and the professionalism."

MP memorialized . . . . . .

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former senior noncommissioned officer of Hanau's 709th MP Battalion. Paff is now with the 14th MP Brigade at Fort Leonard Wood, where incoming MPs undergo their basic training.

"Once we lost Rachel we built a small arms range and dedicated it to her, but we knew that may go away," said Sgt. 1st Class David W. Gilchrist, Bosveld's platoon sergeant. That's when he got the idea of dedicating a classroom in her memory and suggested it to Paff."

"I'm going to try to name several classrooms for Soldiers that meet the criteria — somebody not so long out of training, like Rachel," said Paff.

"Rachel signed up under the delayed entry program as a junior in high school, entering the Army right after graduation," said her father, Marvin Bosveld. "I remember her coming home from school one day saying that she was going to enlist in the Army. Of course I had lots of questions, but as a strong willed girl she had all the answers. I encouraged her to talk with her brother, but again she had all the answers.

"After her testing she wanted to be Military Police. She then had lots of dreams and hopes to one day work for the Secret Service guarding our president. All the way through her training in Fort Leonard Wood she was proud to be an MP, being able to kick some butt and not letting her being a female stop her," he said.

Bosveld joined the 527th's 2nd Platoon in November 2002, just as the company was preparing for a possible deployment to Kuwait in the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, which took place the following March.

"She was quiet and soft spoken," said Gilchrist. "She learned quickly and began to integrate into her team. She'd been briefed about the deployment on her first night in Giessen. Like her fellow Soldiers she was apprehensive, but ready to go. She said she would do her best."

Bosveld trained as an M-1114, up-armored HMMWV, driver and flew to Kuwait with the 527th March 2, 2003. On March 20 the company moved toward the Iraqi border.

"During the convoy north her squad was selected to escort and secure a convoy of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to an area 100 miles south of Baghdad," said Gilchrist. "After moving 380 miles across hostile territory the squad provided 24-hour security on a small airstrip near Najaf, allowing the UAV crews to complete their mission of gathering vital information for V Corps."

The squad completed that mission and linked up with 2nd Platoon at Tallil Air Base April 5 where they began executing convoy escort missions, moving 25 to 100 vehicles at a time toward Baghdad, said Gilchrist. That meant up to 12 hours at a time on the road. Bosveld's squad escorted over 600 vehicles without loss to enemy action.

Her platoon moved to Tikrit April 24 and on to Baghdad May 2, where the MPs began reorganizing and training Iraqi Police forces. "Her unit was later assigned to provide support and force protection at the Abu Ghraib Police Station, which is in one of the poorest suburbs of Baghdad," said Gilchrist.

"We put security teams in each one of the stations. Rachel had a couch down there and spent a lot of time hanging out with fellow Soldiers," said Paff.

That's where Bosveld struck up a friendship with Sgt. James Arntz. Then a specialist, Arntz was the driver for 1st Platoon. "We met a couple of times in Germany, but we were not on very good terms. She didn't think too highly of me," he said.

But Baghdad changed all that. Bosveld and Arntz started talking, developing a relationship that continued to grow until her death. "We talked a lot. We became very close. We'd talk for hours. She wasn't worried about things. She didn't want to get out. She was happy," he said.

Despite the increasingly hostile situation Bosveld stayed gung-ho until her vehicle was hit by an RPG while on a joint patrol with Iraqi Police Sept. 12. The vehicle burned while Bosveld, Sgt. Jimmy Thorne and Pfc. Bagby struggled to get out. Bosveld injured her back breaking open her door so they could escape. She took five days off to recover, was cited for the Purple Heart and went back to work.

After the close call Bosveld talked more about getting out of the Army and started counting the days until the 527th could leave Iraq, said Arntz. "She went there with a purpose; she wanted to help people," he said. "After she got hit we talked a lot. She got shook up. She didn't want to go back to Abu Ghraib. After that it was never 'when we get back,' it was 'if we get back.'"

Photo courtesy of Sgt. 1st Class David W. Gilchrist

Members of the 527th MP Company dedicate a firing range in Baghdad in memory of Pfc. Rachel Bosveld.

Bosveld never made it. She was killed in a mortar attack on Abu Ghraib Police Station Oct. 26. She was sitting in her armored HMMWV with Sgt. Shawn Monroe and Pfc. Christopher Busby when the vehicle took a direct hit. Bosveld was killed and Monroe and Busby were severely injured.

Her death was a blow to everyone who knew her, her family and her fellow MPs.

"It was very sobering," said Arntz. "I'd say I lost it. Everybody was very subdued because you always knew it was possible, but you didn't think it would happen, and that she'd be the last one. It's always the nice people who go first."

Bosveld loved to draw and paint, had been enthusiastic about theater and played the violin, and a life's worth of dreams died with her, said Arntz. "She had all kinds of options she could have done. She wanted to direct movies. She did so much."

Bosveld's death changed Arntz's dreams as well, he said. Up until the time of her death he was tending toward leaving the Army. Over a year later he's planning on transferring to Special Forces.

Naming the classroom in her memory will underscore the Bosveld family's enduring connection to the military.

"Her older brother was in the Army with the infantry, stationed in Fairbanks, Alaska," said Marvin Bosveld. "After leaving the Army he went to the University of Fairbanks, graduating with a forestry degree in 2002. He has now just reentered the Army. Craig is currently in the Officer Basic Course in Fort Benning, Ga. Craig's wife Mary Lou is a lieutenant with the Wisconsin National Guard as a Military Policewoman. Her unit is waiting to be called to active duty.

"Rachel's step-brother is serving with the Marines. Aaron and Rachel were the same age. Rachel was killed in October [2003], and Aaron left for Iraq in February [2004] leaving behind a pregnant wife and a grieving family. He has returned home safely to a new daughter and a very relieved family," he said.

"I feel that all young men and women should serve in the military for a period of time. We live in a free country, and with their service they would treasure that freedom. I was drafted into the Army in 1967. Aaron's father, uncle and cousin all served or are serving in the Marine Corps. Jamie, our 15-year-old is thinking about serving in the Air Force after graduation. You can tell the value of the military has had and is still having on our family. We enjoy our freedom."

"Soldiers probably wouldn't be able to understand that, why it would be named for her," said Arntz. "Maybe they'll come to appreciate it after they've been there. I hope it works with the classroom. It needs to be done. I just hope they do it right."

"If I had to choose which Army value she exemplified most, it would be Selfless Service," said Gilchrist. "She gave more to her country and her fellow Soldiers than she asked in return."

"All gave some, but one gave her all," said her father.