

Looking back on Iraq

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Chicago, Ill., an automotive maintenance specialist. Green had been in Germany for four and a half months before deploying to the Gulf in February of last year. "We had individuals leave earlier to get stuff set up before the company got there."

The major body of the company left Germany in February and was in Kuwait when the invasion started in March, he said.

"We were scattered all over," said Spc. Justin Cloutman, 22, from Phoenix, Ariz., also an automotive maintenance specialist.

"We were basically supporting a whole lot of people," said Green, "all the way from Doha [Qatar] all the way up to Tikrit."

"It was an experience," said Cloutman. "They tried to brief us as well as they could on what to expect when approaching the border [with Iraq]. They all did a pretty good job. We all had a good idea of what to expect."

Soldiers saw the trail of the invasion that had gone before them — "a bunch of blown up vehicles, the aftermath pretty much," said Cloutman. "Anything broken, we tried to fix it or recover it. They'd give us 24 hours to fix it; if not we'd tow it."

They didn't see much of the Iraqi army as they headed north.

"To a point what they did was blend in with the civilians," said Spc. Mark Shene, 24, from Brooklyn, New York, a construction maintenance engineer.

"When we came over the border and set up camp at Camp Cedar, we were just mainly supporting troops that were moving farther ahead, who were passing us by," said Green. "Whatever they needed, anything minor, we'd just jump on it and fix it, keep them rolling."

Cedar was in the middle of nowhere, said Shene.

"It was in the middle of a dust bowl," said Cloutman. "The closest thing was an on and off ramp that led nowhere."

Most of the company spent about six weeks at Cedar, but many of the Soldiers were detailed for other missions.

"I was on Camp Dodge," said Shene. "We were doing permanent guard duty for a refueling station. We saw a little action there." Hanau's 26th Quartermaster Supply Company ran the refueling operation, he said. "Every convoy that was going up to Baghdad would refuel there, and we'd be their protectors."

Cloutman was assigned to a Movement Control Team that directed convoys along the road network, pointing them in the right direction and keeping them away from potential danger.

"It was like they came in through Cedar, fixed whatever they had broken, and then they'd come up through these guys, and they'd show them where Dodge was, lead them to the refueling point," said Green.

"There was some kind of Iraqi protest, they had a giant march or something going on along the back roads they had to be watchful for," said Cloutman.

What he and his fellow Soldiers saw were hordes of Shiite faithful making pilgrimages to Karbala to mark the anniversary of the death of Mohammed's grandson Hussein, an annual event that had been suppressed for decades by the Baathist regime.

"They were all over the place," said Shene. "It was the first action I saw out there, so it was kind of a surprise. We just took it as it came."

"We tried counting them, but we couldn't," said Cloutman.

That was in late April. As the summer came on full force the Soldiers also faced increased danger from Iraqi resistance fighters.

"Everywhere was pretty much hot, both in terms of the heat and enemy fire," said Green. "It was a little more tricky at Cedar because it was farther south so you wouldn't see an individual with an AK-47 strapped to his back. You saw them more likely because we pulled guard duty and there was a main road. That's where you'd see some Iraqis trying to do unscrupulous stuff. They were trying to smuggle stuff through."

The bulk of the company stayed in Logistical Support Area Cedar for about six weeks. From there they moved to Camp Dogwood.

"And set up shop operations," said Green. He spent most of the time working on the 150 or more trucks that passed through the company's hands for repair.

Being a construction equipment specialist, Shene spent most of his time on the road. "My MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] wasn't really needed out there, so I was put on every gun truck mission there was. I was out there on the roads, bringing convoys from one place to another, sitting up on the back of a deuce [a two-ton truck] with a 50-caliber. You sit on the back of a truck, just keep your eyes open, stay aware, having to wear full gear. It was not fun."

"[It was] getting toasted in about 130 degrees," said Green. "Being in a gun truck, say from Dogwood to Doha and back again, that was an experience you'll never forget."

"Being a gunner was rough," said Cloutman. "Sometimes you'd leave at six in the morning, get up around dawn and not get back till before sundown — or not back. You'd stay the night out wherever you went."

Most of the company dug in at Dogwood for about five months, but Cloutman was tapped after about three months to ride as a gunner on mail escort missions from Baghdad International Airport to units around the country. Armed confrontations on the road were just a part of everyday life, he said.

"Usually everyday something would happen. They had us broken down into teams. If you went out that day you'd run into an IED [Improvised Explosive Device] or small arms fire."

"Chances are whenever you go on the road you get into an encounter with somebody," said Green.

Was there more hostile fire toward the end of their tour than in the beginning?

"It's been heavy the whole time," said Shene. "There was just as much. They just make more media coverage of it now." "And they've been learning about where we're going," said Cloutman.

"[They've been figuring out] our convoy routes," said Shene.

Cloutman was wounded twice while on the road. The first time was on a mail escort mission from BIAP.

"We were sent to Fallujah ... and we didn't know about the road we'd be taking. It was the first time there for us," he said. But the Iraqi fighters were at home and they knew how to pick their ambushes.

"There was nothing there," said Cloutman. "The road was real narrow so you couldn't turn around at all, just back up or go forward. They disabled our first vehicle with two IEDs, and I got my Kevlar shattered and the plate in the front of my vest was shattered. One IED went off on the front driver's side, and the second one went off on the rear driver's side. That's the one that blew me out of the vehicle. I was in the back of a five-ton truck and I was blown through the vehicle." He took shrapnel wounds to his arm and his leg was banged up, he said.

"But everybody did what they were supposed to do, everybody was on point," said Cloutman. "We had a good group of Soldiers out there. Everybody did exactly what they

were supposed to do."

"That's probably what you noticed a lot when we were in Iraq," said Green. "Everyone would try, like in the work environment, they'd be a little more relaxed, but as soon as any encounters happen you'd see everyone pull their Soldier face back on and pull together and just make the mission happen."

Cloutman was treated on the spot and carried on with the mission.

"They took out as much as they could. They had a pretty good little FAST [Forward Surgical] team out in the middle of the desert. I was a little bit shaken up, but we had civilians with us [Brown and Root contractors] and we had to keep them under control; we had to take care of them." He was operated on again once he returned to Germany and expected to undergo additional surgery to remove more shrapnel from his arm.

As maintenance specialists, had they been trained for these combat encounters?

"Negative," said Shene. "You learn quick though because most of it is common sense."

"As far as close calls, the closest I ever came was just seeing an RPG blow by the vehicle," said Green. "I never got hit because I've only been out about 110 times," he said with self-deprecating humor.

Green related the little rap ditty he came up with while working in the field.

*"We ain't going home
We ain't never going home
No, we ain't ever never going home ..."*

Cloutman knew the tune and chimed right in.

They both described how Soldiers would watch scorpions and camel spiders fight to relieve the boredom of daily life in the wastes of Iraq.

"It's something that you'd like to forget about, you know," said Shene. "I'd go back for the money, but as for the experience — no. I'm finished with it."

"I'll definitely be back," said Cloutman. He expected to return as early as next summer when he moves on to an assignment with the 10th Mountain Division.

In addition to the tension and the boredom, there were other difficulties to overcome as well at Camp Dogwood.

"Sand," said Cloutman. "Sand was getting everybody — extra minerals with your food. It was pretty messed up. Dogwood sucked," he said.

"Dogwood was nothing but sand, and you'd get mortared every night, attacked every night without fail, whether it be small arms fire or mortar rounds, you're always getting attacked," said Shene.

Attacks on convoys

Convoys en route to Dogwood planned on being shot at too, they said.

"I did guard duty at the main entrance to Dogwood," said Green. "They'll just stay out there and just wait for convoys to come in. You'll see trucks coming in with holes in them and blown off tires, and they'll tell you, 'We just got attacked just down the street.'"

"They like to hit the last vehicle," said Cloutman. "The first or the last," said Green.

"They think it's the weakest," said Cloutman. Shene had his own experience of being attacked on the roads. Iraqi fighters ambushed the lead HMMWV in a convoy he was on, hitting it with an RPG attack from an overpass on the main road. "We looked up there and there were two Iraqi guys up there," he said. The firefight didn't last long once the Americans responded.

"The Iraqis that attack us have no interest in living," said Shene. "Because we'll go out there, well, if not us, another company, attack, really attack them, do twice as much to them



Spc. Taunon Q. Warren (from left), Spc. Jarmine Tubbs and Sgt. Leon Carby look on as Spc. Sean Johnson gives Sgt. James Pollard an Operation Iraqi Freedom haircut during the 10-month deployment of 77th Maintenance Company to Kuwait and Iraq.

Photo courtesy of 77th Maintenance Company

as they did to us, and they still keep coming back for more. Regardless of what they stand for, they keep coming and coming back."

"Their aim is just to hurt somebody," said Green. "If you do hit anyone, you know that we're going to return fire, like what, about 50 times the power they've got. Their mission is just hurt, disable, scavenge, whatever. They don't really seem to care about their lives."

"Usually the ones that pop up, like when we got hit with that RPG, are all suicide missions, because there's no place they can run," said Shene.

"I think the attacks are getting worse, getting more frequent," said Cloutman. "You can almost set your watch to them now. The Third ID and whoever's out there now, they're doing their best. We have a lot of patrols out there now. I suppose they're catching a lot of people."

Shene said morale at Camp Dogwood was low in the beginning. "We had no phones. We barely had Internet usage. That came way after. We had no PX, no shoppette, no nothing. We were depending on family members to send us packages, but the mail was messed up. You'd get a package every once in a while. We did everything on our own."

"It got better after a while," said Cloutman.

"Everything got better after a while. Almost everything got better. It was slow," said Green.

Iraqi cigarettes in particular were low on the totem pole of favored consumer products for Soldiers in the field.

"They are disgusting," said Shene. "They're like smoking hay," said Cloutman.

There were other matters to cope with as well.

"It's definitely a rude awakening whenever you find

yourself transporting bodies," said Green. "Then you have to suddenly realize just exactly where you are and what you're doing. I ended up being placed on that mission a couple of times — mortuary affairs — transporting bodies up to BIAP for shipment."

None of the three expressed a need to talk to a professional about their experiences, though they noted they had all been offered the opportunity to meet with a chaplain or a counselor.

"If you do talk to them they'll probably take it further," said Green. "It wasn't that dramatic. It wasn't like you were seeing blood or anything around. At least from my point of view, I won't be having any nightmares, but it's a rude awakening when you're transporting a deceased from the same armed forces as you're assigned to."

In that respect 77th Maintenance was lucky. No one in the company was killed while in Iraq, though there were two fatalities in their parent unit, the 485th Corps Support Battalion.

A number of Soldiers were injured and evacuated, and one Soldier was redeployed because he couldn't handle the stress, according to 1st Lt. Linwood Hilton, the company's Hanau Detachment Officer in Charge.

"A lot were injuries, on-the-job injuries," said Shene. "I'd say probably about 15."

From Dogwood the company moved most of its Soldiers to Taji, near Balad. It was the beginning of their redeployment to Germany.

"We had a mission to go up to Taji to set up camp," said Shene.

"Another mortar magnet," said Cloutman. "Wherever there's a concentrated area where Soldiers are for two weeks, you get mortared," said Green. "From where? You don't know."

"Then we got orders to redeploy," said Shene. "The people who weren't out there as long as everybody else got to stay in Taji, and the rest redeployed to Kuwait."

The notice that they'd be redeploying got Soldiers moving, they said.

"People got going quick and fast," said Shene. "Once

everybody hears you're leaving, people just get an extra burst of energy."

"Like the Energizer Bunny," said Green. "The lazy people got un-lazy," said Cloutman.

Then it was time to leave and things couldn't happen fast enough. The company convoyed for over 24 hours to make the trip from Taji back to Kuwait.

"We kept driving and driving," said Green. "There were a couple of incidents, and then a truck broke down. People were trying to come to your truck and you don't know what their objective is."

Mostly they were children waving to the American Soldiers and motioning for them to throw them food.

"Those kids wave at you, then throw rocks," said Cloutman. "Or dead animals."

"It's like they're waving and they're expecting something," said Green. "Actually there was fun stuff that happened sometimes."

"It's not fun, but it's funny afterwards," said Shene. "But the unit pulled together pretty well under the circumstances," said Cloutman.

What have they been up to since returning to Germany?

"Getting away from each other," said Green. "I'm concentrating on trying to get a normal lifestyle back together," said Cloutman, "not staying up through the night, getting reacquainted with the family, remembering stuff we did before, trying to learn how to do it again."

All three have done some thinking about their careers in light of their experiences.

"I've got a family," said Shene. "It's not good to be away from your family, your children, that long, especially when you have young children, because it's not good to come home and not have them remember who you are. If I were single, yes, I'd probably do it again, but with a family, no."

Shene was awarded an Army Commendation medal for his actions in Iraq.

"The family thing sucks," said Cloutman. "But for me it was a pretty good experience. I learned a lot." He was awarded the Purple Heart for being wounded in action.

"It probably made me look at the world and life in a different perspective," said Green, "how people live over there and how we live in the United States, in a first world country. I probably won't take things as lightly, probably save a little more, give a little more. But as for staying in the Army for 20 years, that wasn't my objective."

"My wife is in the military, so she understands it," said Cloutman. "I wouldn't volunteer, but I'd go if they asked me to. I have a daughter now so I'd like to be around for her." His wife Chanti gave birth to their daughter Hope about three hours before he left in February. "It's a pretty good name for wartime," he said.

Two-month-old daughter

Shene's daughter Madison is now two months old. His wife Rachel returned to her parents' home in upstate New York to have the baby while he was deployed. "I sent her back home to the States because I didn't feel it was right for her to be here pregnant with no one to look after her," said Shene.

All of the Soldiers had three weeks of leave ahead of them and various plans for what to do with the down time.

"It'll be three weeks of nonstop having fun," said Green. "I'll be going home to the sunny island of Jamaica. That's where I was born so I've got to go back there. It's not that hot though — only about 80 degrees."

Shene planned to take his family home to the United States for a week.

"It won't hurt my feelings at all to stay at home," said Cloutman.

When they return from leave 77th Maintenance Soldiers will go through the process of pulling back together as a unit and getting on with their mission, said Hilton, the detachment OIC.

The shared experience of fighting together in Iraq will leave a lasting impression, he said. "We all got a little bit closer. The whole unit cohesion thing should last. There were a lot of new bonds. You're all pretty much roommates while you're down there, so it improved everyone's social skills."

"A lot of people look at it in comparison to Vietnam and all that, but it's not like that," said Hilton. "It's not as high risk, as combat intensive. Everyone who left came back. Cloutman was the only one really wounded. We were really lucky."