

Working Postal Operations

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Abstract

MSG James' assignment with the 741st AG Co, Orlando, FL, indicated Platoon Sergeant; but performed primary duties of Training NCO and other functions as required. Her story tells of continuous Army Reserve postal units' participation in various exercises and campaigns with training at APOs in Germany, Italy and Korea. As mobilization NCO, MSG James prepared postal Soldiers for deployment to Kosovo, Bosnia and Afghanistan. Additionally, she spearheaded a coordinated humanitarian goods movement from Orlando to the Special Institute at Demir Kapija, Kosovo, the Missions of Charity (Mother Theresa society) and the Skopje School for the Blind. Her story tells of obstacles of running postal operations during campaigns and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) I at APOs and the theater directorate level.

The 741st Adjutant General Company (DS) was a direct support postal unit located in Orlando, FL. The unit consisted of three fulltime support personnel with two of the three serving in Active Guard Reserve (AGR) positions and one dual status military technician along with 56 troop program members. MSG James was originally assigned to the 741st AG Co in the summer of 1999 as SFC James to what she thought was an admin company with a very limited mission. MSG James thought she would finally get an opportunity to acquire additional college credits which she had been longing to do. Those thoughts soon vanished when she attended the postal operations and supervisors' courses in shortly after her arrival. An alert to deploy 26 personnel to Kosovo immediately followed the completion of her postal course work. This alert also started her on an additional path of mobilization NCO for postal platoons under the command and control (C2) of the 3rd Personnel Command (PERSCOM) located in Jackson, MS, while maintaining her duties within the 741st. In this area, MSG James worked with the 3rd PERSCOM mobilization team and the 1st PERSCOM Postal Directorate in Germany to ensure a smooth transition for the deploying platoons.

The postal companies' structure consisted of three 18-man postal platoons and a 5-man headquarters for the conduct of the day-to-day postal operations of an APO. Each postal platoon performs postal operations and postal financial services as separate elements with distinct unit identification codes (UICs). Postal units conduct postal operations to provide a postal network for mail receipt, movement, delivery, collections and dispatch. The units also performed postal financial services with money orders and stamp sales in theater to support the area of operations at various APOs. Additionally, the postal platoons conducted the testing and certifying of unit mail clerks for various units within their assigned area of operations.

The members of the 741st successfully completed all of the required training for the Kosovo mission and deployed to the Balkans in 2000 where they split up and were assigned at two different base camps. After a short while of being in country, one of the soldiers started working as a weekly volunteer with the base Chaplain who organized a support group to work with the Special Institute at Demir Kapija that housed physically or mentally handicapped adults and children. This soldier who worked for Disney communicated her concerns for assistance to friends and co-workers. She also managed to convince other unit members to volunteer their one day a week of spare time. Her concerns lead to evening

phone calls and emails to MSG James requesting assistance in mailing a "few" medium size boxes of goods provided by Disney employees to her in Kosovo. MSG James casually said yes since her thoughts were it would be no more than 6 or 7 medium size boxes. Unfortunately or should we say fortunately, her thoughts were wrong; but this would be a small endeavor compared to the unit's Soldiers' 270-day mission—so how dare she say no. Well, their concerns grew along with those of another Soldier who worked for Sears in Orlando. This Soldier included her husband and Sears co-workers in her endeavor of good will. Their concern for the less fortunate and those of the Disney and Sears' co-workers actually grew to more than 15,000 pounds of merchandise and medical supplies—so much for the medium size boxes.

The next question would be what military system is in place that would take care of the movement of the donated items? All that was needed was to have the goods delivered to a military installation with a flight line, and the goods could be flown OCONUS—wrong. The Department of Defense (DOD) system in place that supported such a task included a process which required a minimum timeline of 60-90 days. Unfortunately, the Chaplain had already informed the Base Commander in Kosovo and the directing staff of the institute of the generosity of the volunteer soldiers' co-workers and the wonderful Training NCO who was arranging the transportation of the donated goods. Everyone anxiously awaited the announcement of the shipment of the merchandise. No announcement came. The significant challenge and concerns grew after weeks and weeks of no movement and storage space became problematic. In the meantime, the Disney soldier had been invited along with the Chaplain to the Embassy in Kosovo for tea because of her efforts. However, the problem of shipping the merchandise continued to grow. Just as hope seemed to dim after a couple of months of no success, a return phone call was received from an astute individual who preferred to remain in the shadows of the Pentagon. This individual provided MSG James with the name of an international company located in Portland, OR, that may be able to provide assistance—funding, customs, storage and expected date of arrival were "huge" issues. After obtaining the information, MSG James was informed that all I had to do was to convince the company to assist her in her endeavor of getting the goods shipped.

It took a few more weeks, several phone calls and conversations before reaching an extremely generous company representative who informed MSG James that they too had offices in the Balkins and

would gladly assist our Soldiers. The company only requested the sharing of the merchandise with other organizations such as the Missions of Charity (Mother Theresa society) and the Skopje School for the Blind and the delivery of the goods to a port in South Carolina. I readily agreed. Getting ground transportation started to appear to be as hard as getting the items overseas. Fortunately, the same generous company representative agreed to have everything shipped from Orlando to the Balkins with the entire costs bolstered by the gracious international organization. The soldiers' themselves found a "mission within a mission," they took the initiative and went well above the normal responsibilities of their military duties and involved their co-workers from their civilian workplace in an act of great generosity. Three of the five deployed soldiers who volunteered at the institute received the Humanitarian Service Medal for their efforts; and during a training mission in Germany, MSG James obtained permission along with her commander to visit Kosovo and the Special Institute at Demir Kapija. Though the unit's personnel had completed their postal mission, another shipment of goods destined for the institute occupied the minds those who previously took part in the earlier efforts as the 741st returned home in February 2001.

Postal unit soldiers continuously embrace the fact of being away from family and friends due to deployments for up to 270 days. A short time after the return of the 741st Soldiers from Kosovo, MSG James then prepared 30 personnel for a platoon plus element of personnel from the 912th AG Co, Orlando, FL, for a deployment to Bosnia. An even shorter time later, she prepared a platoon from the 342nd AG Co, Athens GA, for Bosnia thence a platoon from the 351st AG Co, Miami, FL, to Afghanistan.

Due to MSG James' many hats while performing her normal day-to-day tasks, the many changes and challenges faced when the entire company of the 741st was alerted was second nature. The alert for possible deployment for the Global War on Terrorism in January 2003 appeared to be business as usual as with most postal personnel. The 2nd Platoon received notification for deployment at the end of January and deployed 11 February 2003 with movement to the mob site, Ft Stewart, on 15 February. The unit remained at the mob site, Ft Stewart, for two months before moving forward to Kuwait.

The remainder of the unit received orders for mobilization on 1 March 2003 with a home-station date of 15 March and a forward movement date of 18 March to Ft Stewart. The unit's movement changed from Fort Stewart to Fort Rucker just a few days prior 18 March. A major shortage of junior

officers caused MSG James' initial assignment to be validated by the Regional Support Command's Commanding General as a platoon leader; because of cross-leveled officers, she then became an operations NCO. A short time later, her status changed yet again to that of unit historian. As a result of the start of the war, two months would pass before the unit would move forward to perform their mission at various camps in Kuwait.

The remaining elements of the 741st arrived in Kuwait at 0125 and moved to Camp Wolf for processing and holding until assignment orders were received for our mission. Two days later the unit's two postal platoons and headquarters element received orders to move to Camp Pennsylvania, Kuwait. While awaiting arrival of unit equipment, the unit learned that because of the need for force protection and camp personnel shortage, postal personnel would provide duty as guards and Sergeants of the Guards. Based on the assessment of the previous night's guard duty, the unit's leadership addressed concerns with the Camp Mayor's Cell. The concerns included the perception of sexual harassment, the careless attitude of guards, the lack of proper briefings, and the concern about female soldiers being lone escorts with foreigners who appeared not to follow their orders in a country where treatment toward female soldiers differed from that of the male soldiers. The solution was for all first sergeants to continue to ensure zero tolerance of sexual harassment was being stressed to all soldiers. It was also stressed that all soldiers receive the rules of engagement (ROE) for their respective areas of assignment. Additional training to soldiers in reference to the rules of engagement, search procedures, and a few additional measures of protection for this region would start immediately. The Camp's leadership stressed all soldiers needed to use hand signals and movement of weapons at times to ensure that the individuals requiring inspection, guarding or escorting understands stop and no means just that. The postal supervisors and platoon sergeants provided additional safety briefings with their soldiers, and the 1SG reiterated to all soldiers the ROEs and soldier safety. Other than the usual sand fleas, scorpions, snakes, spiders, etc., things seem to be going fairly well for all while awaiting the assignment of an APO number to fully function as a self-sustaining APO.

After notifying the Pennsylvania Camp Mayor's Cell of the permanently reduced number of personnel assigned to operate the APO, an agreement resulted indicating that unit's personnel would no longer pull guard duty or trash detail until farther notice. After inspecting the unit's equipment and

contacting the HAZMAT team for Camp Pennsylvania, the soldiers drained and disposed of over 50 gallons of contaminated hydraulic fluid from the 10K forklift. Shortly after becoming fully operational, the Camp Pennsylvania APO received eleven milvans of undelivered mail for 3rd ID soldiers for sorting and delivery. Upon further inquiry, it appeared that five of the eleven milvans were empty; but an AR 15-6 investigation occurred with the results unknown by the 741st.

Numerous changes occurred throughout the deployment for all of the members of the 741st. The headquarters element originally assigned to Camp Pennsylvania after various reassignments and cancellations provided C2 to all of the APOs at the northern camps to include Camp Virginia and Navistar after their relocation to Camp Doha.

The 1st Platoon was originally co-located with the Headquarters and 3rd Platoon at Camp Pennsylvania; relocated a short time later to Camp New York. After the cancellation of Bright Star 04 (BS04), the platoon was pulled from Camp New York and transferred to Camp Udari. Finally after the reopening of Camp New York as a redeployment site, the platoon gained the responsibility of conducting a postal rodeo by sending soldiers to that location to perform postal and finance operations several times a week. Camp Pennsylvania was eventually closed around September 2003, and the headquarters and 3rd Platoon was sent to Camp Victory, Kuwait.

The 2nd Platoon, which was the first group of the 741st to deploy, started at Camp Virginia assisting in the training of over 13 postal platoons that came through Kuwait with forward movement into Iraq. After several months of 14-16 hour days and after things quieted down, this platoon was relocated to Camp New York. Upon final closure of Camp New York, 2nd Platoon ended their tour with the 3rd Platoon at Camp Victory assisting them for a short while with the postal rodeo at Camp New York after its reopening for the OIF II surge of units and personnel.

The last of the group, but definitely not the least was the 3rd Platoon. This platoon suffered the brunt of the loss of personnel losing more than half of their platoon for return to CONUS. This platoon which started its mission at Camp Pennsylvania had the least amount of physical movement. After the closure of Camp Pennsylvania, the platoon transferred to full postal operations and financial services of the APO at Camp Victory to include participating in the weekly postal rodeo at Camp New York. This small element of Soldiers were able to accomplish its' mission after the loss of their platoon leader to

CFLCC, platoon sergeant, and the Custodian of Postal Effects (COPE); the personnel numbers went from 16 down to 7 performing duties of a fully functional postal platoon. Not only did this platoon perform postal and finance operations for Camp Victory with only seven personnel, they received numerous accolades from the units located there as well as the coins from General Shoomaker. This was all done prior to 2nd Platoon's relocation to Camp Victory for their redeployment.

Though MSG James would again darn a new hat as the unit's Executive Officer for BS04, 11 August brought about the announcement for the cancellation of the exercise and another change. MSG James would be assigned to the 3rd PERSCOM Postal Directorate as the Operations NCOIC at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. Prior to MSG James' departure from Camp Pennsylvania, she assisted in EO concerns and issues due to her formal training as an Equal Opportunity Advisor. When 3rd ID soldiers' return from the front lines, MSG James' was called upon to use her technical knowledge and EO skills which gained her great accolades from one of 3rd ID's Detachment Commanders and First Sergeant. The detachment leadership felt that a class on sexual harassment to a group of infantry soldiers returning from Iraq would encounter resistance and may last 30 minutes. This was a total shock—over an hour later, the detachment leadership requested she cut her question and answer session short due to the command's accountability formation for end of day orders and dinner break. The resistance and uneasiness of soldiers quickly diminished with soldiers' stating that past sexual harassment classes were never entertaining and enjoyable. This was attributable to the use of impromptu skits versus all platform and slides.

As tensions continued to ease in the AOR in Kuwait July 2003, MWR trips to various locations begun. The MWR trips authorized by the Theater Commander created an avenue as a morale booster for troops as missions allowed. These trips were to the Kuwaiti Zoo, their open markets—Fahhaheel and Murbeurak Souk; Aqua Park and two westernized Kuwaiti malls—Sharq and Marina. All soldiers were eventually able to take advantage of these activities as schedules allowed. Unfortunately as time went on, Red Cross messages continued to plague the 741st.

Following MSG James' arrival at Camp Arifjan as the Operations NCOIC, she worked closely with the Postal Directorate Chief (POD) Chief with postal concerns at the Theater level which included the outlined camps in Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, Djibouti, and Afghanistan. Attention was greatly needed in

gathering data and obtaining solutions of the problems created after the hostile attack of the DHL plane in November 2003 and the need to revert to using trucks until flights resumed. Other issues encountered in November and December 2003 revealed massive backlogs of mail caused by bad weather in CONUS and the closing of main supply routes (MSRs) due to floods and other hostile acts. Transportation requests became more overwhelming than expected, but the POD received great cooperation from the 143rd TRANSCOM and KBR. Later custom issues became a problem due to an increase in the mailing of contraband and the lack of attention to detail by postal inspectors at various APOs throughout the theater.

In December 2003 a representative, from the General Services Accounting (GSA) office traveled to Kuwait together information on all postal functions to assess all postal activities in the theater. MSG James was one of the two individuals who escorted the GSA representative during his Kuwait stay in theater. He visited the joint military mail terminal (JMMT) in Kuwait, the Military Control Activity at the Kuwaiti International Airport, and several of the APOs in the Kuwait, to include those serviced by the platoons of the 741st—Camps Udari and Camp Victory.

During the months the soldiers of the 741st was in country, they pulled together to do various activities to keep occupied and boost soldier morale during off duty hours. There were a host of VIPs—military and civilian (Gen Shoomaker, Gen Meyers, SMA Tilly, CSM Jones, Miss America, Arnold Swarznegger, and a host of other singers, actors, comedians, wrestlers and other military and governmental officials who visited various camps and locations in Kuwait. One of the 741st Soldiers took advantage of an opportunity as a representative from Camp Udari to have dinner with Arnold Swarznegger with photo opportunities. The unit members also received various coins and recognition for their work performance and professionalism.

MSG James assisted with the shifted postal focus of the surge (transition) of units for OIF II. This surge would bring the onslaught of thousands of personnel requiring a smooth transition for the beginning of calendar year 2004. The surge began with a new concept of one personnel services battalion (PSB) for all postal platoons for the Kuwait-Iraq AOR instead of units reporting to a variety of PSBs. The requirement for Air Force and Navy personnel to serve as replacement elements for Army APO soldiers was put in place by the Office of the Joint Chief of Staff during the fall of 2003 due to the scarcity of available postal units. The first of the Air Force replacements arrived in early February and continued

arriving throughout March for in-country processing and training. Because of the short duration of the deployment of Air Force personnel (90 days), the Northern Kuwaiti Camp APOs would be supplemented with Joint Forces—Army, Air Force and Navy. After the completion of the transition process, all the soldiers of the 741st were anxious to depart Kuwait. The soldiers of the 2nd Platoon were the first to depart on 3 Apr 04 with the Headquarters following suit on 18 Apr, and finally 1st and 3rd Platoons obtained a scheduled departure date of 17 May 04 to include MSG James.

During OIF I, there were as many as 28 APOs established; and 26 remain opened during the beginning stages of OIF II and were fully functional. The two JMMTs in Kuwait and Iraq used over 61,000 trailer-trailer containers and processed over 60 and 90 million pounds of mail respectively. The theater's postal finance flexible account amounted to more than 1.3 million dollars through the diligent hard work of over 52 postal platoons, 15 postal headquarters and 200 contractors.

While renewed fighting began in Fallujah in early April 2004 and OIF I troops were beginning to be held in place, the soldiers of the 741st began to nervously prepare for redeployment with hopes that they would not be held in place. As dates grew closer to redeployment, the one soldier who was transferred to support CFLCC reunited with her platoon while MSG James remained at Camp Arifjan with the 3rd PERSCOM's replacement, 348th Personnel Group working with the incoming Theater Operations NCOIC. She would meet the other unit members of the 741st for the scheduled flight to Fort Benning, GA for redeployment processing in the holding area prior to boarding their flight back stateside. The redeployment date actually occurred a week or so earlier than expected giving the unit the first week of May to redeploy. The soldiers arrived stateside via McGuire AFB, NJ on 2 May 2004, then on to Ft Benning, GA, for the final stages of their redeployment. After several days of out-processing, the soldiers were transported back to Orlando by bus the evening of 7 May arriving at 0600, 8 May with family members and media waiting their arrival. MSG James remained in place for two additional weeks after major surgery and completed her convalescent leave in Orlando until her PCS departure the last day of August 2004.

In summary, the 741st AG Co Postal, which is authorized 59 personnel, deployed a total of 58 personnel of which only 6 were cross-leveled. This company was able to successfully complete its' mission despite several relocations, many upheavals and other issues garnering numerous awards to include a Bronze

Star, countless ARCOMs, certificates, promotions, and coins especially those presented by General Shoomaker.

The 3rd PERSCOM POD Chief's diligence along with the support and hard work of the many postal platoons, postal headquarters' elements, and civilian contractors in resolving the many postal issues and challenges appeared evident in the mail handled throughout the theater. There were millions and millions of pounds of mail moved via 29,000 plus containers from Kuwait to Iraq and over 32, 000 containers moved from Iraq to outlining APOs.

The Soldiers of the 741st AG Co accomplished the assigned missions working various tasks from several locations. Even though there were a number of illnesses, injuries, deaths of family members and surgical and other medical procedures which affected both Soldiers and family members, MSG James was thankful that none of the soldiers of the 741st AG Co, were listed in the remembrance pages of Operations Enduring/Iraqi Freedom; but we do honor and remember those who served and lost.
