

Dept. of Military Affairs: Guard troops return to combat 30 years ago

Posted on Wednesday, Feb 24, 2021

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Thirty years ago, approximately 1,400 Wisconsin National Guard members were on hand as Operation Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm when the United States-led coalition launched a devastating five-week air campaign against Iraq. After the air campaign began, ground forces began to prepare for the coming land battle.

By the time the ground war began, all Wisconsin National Guard units supporting the conflict were in the combat theater. The four-person 1122nd Transportation Detachment left Wisconsin Oct. 1 to coordinate convoys in Saudi Arabia, while the 215-person 107th Maintenance Company, alerted Aug. 24, 1990, deployed to Saudi Arabia Nov. 8. The three-person 132nd Military History Detachment left Wisconsin Christmas Day, 1990. The 128th Air Refueling Wing had been rotating up to 70 volunteers to support Desert Shield since Aug. 8, but between Christmas and New Year's sent between 200 and 300 personnel to the Middle East. Sixty members of the 1158th Transportation Company deployed Jan. 5 and 8, 1991, and 124 members of the 1157th Transportation Company also deployed Jan. 8. The 350-person 13th Evacuation Hospital deployed Jan. 10, and the 216-person 229th Engineer Company left Wisconsin Jan. 19. The 32nd Military Police Company sent 140 people to Saudi Arabia Feb. 6.

The U.S. Army's 18th Airborne Corps had been in Saudi Arabia since August, joined in September by additional U.S. forces as well as British, French and Arab forces. The initial ground war plan was a direct attack into Kuwait — a “straight-up-the-middle charge right into the teeth of the Iraqi defenses,” as described by U.S. Central Command leader Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf.

That plan would be scrapped in favor of adding the U.S. 7th Corps — with a mechanized infantry division, two armored divisions and an armored cavalry regiment — to envelop Iraqi forces by attacking into Iraq and assaulting the Iraqi Republican Guard Command on Kuwait's north border.

For this new plan to work, Iraqi forces needed to believe that coalition ground forces would attack Kuwait from the south in Saudi Arabia as well as amphibious gulf landings. Therefore both 7th Corps and 18th Corps troops remained near the Saudi-Kuwaiti border until after the air campaign began. 7th Corps began to move west on Feb. 15, 1991, heading north into Iraq before turning right and advancing on Kuwait to the east.

Col. Helen Gurkow, a doctor with the 13th Evacuation Hospital, suggested in a 1995 oral history with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum that the ground campaign was delayed to ensure field hospitals were properly supplied. Initial estimates warned of as many as 5,000 battlefield casualties per day. Those casualties would first go to Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals, or M.A.S.H. units, and from there to Combat Support Hospitals, and then to evacuation hospitals like the 13th Evacuation Hospital — a 400-bed facility located approximately 25 miles from the Saudi Arabia-Iraq border and roughly half an hour north of Hafar al Batin — to be stabilized for transport to military medical facilities in Germany.

"We were told we would know when the ground war would start because we were under 7th Corps and the 1st and 3rd Division [were] going to come up on either side of us and then go right into Iraq," Gurkow said. She added that they could see the dust trails of the massive convoys as they approached.

"We knew they were on the move," Gurkow said.

"It was just fantastic to see all that equipment," Col. Lewis Harned, 13th Evac commander, said in a 2001 oral history with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

The ground campaign began Feb. 24, but 7th Corps was originally not to begin operations until Feb. 25. However, early coalition battlefield successes prompted Schwarzkopf to launch 7th Corps ahead of schedule.

The 132nd Military History Detachment sent two of its three members forward to document the 7th Corps Rear Tactical Operations Center. But the accelerated schedule, rapid tempo of the ground war and the quick withdrawal of combat units

after combat operations ceased made it difficult to collect historical information in a timely manner.

“For us, the war started and the war was over, and you were trying to [document] as much of it as you can,” said retired Lt. Col. Norm Johnson, 132nd Military History Detachment commander. “I figured if we could give some future historian the proverbial ball of yarn, they could pull from the end and get something.”

The forward element of the 132nd Military History Detachment arrived at the breach in the earthen berm separating Saudi Arabia and Iraq on Feb. 27, but by then the area was quiet. 7th Corps’ 1st Infantry Division had literally plowed through the berm three days earlier, and Iraq had begun to retreat from Kuwait early on Feb. 26. The war was winding down faster than a two-man historian team could receive permission to go where the action was.

The 13th Evac, however, was beginning to see action of its own, as combat wounded troops began filtering in. The numbers were far lower than initial estimates — the hospital treated 44 troops for combat-related injuries. Of those, only 24 were coalition troops. The rest were enemy prisoners of war.

“The majority of the Iraqi soldiers were in very bad shape,” said Col. Mary Moen, a surgical nurse. “They were dehydrated and emaciated with multiple wounds. The Republican Guard soldiers, on the other hand, had been well fed and were in good physical shape. Except for the Republican Guard, these prisoners had been dragged off the streets and forced to fight. If they resisted, their families were killed.”

“You could tell that the elite did very well and these other kids were just gun fodder,” Gurkow said.

The 13th Evac encountered unexpected challenges in treating Iraqi soldiers.

“When the EPWs [enemy prisoners of war], especially the Republican Guard, came into the hospital, only the men could process them or treat them,” recalled Lt. Col. Angela Joseph, then a specialist with the 13th Evac. “We also had to stand guard in the hospital wards when they were hospitalized, with loaded weapons.”

“We were told we were going to have an MP outfit that was to protect us,” Harned said. “We never saw them.”

Joseph recounted the concern directed at her while she stood guard.

“One of the physicians came up to me and asked if I knew how to use my weapon if an EPW did something they weren’t supposed to,” Joseph said. After reassuring the physician that she was trained to use her assigned weapon, senior enlisted leaders also asked her the same questions. She would be pulled from guard duty.

“I felt perfectly fine with that duty,” Joseph said, “but I don’t think they felt comfortable having a girl there. They didn’t put any women in that duty again, at least what I remember.”

For her part, Gurkow said the concern was that hospital staff assigned to perform EPW security were too trusting. They asked the Kuwaiti translators what hospital staff should worry about concerning the EPWs.

“The interpreters said, ‘Well, you don’t have to worry about that kid because he’s so glad to get something to eat that he’s not going to do anything to stop that flow of food,’” Gurkow said. “‘But the Republican Guard is more apt to kill himself because he was captured.’”

Moen said the EPWs feared the nurses at first, as they had been told U.S. forces would torture and kill them. But after a few days of care, the Iraqi soldiers became less fearful and, according to Moen, were excellent patients.

The 32nd Military Police Company was located in the same general area as the 13th Evac, near Hafar al Batin near the Iraqi border, attached to the 402nd Military Police Battalion which operated an enemy prisoner of war camp.

“One of the hardest adjustments was the constant threat of a chemical attack,” said Staff Sgt. Peter Racanella, a member of the 32nd Brigade who volunteered to deploy with the 32nd MP Company. An Iraqi scud missile did strike Hafar al Batin while the 32nd MP Company and 13th Evac were in the field.

When the ground campaign began, the 32nd MP Company went north to assist the 14th MP Brigade in operating a corps holding cage. There they searched, fed and detained the EPWs until they were sent to an EPW camp. Members of the company went into Iraq to pick up prisoners on the second day of the ground war. Female police with the 32nd MP Company expressed similar frustration at not being able to process enemy prisoners of war due to Iraqi cultural sensitivities, instead being relegated to filing paperwork out of sight of the captured Iraqis.

In addition to cultural considerations, the sheer number of EPWs taxed the military police operating procedures. One camp designed for 12,000 had to accommodate more than 17,000. EPWs were malnourished and traumatized from the conflict — some wore the plastic outer bags from American Meals Ready to Eat as shoes. Some policies and procedures at the time proved inadequate, such as occupying existing buildings with water and sewer services for prisoner operations. EPW camps were typically tents and field latrines surrounded by an earthen berm perimeter topped with concertina wire.

Spc. Craig Luther of the 132nd Military History Detachment was able to interview two or three EPWs at the 13th Evacuation Hospital, with the help of Kuwaiti interpreters.

“They didn’t have enough food and boots,” Luther recalled. “One guy said he was forced to join the Iraqi army at gunpoint. They said they were treated poorly by their military.”

Lt. Gen. Frederick Franks, commander of 7th Corps, visited the 13th Evac on many occasions, including a visit shortly after the hospital began receiving casualties.

“The first bunch of casualties we had were mostly amputees, from stepping on mines” Harned said. “And after he toured the hospital with me, [Franks] came out and he said, ‘Col. Harned, I have a suggestion to make — keep the amputees together. Don’t separate them.’”

“Now, he was an amputee, too — he lost his lower leg in [Cambodia],” Harned continued. “And he said, ‘Nobody knows what it’s like to lose an arm or a leg unless it’s another amputee.’ So he said don’t separate them, keep them together, which we did from then on.”

The 229th Engineer Company was located in the field at Base Camp Bastogne approximately four miles south of the small Saudi village An Nu’ayriyah, roughly 75 miles south of the Kuwait border. Their unit newsletter described their portion of the base camp as the “Ritz,” as they enjoyed a hot-water bath house with 15 shower heads and enough field sinks — plywood and two-by-four platforms with metal mirrors and a hole which fit plastic personal wash basins — to accommodate 16 people.

But their deployment was not all comfort, as they immediately began repairing

foxholes and roadside shoulders for Main Supply Route Dodge — also known as Tapline Road (for Trans-Arab Pipeline), a two-lane highway running east-west along the Iraq and Kuwait borders, with two-foot drop-offs on each side of the pavement. Local motorists drove aggressively, leading coalition drivers to drive evasively and resulted in the supply route's name.

"This road is in poor shape," the unit's Feb. 21 newsletter reported, "and has directly contributed to many vehicle accidents, several of which have resulted in deaths." Of the 46 traffic fatalities U.S. troops suffered during Desert Shield and Desert Storm, 23 were on MSR Dodge.

"Our mission on this supply route is very important to the effectiveness of convoys hauling material to the front lines," Sgt. 1st Class Ricky Brown said in the newsletter. "Our work on this road is part of Operation Desert Storm history!"

The 229th also erected fencing and emplaced sandbag fortification around an army/air base outside of Riyadh, and excavated positions for Patriot missile systems. They built fuel pipelines from the gulf to the allied front lines, and also constructed earthen berms around enemy prisoner of war camps.

The ground war lasted 100 hours, liberating Kuwait and validating U.S. military doctrines of air-land warfare and the total force concept.

"We're glad that the war ended quickly," Moen said. "But after the ground war started, our adrenaline got going and our energy was very high. It was tough to turn it off."

As the combat effort shifted to a humanitarian mission in March 1991, operating tempos slowed, and deployed units began to wonder when they would return home.

"We kept our hospital open until the eighth of March," Gurkow said. "We were getting patients — we never had very many patients, but we were seeing a lot of out-patient stuff and emergency room stuff."

The Muslim holy season of Ramadan had begun, adding more restrictions on coalition troop movement. Harned, who was authorized to leave base, came up with a solution for stir-crazy Soldiers at his hospital. He met with the mayor of Hafar al-Batin, who introduced him to a local merchant.

"They had the equivalent of Crazy Eddie," Harned recalled. "He took me over to his

warehouse, and you never saw such stuff in your life. He had everything.”

Harned arranged for the merchant to use an air-conditioned tent at the 13th Evac as a bazaar.

“I bet he sold \$10,000 worth of equipment,” he said.

The 13th Evac received word to strike the hospital on March 8, and inspectors came to check on the tents.

“They would pinch the tent, and they would try to tear it,” Harned said. “And if it tore, we couldn’t take it home. We only took two tents back with us, of all the tentage that we had.”

But preparing to leave and actually leaving proved to be two different things.

“We thought we’d go home in two weeks, and we sat there until the first of May because they couldn’t find aircraft for us,” Gurkow said.

“It was kind of ... a depressing time because we sat in the tents waiting for orders to ship out, and it took about six weeks,” Sgt. 1st Class Doral Clark, a ward master with the 13th Evac, said in a 1996 oral history interview with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. “The weather was like 100, 80 to 90 degrees at night.”

The deployed members of the 128th Air Refueling Wing returned to Milwaukee between March 28 and mid-April. They were the first Wisconsin National Guard members to deploy for Desert Shield, and the first to return to Wisconsin.

Before long, the 13th Evac received its own evacuation orders.

“The day we left it was 133, and it was 166 on the tarmac,” Clark said. “We boarded the plane about 3 p.m. and sat in it until about six before there was enough lift to get off the ground. So it was kind of tough.”

The 13th Evac returned to Wisconsin in three installments — advance party, main body and rear party. Shortly after that, the 32nd MP Company and the 229th Engineer Company returned to Wisconsin. The 132nd Military History Detachment left Saudi Arabia May 15, arriving in Wisconsin a few days later.

The 107th Maintenance Company returned to Wisconsin July 3, having spent nine

months deployed at a time when National Guard and Reserve units were only authorized to be deployed for six months. And perhaps their deployment would have lasted longer had it not been for 93 volunteers who deployed June 22 to replace the 107th.

“Someone should replace those guys — they’ve been there for a long time,” Sgt. Brian McCamey said in the Summer 1991 issue of the Wisconsin National Guard’s publication *At Ease*.

Pfc. Charles Collins, a member of the replacement unit, said his father served in Korea and his brother served in Vietnam.

“I want to do something,” Collins said.

Sgt. Thomas Trautt said he was a family man.

“I’ve got kids of my own, and I felt for the dads over there,” Trautt said.

Back home, the Wisconsin National Guard had been planning an all-state annual training for that summer for some time, and a little thing like a war wasn’t about to disrupt those plans.

“This annual training is so important to the National Guard,” said Brig. Gen. Jerome Berard, then Wisconsin’s deputy adjutant general for Army. “Never before have we had the visibility we’re going to have at this annual training. Visitors from the most important military offices in the Defense Department are going to be here to see what the Wisconsin National Guard can do. We’ve got to do our best and show everyone how good we are.”

That meant that, at least for the 132nd Military History Detachment, their federal orders expired on June 6, 1991, and annual training began on June 7. The unit worked to set up a Desert Storm exhibit at the Wisconsin National Guard museum at Camp Williams. However, approximately 1,100 Wisconsin National Guard members did not attend annual training.

Gov. Tommy Thompson held a “Salute to the Troops” parade July 6 at the state capitol, attended by approximately 60,000, for all Wisconsin service members who served in Desert Storm. A group of anti-war protestors stood across from the governor’s review stand, providing a momentary criticism amid the popular support expressed by the rest of the nation.

“The people of Wisconsin could not be more proud of the brave Citizen Soldiers who serve their nation in the time of war,” Thompson said.

The 1157th Transportation Company, 1158th Transportation Company and the 1122nd Transportation Detachment were the next units to return to Wisconsin. The replacement 107th Maintenance Company left Saudi Arabia Oct. 31.

Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm provided the first opportunity for Wisconsin National Guard members to deploy to a combat zone in support of a federal overseas mission in at least a generation. But one decade later, the Wisconsin National Guard would begin sending troops to the region again in support of the global war on terror.

Thousands would ultimately serve in places like Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, and across the Middle East after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, as virtually every unit in the Wisconsin National Guard would deploy at some point.

Wisconsin National Guard troops remain in the theater today with more slated to deploy this spring.