

Perspective Transcript

Troop Tales: A Year in Operation Iraqi Freedom

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) Flags, family and a busload of soldiers returning from the front. Common images during this time of war. This time it was the 105th Army National Guard Personnel Detachment. Its 43 soldiers came home in March.

(Major Georgia Kroese/105th Personnel Detachment Commander) We did what needed to be done. Accomplished our mission and did what we were asked to do. And we did it well.

(Tobias) Most of the time the mission was serving as Operation Iraqi Freedom's welcome wagon. They processed personnel coming into the war. Their home and office was a base near Kuwait City called Camp Wolf, later changed to Camp Wolverine.

(Spec. Tonya Schwanke/105th Personnel Detachment) The planes would come in and we'd have a few people on the flight line. They'd bring them off the flight line and into the camp. We'd in-process them. We'd scan them, brief them.

(Kroese) I was thinking we processed almost 300,000 soldiers. And not just soldiers, we'd do the Air Force, the Army, the Marines, we did civilian contractors, we processed everybody that came through Kuwait.

(Sgt. Gary Eckhardt/105th Personnel Detachment) We worked two 12-hour shifts so we ran 24-7 while we were over there.

(Schwanke) We'd be dead for a while then all of the sudden it'd be like, couple planes be on the ground and it'd be like a constant hour or two of work, getting people through and everything.

(Kroese) We always had the saddest job because we always, we welcomed the people coming in, tried to make them feel good about being there for the next year.

(Tobias) This was hard, because sometimes the soldiers of the 105th didn't feel good about being there themselves. Their sometimes-dysfunctional journey was full of detours and roadblocks. It started in the winter of 2003. On just a few days notice they left jobs, classes and family, and came to Lincoln to pack and prep. Two days later they were out the door. A short stop for training in Fort Riley, Kan., drug on for more than a month as soldiers slept in a gym, awaiting orders. Those finally arrived in April, and the unit shipped off to Jordan. Half the unit was quickly moved to Kuwait to sort mail. The others remained in Jordan.

(Kroese) Spent about a month and a half to two months there, trying to set-up our personnel operations. We never really had a lot of guidance of what needed to take place. But as everybody realized so soon, is that we weren't really needed there, and received our redeployment order that we were going to go home by the 30th of June.

(Tobias) That never happened. Orders changed. The rest of the unit went to Kuwait to take over troop processing. New orders said they'd be home by Christmas. In September, though, more bad news. Another extension.

(Kroese) I think that was probably the roughest thing you could ever do to a soldier.

(Eckhardt) I would say that was probably the low point of our whole deployment, was that when we heard we were extended to 2004 and beyond our 365 that we originally thought maybe would be shortened too.

(Schwanke) It was frustrating not knowing when we were going to be home. I think that's kinda what made it hard for everybody.

(Tobias) One soldier in the 105th vented her anger in the military newspaper Stars and Stripes, and on several web sites. Sgt. Leanne Duffy's letter was titled "Don't Use GIs as Pawns." It questioned the movement of her unit, and spoke of low troop morale. The situation was especially hard for Kroese, who thought she was giving her troops accurate information.

(Kroese) I'd say, I've got my redeployment order in hand that says the 105th is going to be released to be returned back to the United States the 30th of June. You tell people that, they share that with their family and friends, and co-workers, and then somebody can just change that? Somebody just issued another frag order and said, guess what we've changed our mind. You belong to us, you're coming back here, you're going to perform another job. It's devastating.

(Tobias) Kroese is back home now with her family. But she still has candid questions about the deployment.

(Kroese) I wish I knew what was going on through this whole process. You know, because you want people to be honest, and you're honest with people, and you don't realize that not everybody is telling you the truth and just like my soldiers coming back from the mail mission, they never said once we get your unit we're bringing the rest over, and this is what we're going to do. They just say, we only need them for a couple weeks or a month, then we'll send them back. And that was never true.

(Tobias) Things are simpler now for Kroese. The only uncertainty this day is whether her kids want to swing or jump on the trampoline. She's using the time off from her full-time job with the National Guard to get re-acquainted with her husband, Mike, and their kids, 2-year-old Cole and 5-year-old Hannah.

(Tobias) Does she know where you were? (Kroese) Yeh, she said the other day, she goes, well mom, when you go back to the war and have to spend the night again. And I said no, not gonna do it. And she said well, just pretend that you do. Cole, he's speaking. When I left he was just barely walking. He'd just been walking, he wasn't talking. He was 14 months when I left. He's changed so much. He calls me mommy like he'd call Hannah, "Hannah." Or somebody by their first name. Mommy wasn't, "mommy," needing your mom, like they'd call me "Georgia." So that's been the hardest.

(Tobias) Kroese says she doesn't miss the heat of Kuwait, where temperatures topped out at 140 degrees. She also doesn't miss the landscape.

(Kroese) There's just nothing there. Just all sand and dirt and gloom.

(Tobias) Gary Eckhardt won't forget the noise. The relative silence of a walk with his wife Angie is much different than the din of Camp Wolf.

(Eckhardt) Everything is run by generators over there that are very loud and so I think that's the hardest for me is just to be lying in bed and it's so silent, you know. I can hear the leaves moving almost outside on the driveway.

(Tobias) Photos preserve other memories for Eckhardt. The heavy rain that flooded the camp, inside and out. The makeshift Christmas decorations. And the sleep tent he shared with seven others.

(Eckhardt) I suppose we each had probably an 8 by 10-foot area, each one of us, so it was comfortable there and you know, you actually got used to it.

(Tobias) This plane also got Eckhardt's attention. It's a C-130 flying-out the bodies of American soldiers.

(Eckhardt) That's a very somber moment, I guess so to speak, and you know hopefully, you know, you didn't see it too much. But unfortunately, you know, we're losing soldiers every day over there.

(Tobias) The 56-year-old Eckhardt was jokingly called "old man" by some of the younger soldiers. He lost 40 pounds and says the mission was hard on him physically. But he says that wasn't the hardest part.

(Eckhardt) Mentally I was just beaten down most of the time and I was depressed a lot during that period of time. If it wouldn't be for the phone calls from Angie and friends and family, I don't know how I would have made it the whole year, you know. It was just mentally a real low point in my life.

(Tobias) Eckhardt says his relationship with Angie has never been better. And it's good to see his girls again - he missed daughter Chelsie's high school graduation. Eckhardt has returned to his state government job, helping veterans find work. And although he proudly wears one of his desert tops around Hastings, Eckhardt's military days are over.

(Eckhardt) I've served 18 and one-half years total and 14 and a half of that active duty and I've just, this deployment kind of did it for me.

(Tobias) Tonya Schwanke is getting ready to register for classes at Wayne State College. The National Guard pays for her education. This deployment helped her get more out of it, although she missed a year of classes.

(Schwanke) It came at a good time for me because I was kinda struggling like with school and stuff, and balancing out everything in life. I think I matured a lot, and I see things like differently. I got my priorities straight, like I want to go to school now instead of I have to go to school.

(Tobias) She says living at Camp Wolf was a little like a college dorm, although a bucket outside her tent sometimes served as a washing machine. Schwanke had hardly been outside Nebraska, let alone the country. So deployment was an opportunity to see new places and meet new people. In Jordan she befriended Jeffrey Wershow, a college student and Guardsman from Florida.

(Schwanke) He was a really good guy. He took the military very seriously. He was, could talk about anything for hours. He was just, I don't know, very nice guy.

(Tobias) Schwanke got an e-mail from Wershow in July. The next day he was killed pulling guard duty in Baghdad.

(Schwanke) That was really hard, because you know it's happening but its like completely different when its somebody you know. Schwanke was never in danger herself, but says there was occasional action near their camp.

(Schwanke) Even though we weren't right in the combat zone, I mean there's still stuff around. Like during Ramadan, there were a couple incidents where there were attacks right outside our gates and stuff like that.

(Tobias) Schwanke, the daughter and granddaughter of veterans, says she may continue the family tradition.

(Schwanke) Just depends where life is at when it comes time to re-up. Everything. I don't know. I always wanted to make a career out of it, so we'll see what happens.

(Gov. Mike Johanns) And I want to say personally thank for your sacrifices, the sacrifices you made in this war against terrorism.

(Tobias) The soldiers of the 105th all have stories of sacrifice from Operation Iraqi Freedom. And they all knew deployment was possible when they signed on the dotted line and volunteered for Guard duty. Now that they're back, do they think what they were fighting for was worth the cost?

(Schwanke) You see so much going on over there that you want to help them. It's hard to say whether you should be there or not.

(Kroese) I think the concept of what we were doing over there was good. I think the reason that we were there needed to happen. I struggle with the way it all worked.

(Tobias) Reporting for Statewide, I'm Mike Tobias.