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INDEPENDENCE *Gazette*



Finishing Strong

Stryker vehicle proves itself a worthy warhorse

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Why the Independence Gazette?

The name for the 56th SBCT magazine and newsletter is derived from the unit's historic ties to Benjamin Franklin and the city of Philadelphia.

The 56th Brigade is known as the Independence Brigade because the brigade is headquartered in Philadelphia, the birthplace of American independence.

The name Gazette harks back to the "Pennsylvania Gazette," a newspaper run by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin did not start the Gazette but under his ownership the paper became the most successful in the colonies.

The legacy of Benjamin Franklin lives on with the 1-111th Infantry tracing its lineage back to 1747 when Franklin organized his Associators to defend Philadelphia from the threat of French privateers.

The Independence Gazette will chronicle the activities of the 56th in Iraq as it continues to build on the proud legacy of the Pennsylvania militia: "Citizen in peace, Soldier in war."

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On The Cover

Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Staff Sgt. Andrew Fregel of Lebanon, Pa., other Soldiers and Stryker vehicles of A Troop, 2nd Squadron, 104th Cavalry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team move through Sa'ab al Bour, southwest of Taji, July 20. Pennsylvania Army National Guard Soldiers say they appreciate the versatility and safety offered by the eight-wheeled vehicles after using them in Iraq since late January.



Yes ma'am, Mom!

Mother, son serve together in Iraq

By Sgt. JON SOLES
MND-B PAO

One Pennsylvania National Guard Soldier has two ways he can address Capt. Dorothy Watkins. He can call her ma'am or he can call her Mom.

Spc. Joshua Watkins and his mother, Capt. Watkins, are both deployed to Camp Taji, Iraq, a base camp north of Baghdad, with the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division. The mother and son from Hazleton, Pa., are able to enjoy lunch together most days, and celebrate family holidays such as Mother's Day.

Capt. Watkins was already in Iraq, deployed with another unit of the Pennsylvania National Guard when her son received orders to deploy to Iraq with the Philadelphia-based 56th SBCT.

Capt. Watkins, an officer in the adjutant general corps, scrambled to find a slot so she could deploy with her son. She was home from Iraq only nine days before she mobilized with the 56th SBCT.

"We were fortunate enough that Col. Marc Ferraro [56th SBCT commander] and the chain of command gave us the opportunity to serve together," said Capt. Watkins, who is now assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 56th SBCT. "Not many people get to say they served with their mom or son."

Spc. Watkins, a cavalry scout assigned to A Troop, 2nd Battalion, 104th Cavalry Regiment, 56th SBCT, said he is glad to be deployed with his mother.

"I think it's cool," said Spc. Watkins. "It's nice having family here, especially for my first deployment."

On duty, Spc. Watkins salutes his mother and calls her "ma'am." But off duty, mother and son often spend time together, taking advantage of the circumstances that have allowed them to be deployed together.

"Usually at night, when she gets off work, there's a group she hangs out with," Spc. Watkins said. "They all know me and we sit around and exchange stories and I get to meet a lot of great people."

Spc. Watkins marked the Mother's Day holiday in a way that can only be appreciated by deployed Soldiers, according to Capt. Watkins.

"We had lunch together in the dining facility and for the evening meal, he brought me a Taco Bell dinner, a card and a pair of Oakley sunglasses," Capt. Watkins said.

The sense of family is twofold for the Watkins. Back home, they have James Watkins, Capt. Watkins' husband and Spc. Watkins' father. But in Iraq, they also have the Pennsylvania National Guard family.

"This is our family away from family," Capt. Watkins said. "The 56th SBCT is making history and we are honored to serve."

When mother and son return home, their civilian careers will still



Photo by Sgt. Jon Soles
Spc. Joshua Watkins (right) and his mother, Capt. Dorothy Watkins serve together at Camp Taji, Iraq. Both are from Hazleton, Pa.

parallel their military careers. Capt. Watkins is a parole officer and Spc. Watkins, who attends Luzerne Community College in Hazleton, aspires to be a Pennsylvania State Trooper. Whether they are at home, or defending America abroad, they have a bond that goes beyond blood.

"We get to wear the same combat patch together and that is special," Capt. Watkins said. "It's been a great learning experience for both of us and if anything, it has brought us closer together."



clear the Road

Route clearance teams protect Soldiers, civilians

By Sgt. DOUG ROLES
56th SBCT PAO NCO

Soldiers of the 856th Engineer Company, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team slowly cruise the roads of the Taji area, looking at a piece of construction debris here a cardboard box there, trying to find anything that might hide a roadside bomb. When the engineers find something suspicious, they poke it.

It may seem like a strange job but it's a necessary one. Soldiers on the route clearance missions have a goal of finding emplaced IEDs before they can be used against other Soldiers or civilian motorists. Their toolbox includes Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles equipped with hydraulic arms that can "poke" at suspect items and dig through dirt or piles of trash. The teams also use metal detectors and the engineer-variant Stryker

vehicle. Teams don't move very quickly. But speed is not the goal; vigilance is.

"It's very interesting because you never know what's going to happen out there," said Staff Sgt. Joshua Bentley of York, Pa., a squad leader with 856th's 2nd Platoon.

A typical mission can last six hours. Bentley said the heat and the repetitiveness of the job wear on Soldiers. He said his squad has seen the same stretches of road, and the same garbage, many dozens of times. He said the key is for team members to keep the radio chatter going between vehicles and to call out familiar and unfamiliar tires, plastic bags, pieces of pipe and even dead animals.

"You try to talk amongst each other," Bentley said, adding that driving a route every day helps Soldiers "know what's trash and what's not."

Bentley, a communications and sign language interpretation major at Bloomsburg University, deployed to Iraq with the 28th Infantry Division's Taskforce Dragoon in 2004-05. He said he believes the route clearance teams have done a good job so far. He said they have twice been attacked by IEDs, with "no real damage" to the vehicles, let alone to Soldiers.

"A lot of our job is months of boredom and minutes of terror," 1st Lt. Richard Gordon of Logan, Utah, 2nd platoon leader, said.

Gordon said his Soldiers performed well during those scary moments, adding that the most recent IED attack on his column, last week, did minimal damage to a vehicle though the subsequent investigation resulted in the arrest of two suspected insurgents.

Asked about the repetitiveness of the missions, Gordon said he stays focused by writing out his pre-mission briefing to the platoon every time, even though it's the same briefing. He likened his method to sergeants who still make sure junior enlisted Soldiers have performed their preventative maintenance checks on vehicles even though "They've

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Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Two Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles move along a highway in the vicinity of Taji Market July 13, followed by an engineer-variant Stryker vehicle. Soldiers of 856th Engineer Company, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, used the vehicles in a six-hour route clearance mission. Previous page: The hydraulic arm of the Buffalo MRAP is used to inspect suspicious objects.

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done this PMCS hundreds of times."

Bentley said the engineer company also participates in missions to search for weapons caches. He said he feels both missions – route clearance and cache search – help make the local civilians safer.

"A lot of guys have come up and said 'We appreciate you guys,'" Bentley said.

Gordon said his platoon has come together as a team, saying the route clearance mission is not an easy one to master. Gordon moved to Pennsylvania to attend law school, from 2005-08, and jokes that he "stayed for the war." Before joining the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, he had served in the Utah National Guard as a medic.

One of Gordon's "junior" enlisted Soldiers brings a wealth of experience to the job. Spc. Joseph Biddle, an MRAP Buffalo arm operator and explosive ordnance disposal-trained engineer, said of the 120 missions his platoon has conducted, he's been on 110 of them.

"I'm here to go out. That's why I'm here," he said.

Biddle, a grandfather, enlisted in the active Army in 1980 and served until 1992, as a combat engineer. He reenlisted in 2004, with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard's 2nd Brigade. He then volunteered to deploy with the 56th SBCT. Part of the on-mission banter in Biddle's MRAP involves trading friendly barbs with younger Soldiers.

"I got out a long time ago," Biddle says. "But I'm certainly capable of doing the job of some kid."

At right: Spc. Joseph Biddle of Morgantown, W. Va., 856th Engineer Co., operates a hydraulic arm from the cab of the Buffalo Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle July 13. Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles

Biddle, of Morgantown, W. Va., describes the morale of the platoon as good, but is quick to point out that "It's a Soldier's inalienable right to complain."

Jokes aside, Biddle says he gets focused for missions by reviewing on his laptop information he has compiled on various types of explosives is the key to operating around them with confidence. Biddle, who as a civilian is a large truck hydraulics system mechanic, has completed the operator and sapper portions of the Army's Route Reconnaissance and Clearance Course. He praised the military's "excellent" MRAP family of vehicles, saying he feels safe carrying out his mission in the vehicles.

"We've pulled right up to suspected IEDs," he said. "It's probably the safest vehicle here."

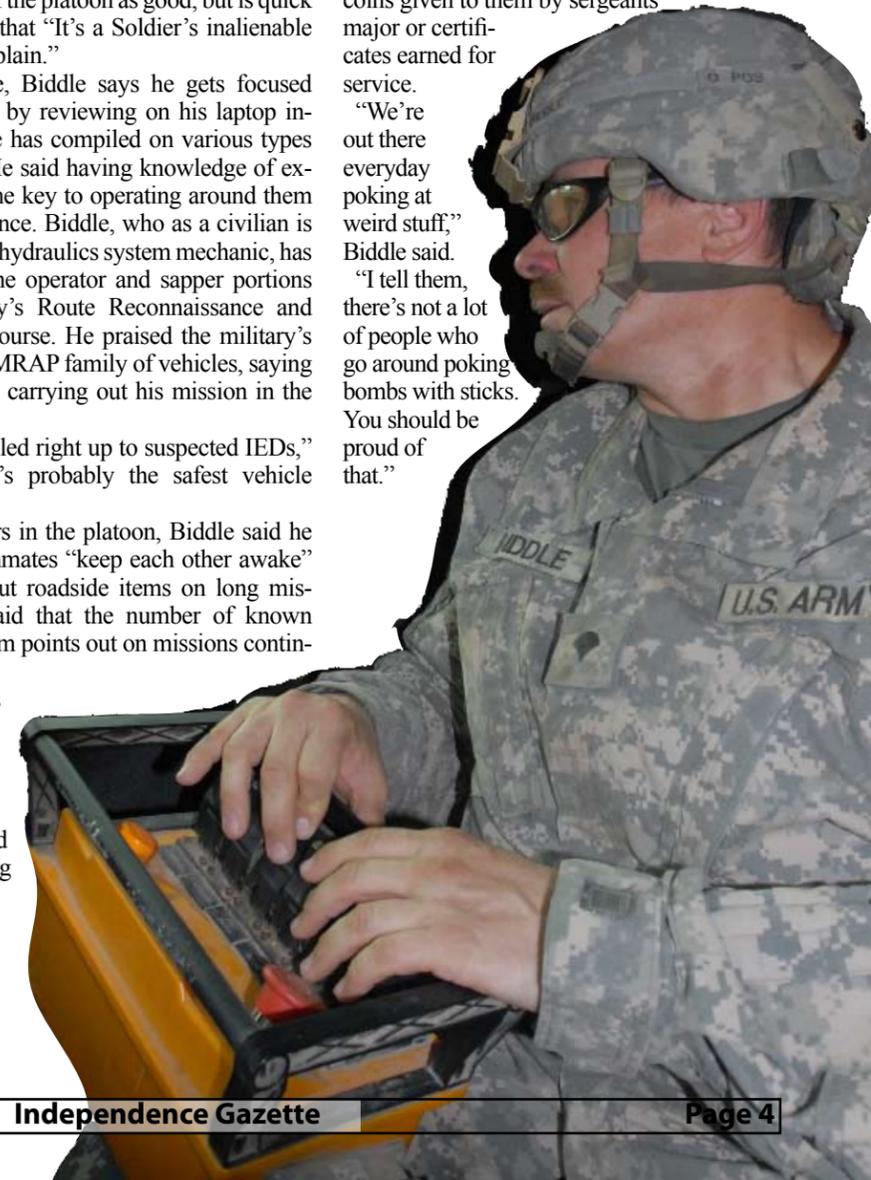
"Like others in the platoon, Biddle said he and his teammates "keep each other awake" by calling out roadside items on long missions. He said that the number of known items his team points out on missions continues to grow.

Biddle uses his years of experience to encourage other Soldiers. He said he tells young Soldiers to be sure to hold on

to keepsakes from this mission, especially coins given to them by sergeants major or certifies earned for service.

"We're out there everyday poking at weird stuff," Biddle said.

"I tell them, there's not a lot of people who go around poking bombs with sticks. You should be proud of that."



Signal company keeps Stryker Soldiers in touch with each other, the world

By Sgt. DOUG ROLES
56th SBCT PAO NCO

The 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team's signal company has been fighting the heat and dust of Iraq to keep brigade units "on the horn" with each other. The Pennsylvania Army National Guard Soldiers understand that the performance of Soldiers on missions may depend upon how well they can communicate.

"In few places can you say life or death depends on being able to talk; this is one of them," Capt. Mark Campbell of State College, Pa., 656th Signal Company commander, said July 11.

The mission of the 656th, based in Torrance, Pa., is to provide phone, internet and radio communication for the 56th SBCT. Campbell, who as a civilian works in information technology for the Penn State University library, said Soldiers of his unit aggressively look for communications problems to solve by routinely visiting units.

"We go ahead and we ask them, 'How are things going?'" Campbell said.

The company first sergeant, 1st Sgt. Robert Melego of Russdale, Pa., explained that his Soldiers began their time in Iraq, in January, assessing radios and transmission equipment. They worked to replace antenna heads and dry rotted cables and to stabilize antennas, all to improve the communication system they inherited from the departing unit at Camp Taji.

"This heat really deteriorates electronic equipment," Melego, who works as an electronics mechanic for the military in Coraopolis, Pa., said.

Melego said it took nearly three months to get the FM radio communications ability to the desired level. The unit had a goal of having no dead spots in the 56th SBCT's area.

"Our brigade commander [Col. Marc Ferraro] wanted to be able to listen when our DCLP's [supply convoys] went out," Melego said. "Now they have FM comms all the way from Liberty to Rowad."

"We covered the entire area of operations," Campbell added.

Campbell said the unit has had "a lot of successes." He and Melego said the unit has achieved about a 99 percent "up time" for the brigade's internet service while the brigade phone directory is now about 98 percent correct. Melego said phone books here had become about 50 percent inaccurate through the normal moving of equipment by previous units. Campbell said the first couple months in country saw his Soldiers working 18 hour days and more.



Above: Spc. Ryan David (at right) and Staff Sgt. Keith McBroom, both of Pittsburgh and both with 1st Platoon, 656th Signal Company, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, power up a satellite transmission terminal generator July 10 at Camp Taji. The STT enables calling by Defense Switched Network (DSN) phone line back to the states. Below: Spc. Robert Sinclair of Indiana, Pa., a 656th satellite technician, explains the importance of the STT. The terminal relays DSN phone calls utilizing a satellite 22,000 miles above Earth.

"We're providing the backbone for the internet and telephone service," Melego said, adding that everyone wants their phone to work and their emails to send.

An array of equipment near the brigade tactical operations center links the brigade to those beyond Camp Taji. The equipment is no good without the expertise of the 656th's Soldiers.

"There are a lot of pieces," Spc. Robert Sinclair of Indiana, Pa., a satellite technician, said.

Sinclair said part of his job is to check equipment readings to see if atmospheric conditions, such as dust storms or rain, are interfering with satellite communications. He explained that when a Soldier makes Defense Switched Network phone call a satellite 22,000 miles above earth makes the connection.

"That's what the delay [in a DSN call] is," he said. "A three to four-second delay is acceptable for 44,000 miles."

In triple-digit heat, keeping electronics cool is a challenge. Signal company Soldiers are continually using compressed air to blow dust from air conditioning units and communications equipment.

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Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

'Independence' Soldiers take SAT test at Victory

By 1st Lt. ROBERT PRAH
56th SBCT Education Officer

Sixteen soldiers assigned to the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Pennsylvania Army National Guard, were administered June 29 the scholastic aptitude test at the Staff Sgt. Russell J. Verdugo Education Center at Camp Victory, Iraq.

The soldiers of the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team arrived at Victory Base Complex and were given a day of rest prior to the exam. The SAT, proctored by Alice Haas, test examiner at the Camp Victory Education Center, was free of charge to the Soldiers. This test, given each year from November through June, is free to military service members serving overseas.

"I'm always amazed by service members who are able to pursue academic endeavors in such a difficult environment. The 56th Soldiers were courteous, surprisingly light-hearted, and easy to accommodate. I'd be happy to test the 56th Stryker Brigade anytime," Haas said via email.

Haas said: "When I first heard about the SAT's, I thought it was a great idea for Soldiers so they could take the SAT while in country; they would have the scores to put on the application for college and help speed things along after redeployment. I think the Army in general is doing a good job helping Soldiers get their college things together; briefings about new and current benefits, EAP forms, FTA, and the new Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. The resources are there."

For Spc. Timothy Mong, 21, of York, Pa, the opportunity to take the SAT will save him time after redeployment. Mong plans on attending college in January 2010 and fully intends on using the new Post 9/11 G.I.

Signal

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As he cleaned one air conditioner, used to cool a joint network node, Spc. Brandon Harper of Pittsburgh said cleaning the cooling equipment is at minimum a weekly task, with extra effort required during periods of dust storms.

"The JNN provides phones and internet," Harper said. "This controls the phone book for the brigade."

"The more dirt collects on the electronics, the hotter it gets; the hotter it gets the worse it runs," Sinclair said.

Melego said his unit had intensive training during long drill weekends in the year preceding the September 2009 mobilization of the brigade. He said his Soldiers can now take their experience with them and train new Soldiers.

"It was really good experience for these guys to get in here and set this up, in real time," Melego said. "It's going to pay huge dividends, in lessons learned."

Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Spc. Brandon Harper of Pittsburgh, with 1st Platoon, 656th Signal Company, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, blows dust out of an air conditioning unit July 10 at Camp Taji. The unit cools a joint network node that provides communications to the brigade headquarters



Photo by 1st Lt. Robert Prah

Sixteen soldiers serving with the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, Pennsylvania Army National Guard, pose for a photo just before the SATs at the Staff Sgt. Russell J. Verdugo Education Center. Back Row, from left: Spc. Kyle Yeager (2/104 RSTA), Spc. Timothy Mong (1/108 FA), Spc. Zachary Flyte (2/104 RSTA), Spc. Derek Porter (2/104 RSTA), Spc. Brian Rhodes (2/104 RSTA), Spc. Brandon Shoemaker (2/104 RSTA), Spc. Paul Johnson (856 ENG Co.), and Spc. Isiah White (HHC 56). Front row, from left: Spc. James Smith (1/108 FA), Spc. Max Morelock (2/104 RSTA), Spc. David Morales (1/108 FA), Spc. Travis Liller (2/104 RSTA), Spc. Wali Henderson (34/9 MiTT), Sgt. Julio Clavell (856 ENG Co.), Spc. Brent Dantzic (856 ENG Co.), & Spc. Richard Cunningham (856 ENG Co.).

Bill that became effective Aug. 1, 2009.

"I thought it was convenient to be offered in country at no cost. Having the ability to do this doesn't set me back in terms of taking the SAT and using the information on my application," said Spc. Kyle Yeager.

Yeager, 23, who serves with the 2nd Squadron, 104th Cavalry and plans on attending

Indiana University of Pennsylvania upon his return home.

For the 16 soldiers who completed the SAT exam at the Victory Education Center, this is just another check in the box.

Next up for these citizens Soldiers following redeployment – finding the classroom.



Stryker:

One sweet ride for 56th Brigade

By Sgt. DOUG ROLES
56th SBCT PAO NCO

Decked out in pope glass, camo netting and possibly an ice chest or two, the vehicle begins to resemble a parade float. But Soldiers who depend on the Stryker each day here are fond of their “trucks” that bring a new level of versatility and mobility to the battlefield.

Soldiers of one 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team unit also praise the eight-wheeled, all-wheel-drive Stryker for its high-tech communications package and its safety features. First Lt. Eric Tomlinson of Warminster, Pa., leader of 1st Platoon, A Troop, 2nd Squadron, 104th Cavalry, said he appreciates the armor package of the Stryker.

“It’s a lot more robust than what you’ve got in a Humvee,” Tomlinson said. “And the other thing that’s great about it is the flexibility of being able to have more dismounts in a concentrated vehicle platoon.”

The Stryker, produced by General Dynamics Land Systems, comes in 10 variants. The infantry carrier variant can shuttle a squad of nine Soldiers, in addition to a vehicle commander, driver and gunner. The

vehicles feature fire-suppression systems and operators can adjust tire pressure to terrain.

additional cases of bottled water and foodstuffs are stored in various nooks and crannies. Padded bench seats add to the comfort factor. “It’s great in the sense that what you need you can bring it with you, whether it’s more Soldiers, more equipment or more supplies,” Tomlinson said.

Tomlinson, who as a civilian works for MetLife insurance, served as a platoon sergeant with the 2/104th mounted force. He witnessed the transition to the officer corps and job of platoon leader. Tomlinson said he “couldn’t be happier” working with a Stryker unit, saying every vehicle has its pluses and minuses.

He said the Stryker offers more room than the Humvee and better mobility than the military’s Mine Resistant Ambush Protected family of vehicles. He said his platoon, as a tactical area command (TAC) attached to the headquarters troop, often has to roll out on missions across the brigade area of operations with little advance notice. He said the versatility of the Stryker matches the flexibility of his Soldiers.

Sgt. Charles Chiao of Mahonoy City, Pa., a First Platoon Stryker

vehicle commander, trained on the Stryker vehicle for two years prior to the mobilization and deployment of the 56th SBCT in September 2009. He said he “has faith in the Stryker” and agreed that Soldiers don’t have to use a “stock out of the box” vehicle. Chiao said the vehicles can be configured for various missions by moving or adding storage shelves. Additionally, Soldiers can mount the M2 .50-caliber machine gun, 240B machine gun or MK19 grenade launcher as the infantry carrier variant’s main armament. Hatches in the vehicle allow for “air guards” to pull security in all directions, from behind the safety of the bulletproof pope glass.

Chiao, who works in security for the Pennsylvania State House of Representatives, said one of the keys to success has been for the platoon’s Soldiers to realize the limitations of their vehicles and not put themselves in dangerous situations.

“When we were driving back at the Gap [Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa.] we put the Stryker through its paces. We purposely went out and tried to get it stuck. We couldn’t really do it,” he said.

“If you have a good driver, you’re going to have a really good Stryker,” Chiao said.

“There are really not a lot of places we can’t go and we get there quietly.”

The so-called “bird cage” slat armor adds three feet of width to the roughly 18-ton vehicles, something drivers have to remember when navigating the streets of the Taji region.

“You have to get used to the size,” Spc. Carson Mensinger of Ber-

wick, Pa., a First Platoon driver, said. “You get in a mindset of how wide you are going down the road and of how powerful the vehicle is.”

Stryker drivers look through three periscopes of glass. Their visibility is limited to about a 90-degree field of view.

“We depend a lot on the VCs [vehicle commanders] to be our eyes where we can’t see,” Mensinger said.

Mensinger, who works in the mining explosives field as a civilian, said the deployment is “a lot calmer” than he imagined. He said as a driver he is in one of the most protected places in the vehicle.

“We know the Stryker can handle a lot,” Mensinger said. “I have tons of confidence in the vehicle.”

Tomlinson said the first time his platoon came into contact with the enemy FM radio communications were not available. The platoon was able to use the onboard FBCB2 graphics communication system.

“It was good to know that I was able to communicate with the people who I needed to come and to support me,” Tomlinson said. “I don’t think you ever feel 100 percent safe. I certainly feel safer in this vehicle than probably just about any other vehicle.”

Mensinger explained that the Stryker can traverse two feet-wide ditches and climb a vertical barrier two feet in height. He said thanks to the vehicle’s suspension system drivers and passengers have a smooth ride.

“It can be fun. It’s like monster truckin’ just not as high up off the ground,” Mensinger said.

Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles

A Stryker vehicle from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, moves across the Iraqi desert near Nubai June 16.

Staff Sgt. Andrew Fregel of Lebanon, Pa., other Soldiers and Stryker vehicles of A Troop, 2nd Squadron, 104th Cav., 56th Southwest of Taji, July 20. Pennsylvania Army National Guard Soldiers say they appreciate the versatility and the safety offered by the eight-wheeled vehicles after using them in Iraq since late January. Centered: The engineer variant Stryker with a mounted plow used by the 856th Engineer Co.

Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

Staff Sgt. Andrew Fregel of Lebanon, Pa., other Soldiers and Stryker vehicles of A Troop, 2nd Squadron, 104th Cav., 56th Southwest of Taji, July 20. Pennsylvania Army National Guard Soldiers say they appreciate the versatility and the safety offered by the eight-wheeled vehicles after using them in Iraq since late January. Centered: The engineer variant Stryker with a mounted plow used by the 856th Engineer Co.

Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

Stryker numbers

- 10 variants
- Weight: 19 tons
- Speed: 60 mph; range 330 miles
- Deployable by C-130 and larger aircraft; deployable by sea
- \$2.2 million per vehicle
- 23-inch vertical climb, 60 percent grade climb



The MiTT Experience Made in PA ... Re-made in Iraq

By Lt. Col BILL BOHMAN
34th BDE MiTT Chief

One of the 56th SBCT's partnered Iraqi Brigades, the 34th Armored Brigade, is undertaking a project with roots in Pennsylvania. The 34th Brigade is refurbishing M109A1 self propelled howitzers that were originally believed to be built in Pennsylvania way back in the 1970s by BAE, formerly United Defense Industries.

These howitzers have an interesting history. They were originally sold to the Iranian military back in the days when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ruled the country



and Iran was a strong U.S. ally. During the 1980s Iran - Iraq war, they were captured by the Iraqi Army. Late in the war, Sadaam Hussein decided to equip the MEK, a militant Islamic group that advocated the violent overthrow of the Iranian Islamic Republic. The howitzers ended up in their hands and may have been used in the

MEK's short-lived invasion of Iran in 1988. Following Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Hussein reportedly used the MEK to help

Photo by Sgt. Jon Soles
Maj. Matthew DeLoia, an artillery officer from Duluth, Minn., shows off July 2 one of dozens of abandoned howitzers which are being refurbished for use by the Iraqi Army at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad. DeLoia is a member of a Military Transition Team assigned to the 34th Armored Brigade, 9th Iraqi Army Division, at Camp Taji. "Last fall, our brigade commander was given guidance by the 9th IA commander to pull out of the Taji boneyard roughly a battalion's worth of M109A1 howitzers," DeLoia said. "They [34th Arm. Bde.] have grouped together just a small cadre of local hires and mechanics who have shown great ability to adapt with tools and spare parts."



Photo by Lt. Col. Bill Bohman
Capt. Joe Ruotolo, commander, B Battery, 1-109 Artillery Regiment (PAANG) stands in front of the M109A1 his battery helped the Iraqi 34th Brigade refurbish.

suppress the Kurdish and Shiite uprisings in Iraq. In 2003, the MEK surrendered to U.S. forces as Saddam's regime fell. Eventually the guns ended up in a scrap yard on Camp Taji and sat there for years.

Some still have the MEK's markings on them. In the fall of 2008, the 9th Iraqi Division Commander, Major General Qassam ordered the 34th Brigade to recover the M109A1s and begin refurbishing them. The recovery was completed immediately as the howitzers were moved to the 34th Brigade headquarters. Early in 2009, the actual refurbishment began. The first howitzer is up and running but the Iraqis are missing several critical components that must be acquired before it can be test fired. Work on a second piece has begun but is progressing slowly. Capt. Joe Ruotolo from B Battery, 1-109 Field Artillery is assisting the Iraqis in their effort. The Iraqis doing the refurbishment are not experts on the M109 so Ruotolo's assistance is invaluable to them. In civilian life, Ruotolo is the engineering manager of all field artillery programs for BAE systems in York, PA.

The Iraqi Army is seriously considering picking up what has been to date a 9th Division project and making it an Army project. The U.S. Command requested that BAE Systems conduct an assessment on the viability of economically refurbishing these guns. BAE sent Mike Evans to Iraq to complete that assessment. Evans is also a member of the PA National Guard. He recently commanded 1-109 Field Artillery Regiment and has been selected to command the 2nd Brigade, 28th Infantry Division. He found that the howitzers could be refurbished but also provided the command other interesting options for assisting the Iraqis in developing a field artillery branch for their Army. For now, the Iraqis are determining what they want to do. In the end, these howitzers may once again, ride to the sound of the guns.

Descendents of Ben Franklin's 'Associators' continue to serve

By Sgt. JON SOLES
MND-B PAO

As America celebrated its 233rd birthday July 4, a Pennsylvania National Guard unit that predates the American Revolution, continued its mission of defending freedom with combat operations here in Iraq.

The 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry Regiment is the original unit of the Pennsylvania National Guard and is one of the oldest units in the Army. The unit, which was founded by Benjamin Franklin, first saw action in the French and Indian War and today is a part of the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, deployed to Camp Taji, Iraq, a base camp north of Baghdad.

"We're the founding unit in the Pennsylvania National Guard," said Lt. Col. Mark O'Hanlon, commander of the 1st Bn., 111th Inf. Regt. "We're very proud of our lineage. We have been around since 1747 before there was a country."

In the mid-18th Century, Pennsylvania was a British colony, but was still subject to threats from the French privateers and pirates.

"Ben Franklin understood there was a need for a mechanism to defend the colony," said O'Hanlon, of Wallingford, Pa. "He conceived of an association that would come together to defend the city in times of crisis."

Franklin organized fighting men under the auspices of a firefighting brigade, because the Quakers who controlled Pennsylvania at the time were pacifists opposed to militias. At the time, firefighters were called associators and the unit still uses the same call sign today, according to Maj. James Fluck, a 56th SBCT civil affairs officer who was formerly a company commander in the 1st Bn., 111th Inf. Regt.



Photo by Sgt. Jon Soles

The Franklin Flag flies in front of the 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry Regiment's headquarters in Camp Taji, Iraq which is north of Baghdad. The flag was designed by Benjamin Franklin and was used as a maritime flag before the current American flag was adopted. The 1st Bn., 111th Inf. Regt. is the only unit allowed to fly the Franklin Flag. The regiment is part of the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, Pennsylvania National Guard.

"He formed it as an 'associator' brigade who trained as firefighters and gave the surface appearance of firefighting but they actually trained as a militia," said Fluck, of Lancaster, Pa. "Franklin procured money to go to New York to buy fire hoses. He came back with 10 cannons he considered fire hoses."

Franklin disguised the real mission of the association, according to O'Hanlon, by ordering fire hoses and conducting training outside Philadelphia. But when the fire hoses arrived, they didn't shoot water. Instead, they were cannons capable of heaping firepower toward any enemy.

The 111th Inf. Regt. flag has battle streamers from almost every military engagement dating back to the Revolutionary War. O'Hanlon said the Soldiers serving in the 1st Bn., 111th Inf. Regt., celebrate their heritage and educate any new Soldiers about the unit's history. A regiment mess is held every year, complete with a reading of the Declaration of Independence and the attendance of an actor who portrays Benjamin Franklin.

The 111th Inf. Regt. today is the only unit in the military allowed to fly the Franklin Flag, which predates the current American flag. It has 13 red, white and blue stripes and 13 six-pointed stars.

"That flag was flying on John Paul Jones' ship when he uttered the words 'I have not yet begun to fight,'" said O'Hanlon.

Two and a half centuries later, and half a world away from Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin's legacy of fighting for freedom lives on in the 111th Inf. Regt.

"Benjamin Franklin would be very impressed with the Soldiers and their courage and commitment," O'Hanlon said. "I think he would also be proud that we are good ambassadors of America in Iraq."



Photo by Sgt. Jon Soles
Two Iraqi mechanics work on the diesel engine of an M109A1 howitzer under the guidance of Maj. Matthew DeLoia, an advisor with a military transition team team assigned to 34th Armored Brigade, 9th Iraqi Army Division, at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, July 2. Refurbishment of the howitzer is 90 percent complete, according to DeLoia. He said the MiTT team has received help from the Pennsylvania National Guard's 109th Field Artillery Regiment, assigned to the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team.

Soldiers see big benefit in small group worship service at Fire Base Mayhem



By Sgt. DOUG ROLES
56th SBCT PAO NCO

The rattle of small arms fire from a nearby range didn't detract from the parishioner's joy in singing hymns. That the congregation was comprised of only four Soldiers didn't diminish the value of the chaplain's weekly message at the small fire base on the outskirts of the post.

The chaplain, Capt. Glenvil Gregory of Newark, N.J., 1st Battalion, 108th Field Artillery, believes small group worship sessions can have big impacts on the lives of deployed Soldiers. The Soldiers realize church attendance is one more way to be there for their buddies.

"Over time I'm seeing an increase in Soldiers experiencing their faith and seeking avenues in which to express their faith," Gregory said. "It has been very rewarding for me."

Gregory initiated the Saturday morning general Protestant service at Fire Base Mayhem in April. He had been conducting services for another group of Soldiers at a nearby radar operations center when the first sergeant of Battery B requested the startup of services here.

The faces in the "crowd" keep changing for Gregory and Staff Sgt. Chris Paulhamas of Trout Run, Pa., a 1-108th chaplain's assistant. The 1-108th, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, rotates Soldiers in and out of the fire base. The small size of the base and the work schedules, including night shifts, limits the number in attendance Saturday mornings. Gregory said the numbers of Soldiers attending services may not be large but he said of those who do come "there is a willingness and an eagerness."

Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles

Chaplain (Capt.) Glenvil Gregory of Newark, N.J., 1st battalion, 108th Field artillery chaplain, makes a point during a service at Fire Base Mayhem, Camp Taji, Iraq, July 25. Gregory is a native of Antiqua who now lives in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands when not in New Jersey. As a civilian he is a pastor in the Moravian Church, West Indies Province.

"We've had a diverse group. We have a different group almost every month," Gregory said. "It helps them share their faith."

The Soldiers at the Saturday, July 25 service all had one thing in common: an appreciation for the assembly of believers. Spc. Sean Keefer of Waynesboro, Pa. has been able to attend nearly all the Saturday services at Mayhem. He works dayshift at Mayhem performing maintenance on guns. He said at home he, his wife and children are churchgoers and said he continued that practice while deployed.

"I guess I've been a rock," Keefer said, playing on the New Testament reference to the apostle Peter.

"It's meant a lot. Not just spiritually but for getting together with the guys," he said. "You realize that no matter how different we are we're the same. It's brought a lot of us closer together."

Sgt. Brad Hefflefinger of Indiana, Pa., with B Battery, said he wasn't much of a churchgoer until recently, when he was asked to bring his guitar to a service. He's been playing the instrument for nearly 20 years.

"I find great joy in playing for the church," Hefflefinger said.

He said it strikes him that Soldiers most often raise concerns they have about others during the sharing portion of the weekly service.

"It's very noble; but it's not wrong to ask for peace for yourself," he said.

Spc. Jared Divittorio of Pittsburgh, another B Battery Soldier, said he appreciates having a service available when he's at Mayhem.

"It really helps us out to have him [Gregory] come out here. It's a convenience," Divittorio said. "It gives us a chance to sit down and bring our faith to the table."

Divittorio said he grew up going to church but had "fallen off the horse" recently. He said being deployed helped him return to faith.

"I realized I need Him and He's here, Divittorio said, adding that in a way he feels God is "even closer" in Iraq.

Paulhamas and Gregory said the issues battalion Soldiers most commonly bring to them are relationship issues, be it relationships with other Soldiers or with family members. Gregory also said he's fielded a number of theological questions.

"There has been an upsurge in people asking Bible questions," Gregory said. "It seems more people are reading The Bible."

(Continued on Page 12)

(Con't from Page 11)

Gregory is a native of Antiqua who now lives in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. He said he is "passing through" New Jersey. Gregory grew up in the Moravian church. He called the choice of ministry as a profession "a natural fit."

"All my life I've been in church," Gregory, who as a civilian is now a pastor in the Moravian Church, West Indies Province, said. "My mission here is to help to sustain the faith of Soldiers by providing them with religious services, Bible study groups and also pastoral care and counseling."

Gregory transferred to the Pa. Guard in 2005, from the Virgin Islands Army National Guard, while attending Moravian Seminary. He deployed to Guantanamo Bay with the Puerto Rico National Guard in 2007-08.

Of his current tour, Gregory said ministering to Soldiers during the deployment has caused him to grow spiritually and emotionally. Paulhamas shares prior deployment experience with Gregory, but not as a Soldier in the chaplain corps.

Paulhamas, who works as a quality assurance technician as a civilian, deployed to Ramadi, Iraq in 2005-06 with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard's 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division. He was an in-



Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

Above: Chaplain (Capt.) Glenvil Gregory (at right) of Newark, N.J., 1st battalion, 108th Field artillery chaplain, and Staff Sgt. Chris Paulhamas (second from right), a chaplain's assistant, lead a general Protestant service July 25 at Fire Base Mayhem, Camp Taji, Iraq. Soldiers of Battery B, 1-108th, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team taking part in the service are, from left: Spc. Sean Keefer of Waynesboro, Pa.; Spc. Ryan Koehler of Oil City, Pa.; Spc. Jared Divittorio of Pittsburgh; and Sgt. Brad Hefflefinger (with guitar) of Indiana, Pa. At left: Hefflefinger plays guitar during the service.

fantryman who worked as a tanker on that deployment, an experience he termed the "total opposite" of his current mission. Paulhamas feels his new role in the military is a good fit for him.

He said one of the highlights for him this

time around was the baptism of over a dozen Soldiers while the brigade was moving through Kuwait to Iraq.

"God led me to be a chaplain's assistant. He opened doors and I was able to give back," Paulhamas said.



'We ask Your protection ...'



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Praying before heading out on a mission is an essential part of the get-ready process for many units of the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team. At left: 1st Lt. Richard Gordon (second from left) of Logan, Utah, 2nd platoon leader, 856th Engineer Co., leads Soldiers in prayer prior to a route clearance mission July 13.

Task Force Joshua transfers BDOC mission

Photos by Capt. Ed Shank
Members of Task Force Joshua, 108th Field Artillery, officially transferred responsibility of the base defense operations center (BDOC) mission July 24 in a ceremony outside their former headquarters at Camp Taji.

Top, right: Lt. Col. Corey Lake addresses soldiers from both TF Joshua and the Mississippi National Guard's 155th Brigade Support Battalion.

Above, center: Master of Ceremonies Sgt. 1st Class Jason Flenner reads the history of both units.

Right: Soldiers from "Hellfire," "Barak" and "Caleb" stand in formation during the TOA ceremony.



Paxton Rangers help with Iraqi education

By Sgt. PHILIP SCHRATWIESER
2-112th, 2 HBCT PAO NCO

With the cooperation of the Government of Iraq and the local Abu Ghraib government, Coalition forces embarked on the construction of a 450 sq. meter warehouse built to house supplies for dozens of area schools.

Soldiers of 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment, "Paxton Rangers," 2nd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, Multi-National Division—Baghdad completed the project this past week and opened the warehouse in a ribbon-cutting ceremony July 27 in Abu Ghraib.

In honor of the completion of the warehouse, Coalition forces, who funded and managed the construction of the warehouse,

purchased 153 high capacity photocopiers and over 30,000 reams of copy paper.

Dr. Nihad Abbas Shihad al-Juburi, the deputy minister of education from Baghdad, joined several members of the local Abu Ghraib government at the opening ceremony.

Dr. Nihad spoke briefly, congratulating the government of Abu Ghraib on its recent improvements to its city, to include upgrades to the schools and the opening of the supply warehouse, which will act as a hub for the schools in the region.

"I want to thank the CF for their generous gift," said Kamil Abbas, the Abu Ghraib Council Chairman. "[There was] ... hard work done by everyone to get the warehouse finished before the beginning of the next

school year."

After the speakers concluded a short tour commenced with a ceremonial cutting of the ribbon.

The Paxton Rangers' Civilian and Military Operations Platoon, lead by Capt. Matthew McKnight from Carlisle, Pa, were in charge of overseeing the project.

McKnight and his CMO platoon travel throughout the Abu Ghraib area on a daily basis with engineers in order to inspect the work being done by hired local contractors.

"After months of work overseeing this project and making sure it was completed to [standard] we are glad we can hand over a completed project," said McKnight. "[This was] designed to help the children of Iraq."



Future Hero Project:



Photos by Capt. Maggie White



Distributing smiles to Iraqi children

By Capt. MAGGIE WHITE
56th SBCT Public Affairs

Over 2,000 children from the Tarmiyah area received soccer balls and school supplies, July 29, thanks to a combined effort between the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team (Independence), Iraqi Security Forces, and the Ministry of Education.

The Future Hero project is a joint effort between Soldiers from the Independence Brigade and their Iraqi Security Force counterparts. In the past they have done many school drops under the Junior Hero program, but the Future Hero program took things to the next level by involving Iraqi officials and recognizing academic achievements of the students.

"We have done about 15 Junior Hero projects throughout the Tarmiyah qada, but this one is the largest," Sgt. Brian Choe, of Tustin, Calif., said. "We asked to bring in the Ministry of Education and the council members and are presenting the top students from 15 schools with a certificate of achievement today."

Choe has been based out of Tarmiyah since last October and wanted to give back to the small town north of Camp Taji that he had been working in. He got the idea for Operation Future Hero after holding about fifteen Junior Hero school drops in the past 10 months. According to Choe, Operation Future Hero creates community involvement rather than just handing out gifts.

"Sgt. Choe ensured coordination between the ISF, Tarmiyah leadership, and the Ministry of Education," Sgt. 1st Class Brian

Boos, of Philadelphia, 56th SBCT information operations NCO said. "It's good to see the ISF come together to help support their qada leadership and make this event possible".

Children lined up for two hours with their classmates prior to receiving their gifts. The boys received soccer balls and the girls received backpacks with school supplies in them. Officials from the Tarmiyah school system and the Ministry of Education were on hand to present achievement certificates to students in a ceremony prior to giving out the gifts.

"This is the first time we've done a ceremony especially for the students. It's a good experience for us," Habib Taba al-Fadan, Chairman of the Tarmiyah Teacher's Association and principal of al-Hatab school said. "This is a cooperative effort where everyone can see that the Coalition forces working with us to help improve Iraqi society, especially in taking care of kids. These kids are the future of Iraq."

Iraqi Army Soldiers and Iraqi policemen inflated soccer balls and distributed the backpacks to over 2,000 spirited children. Choe said that he made sure his Soldiers took a backseat in the actual distribution process.

"We want to make sure the children see that the IA and IP are handing out the toys, not us," Choe said. "They see that they can rely on them to help in their community".

Children smiled as they received the gifts and immediately started to kick the soccer balls around and wear the new backpacks. They didn't seem to mind the triple digit heat as they ran in huge packs around the courtyard of the Huda Girls School testing out their new toys.

"The joys of simple gifts and presents are evident today," al-Farda said. "It is all worth the effort to see the smile of a child"

2-112th Soldiers counter indirect fire threat

By Sgt. JON SOLES
MND-B PAO

An area known as “the big concrete slab” has attracted the interest of a platoon of Pennsylvania National Guard Soldiers for its use as a staging area to deter indirect fire (IDF) attacks against Coalition forces.

Soldiers of the “Charger” Company, 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment, drove Stryker vehicles onto the “slab” to conduct a counter-improvised explosive device and counter-IDF mission here, July 30.

The area, which gave a wide 360-degree view, was picked as a good spot to thwart insurgent attacks in the planning phase.

“We’re trying to catch people placing IEDs or trying to fire rockets and mortars at us or at VBC [Victory Base Complex],” said Spc. Paul Valdiserri, an infantryman from Stockdale, Pa. “There is also that chance that someone will come up to us to give us information. We’ve had that happen before.”

The Pennsylvania Guardsmen, attached to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, dismounted from their Strykers and scanned the area for anything out of place. There was good reason to search the area, according to 1st Lt. Frederick Santucci, a platoon leader. There have been enemy attacks with RKG-3 grenades in the area recently.

“The remote weapon station has a pretty good field of view from here,” said Santucci, who is an infantry officer from Lock Haven, Pa.

Though few attacks against CF would be conducted during the day, Santucci said the presence of the Charger Company Soldiers would hopefully discourage insurgents. He said there was no substitute for a Soldier’s eyes on the ground.

“Every Soldier is a sensor,” Santucci said.

The Strykers stopped at several other locations, where the Soldiers walked around looking for anything out of the ordinary that could indicate a freshly-planted IED. After the searches were concluded, the Soldiers stopped at the Rishala Iraqi Police Station in the Abu Ghraib area.

“They are a solid ally here and we have a great working relationship; we have invested a lot of time with them,” said Santucci. “They



Photo by Sgt. Jon Soles

Spc. Lucas Butler scans the horizon with the sight of his M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon during an anti-improvised explosive device and anti-indirect fire mission in the Abu Ghraib area July 30. Butler is an infantryman from State College, Pa., assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. The Soldiers of the 2-112th chose an area known as “the big concrete slab” to conduct their mission of catching insurgents in the act of placing IEDs or planning IDF attacks.

have really stepped up and supported us.”

The platoon leader praised the efforts of the local Iraqi Police, who he said had demonstrated a commitment to keeping their community safe and to improving the quality of life for the Iraqi citizens.

“Together we have managed to do a lot of great things in the community, from humanitarian drops to taking down bad guys,” said Santucci.

As the Strykers rolled back toward VBC, the sky turned orange as a dust storm quickly descended upon Baghdad. The Soldiers dis-



Photo by Sgt. Jon Soles
Spc. Bill McSwain, an artilleryman from Clarion, Pa., pulls security while other Soldiers meet with the local police commander at the Rishala Iraqi Police station in the Abu Ghraib area July 30. McSwain is with the 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment, which was assigned to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division during the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team’s deployment.

mounted the Strykers for the last time of the day, and attended a post-mission briefing. Santucci fielded questions about how the Soldiers thought the mission went and encouraged them to remain vigilant.

“The guys are capable of handling any mission they are given,” Santucci said of his infantry platoon. “Every one of them has improved every day since we got here.”

At the end of another mission, the Soldiers of the 2nd Bn., 112th Inf. Regt., could rest and prepare for their next mission, knowing their presence out in sector had helped to keep other Soldiers safer from IEDs and VBC safer from attack.

Stryker brigade’s GMAV pilots bring ‘hover and stare’ capability to battlefield

By Sgt. DOUG ROLES
56th SBCT PAO NCO

A new unmanned aerial vehicle with “hover and stare” capability gives the high ground to 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team units. Soldiers piloting the Gas Micro Air Vehicle can use it as an extra set of eyes near a patrol or can send the UAV miles ahead to scout beyond the horizon and send back real-time video.

“Independence Brigade” pilots who have used the prototype in Iraq over the past seven months have provided feedback to manufacturer Honeywell. Company engineers have used that input to make modifications to a forthcoming GMAV model.

“It’s exciting to hear their ideas that come



Photo by Sgt. Tim Davis

Spc. Earl Acker (at left) of Saegertown, Pa. and Sgt. Blake Myers of Girard, Pa., both of Company B, 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, ready the Gas Micro Air Vehicle for a mission April 20, 2009, northwest of Taji. Their mission was canceled before the GMAV took off. A few days later, on April 25, Myers became the first GMAV pilot to fly the unit while participating in a mission off of a base.

back,” Kevin Bogert, a Honeywell field service engineer working at Camp Taji, said. “For a prototype configuration it’s done very well.”

“The beauty of the system is you can hover and stare,” Bogert said, adding that the GMAV can take snapshots, record video and help Soldiers mark targets.

GMAV can share its video with other computers, allowing Soldiers in multiple locations to view the same footage.

Bogert began instructing nine 56th SBCT Soldiers on the system in mid-December at Fort Polk, La. Training continued when the brigade arrived in Iraq. With trained pilots in its ranks, the Pennsylvania Army National

Guard brigade has been able to utilize the GMAV system to a greater extent than its predecessors at Camp Taji.

“The 56th was the first unit to fly missions,” Bogert said. “We, Honeywell, were flying the missions for the 25th Infantry Division.”

Sgt. Blake Myers of Girard, Pa., with 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, on April 25, became the first person to fly the GMAV while part of a combat unit on a mission outside a base. Honeywell technicians had previously piloted the GMAV from Camp Taji. Myers termed flying GMAV “a blast.”

“You have to think three-dimensionally,” Myers said. “You have to forget about your left and right and think about the bird’s left and right.”

Myers is also a Raven pilot and sometimes flies both systems in the same day. He said the Raven fixed-wing UAV system makes sweeps over an area. The GMAV, he said, lends itself to close-up work in one place.

“GMAV brings more of a hovering capability. With GMAV I can go right up to the target,” Myers said.

Myers said that first mission in April was in support of a raid at a factory near Taji. He explained that as the mission began, he spotted a man armed with an AK47 rifle with the GMAV. He said the man turned out to be a security guard and said use of the GMAV alerted the Soldiers to the presence of a friendly in the area.

“This bird was involved in the Nassir factory raid. I always kept it ... ahead so I was facing them [Stryker Soldiers],” Myers said.

Made in Albuquerque, N.M., the Honeywell micro UAV operates off a two-stroke engine similar to the power unit of a lawn trimmer. Ducted airflow from the unit’s fan guides the GMAV through its vertical takeoff and flight.

The system weighs about 45 pounds. Though it is designed to be man-portable, with component carriers attaching to a Soldier’s body armor system, 56th SBCT pilots typically don’t pack the equipment on their backs. They’ve been loading the equipment into vehicles and setting it up upon arrival at a mission site.

“Guys are flying this more and more out the back of a Stryker,” Bogert said.

Bogert explained that Soldiers here are using the “Block One” configuration, the prototype. Honeywell’s “Block Two” fielding of GMAV is to Navy EOD teams in Afghanistan.

Bogert said the “Block Three” configuration, due to the Army in late summer, will cut Soldier exposure time by means of an electronic refueling system.

The new system will be fuel-injected and



have its camera mounted on a multi-directional swivel. The prototype’s camera is stationary, meaning pilots must move the vehicle to move the camera.

The GMAV is started by a pull cord, similar to a lawnmower, and is moved from its starting base to a takeoff point.

Honeywell has produced 16 of the prototype systems, at a cost of about \$400,000 each. Each system includes two UAVs and the control apparatus. Bogert said three systems have been issued for use by 56th brigade. One of those is used by the 2nd battalion, 112th Infantry at Camp Liberty.

Despite the advantage it brings to the fight and the engineering specification involved in keeping the unit aloft, Soldiers have nicknamed the ungainly-looking GMAV the “flying beer keg” among other names.

“We’ve had it called the ‘flying trash can,’ also the ‘flying mosquito,’” Bogert said.

Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

Above: Sgt. Myers watches the GMAV go through its startup sequence at Camp Taji Aug. 2. Below: The GMAV comes in for a landing at a Camp Taji shipping and receiving yard Aug. 2. The GMAV unmanned aerial vehicle system gives pilots the ability to monitor an area using man-portable equipment.



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328th BSB



Above: Medic Spc. Stafford at the patient administration desk, Hale Koa Clinic Camp Taji, in March. At right: Sgt. Bobroski, participates in MRAP Egress training in May. Far right: Cpl. Dehart operating the forklift at the 56th SBCT Class I Point in May.



'Iroquois'



Above, left: The 656th Signal Company at Camp Taji, Iraq, July 2009. Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles

Above: First Sgt. Robert Melego (center) assists Spc. Roxanne Oglesby (left) and Sgt. Francis Scardino (right) with preparations for the Father's Day Cookout at the 656 Signal Company building on Camp Taji, Iraq. Photo by Spc. Brian Robinson

Below: Spc. Brian Robinson of the 656 Signal Co. splices fiber optic cable for the base defense operation center camera system in May. The camera system allows the BDOC to monitor the area outside of Camp Taji. Photo by Spc. Randolph Johnson



Photo by Spc. Brian Robinson. Spc. Timothy Doverspike, JNN operator from the 656 Signal Company, makes configuration changes to the JNN during installation at Camp Taji in February 2009.



Photo by Spc. Brian Robinson. Staff Sgt. Robert Brudnock (left) and Sgt. 1st Class Gregory Pastor (right), of the 656 Signal Company, do maintenance on the mast of a Harris RF7800 Radio System on the Iraqi Army side of Camp Taji in May of 2009.



Above, center: The Hale Koa Clinic night shift staff in April, left to right: Sgt. Young, Spc. Thompson, Spc. McGarvey, Capt. Holdren, Sgt. 1st Class Pueyes, Sgt. Kramer, Spc. Baer, Spc. Dreibelbies, Spc. Gravelly and Spc. Reed, at C Co. 328 BSB, BMSO office, Camp Taji, Iraq.

Above: Cpl. Cruz, right, (BMSO) issues meds to Capt. Jones.

Above, right: Spc. Clouser, left, and Sgt. Coldwell cooking at JSS Falahat in March.



Top: Sgt. Neil Mascaro, Spc. Christopher Jones and Spc. Anthony Miles replace parts on a forklift. The Ground Support Section (GSE) has made 376 repairs to Material Handling Equipment across the Brigade.

Above: Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Diehl teaching the Iraqi army how to maintain 360 security July 14, 2009.



At left: Co. A Soldiers in formation for an award ceremony in April. Above: Sgt. Marc Robles cheers on school children near Hor A Bash in June. At right: 556th MICO leaders at Uda Ari Range, Kuwait Jan. 27, from right: Sgt. 1st Class Keith Henninger, 1st Sgt. Michael Maniero, Sgt. 1st Class James Jones, Staff Sgt. Jamie Strayer and Staff Sgt. David Malseed.



1-111th Inf. 'Associator'



Iraqi Police and "Associator" Soldiers attend a joint briefing May 28.



Photo by Sgt. Jacob Smith
A 1-111th Soldier enjoys a rainy day with Iraqi children in April.



An "Associator" Soldier patrols with an Iraqi Army Soldier June 12.



An "Associator" mortar team fires an illumination round out of the back of their Stryker June 11.



At left: 'Associator' Soldiers conduct a joint air assault with Iraqi Army Soldiers May 11 near Mushada. Photo by Spc. Neil Stanfield



Photo by Master Sgt. Sean Whelan
At right: Lt. Col. Mark O'Hanlon, 1-111th commander, enjoys some local fare in Al Awad Feb. 4.



"Associator" Soldiers talk with an Iraqi boy April 8.

1-112th Inf. 'Strong'



Spc. Clark and Sgt. Zelinski of 2nd platoon hand out toys to Iraqi children.



The sun rises over a Co. A, 1-112th Stryker vehicle in July.



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
An Iraqi cow balks at Capt. Nicholas Buchheit's visit to the farm.



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Spc. Adam Feldon of Co. C. operates a radio in a rural area near Taji in May.



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Soldiers of Co. C. patrol through Taji Market with Iraqi Police May 4.



Above: Capt. Gregory Holloway shares candy with a group of Iraqi children. Above, right: Spc. Michael Foster poses with local children.





'Joshua' 108th Field Artillery



Above: B Battery, fires rounds near Camp Beuhring, Kuwait in January, becoming the first National Guard unit to fire the M777A outside of the United States. Photo by Staff Sgt. Nicolas Sterner At left: Sgt. 1st Class Ricardo Mulinaro of Nanticoke, Pa. talks with two Iraqi boys at Al Sareaa, near Camp Taji, June 9. At left, top: Staff Sgt. Duane Wolfe, a 1-108th PSD Soldier, stands guard during a conference with local leaders May 3 at a power plant.



An M777A Howitzer sits in place at the newly completed Fire Base Arrowhead, at Joint Security Station Istiqlaal. At right: Col. Marc Ferraro (right), 56SBCT commander, pins a Purple Heart on Sgt. 1st Class John Veater of York, Pa. May 1 at Camp Taji. Photos by Capt. Ed Shank



Photo by Capt. Ed Shank At right: Lt. Col. Corey Lake (left), 1-108th commander, and Command Sgt. Maj. Stephen Klunk, at the base defense operation center transfer of authority July 4.



Photo by Capt. Ed Shank B Battery fire rounds from the unit's M777A Howitzer at Camp Taji, Iraq Feb. 13. The 108th is the only National Guard unit to be fielded with the M777A.



Photo by Sgt. Philip Schratwieser Sgt. Joseph McGowan, a sniper, demonstrates the finer points of marksmanship to a group of Iraqi Army students on July 31, 2009.

2-112th Inf. 'Paxton'



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles Sgt. Sergio Carmona pulls security at the corner of a building May 19 during a search for explosives in Abu Ghraib.



Photo by Sgt. Philip Schratwieser Staff Sgt. Joel Oravitz (at right) of Beaver Falls, Pa. and Spc. Mark Laird of Phoenix, Ariz., load bags of food onto an Iraqi Army truck June 25.



Photo by Sgt. Philip Schratwieser At left: A mixed crowd of soldiers from the 2-112th and the 24/6 Iraqi Army brigade return to the 100m firing line after examining their targets July 31.

Spc. Mark Cameron (below, right), pulls security at a building in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, March 23, during a district advisory council meeting.

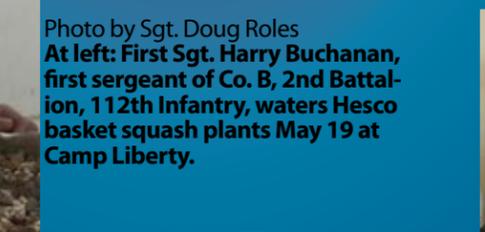


Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles At left: First Sgt. Harry Buchanan, first sergeant of Co. B, 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry, waters Hesco basket squash plants May 19 at Camp Liberty.

Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles Staff Sgt. Jose Martinez (center) rolls simulated casualty Spc. Dean Matthews to his side May 17 as Cpl. Jason Rhoads (at left) looks on during a Combat Life Saver Class for Iraqi Army Soldiers.



2-104th Cav. 'Raven'

Soldiers from Bravo Troop, 2-104th Cav. move out from their Stryker vehicles in June at Sa'ab al Bour



Capt. John Sheaf (third from left) Delta Troop commander, at a stable call in July at the footprint.



856th Eng. Co.

Above: Third platoon uses MRAP vehicles to conduct a route clearance on route Lincoln.

At left: Spc. Crawford, Sgt. 1st Class Koontz and Lt. Peffer pull security from atop a Buffalo vehicle on Route Tampa. Photo by Staff Sgt. Joshua Bentley

At right: Spc. Anthony Pompliano uses a metal detector March 3 in Kem Village. Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles



Charlie Troop prepares to move out of Camp Taji.



Above: Soldiers with Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 2-104th Cav. meet Iraqi children during a school supply drop in March at Western Village. At left: A Soldier with Alpha Troop, 2/104th Cav. relaxes on his Stryker at Joint Security Station Sheik Amir, Feb. 19.



At right: First Platoon clears MSR Tampa. Photo by Staff Sgt. Kenneth Claycomb

Far right: Spc. Gill, Pfc. Strickland and Sgt. Roles conduct a cache search. Photo by Staff Sgt. Joshua Bentley

Below: Second platoon clears Route Cobras.



Bravo Troop Strykers move along a canal outside Sa'ab al Bour in July.



Chaplain (Capt.) Meyers conducts a religious service at Camp Taji in July.

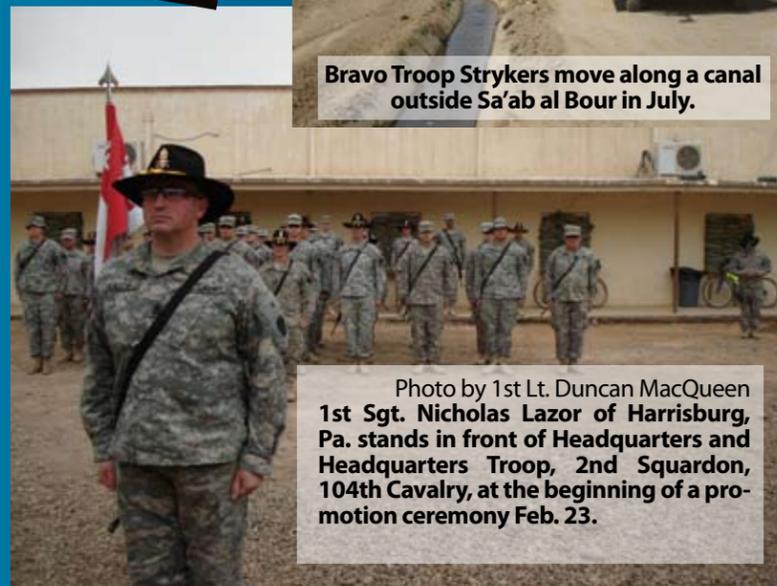


Photo by 1st Lt. Duncan MacQueen
1st Sgt. Nicholas Lazor of Harrisburg, Pa. stands in front of Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 2nd Squadron, 104th Cavalry, at the beginning of a promotion ceremony Feb. 23.



The 856th Engineer Co. in front of the company motor pool. Photo by Capt. Ed Shank





America's birthday month brought a gray day and even an orange-weather day to "Independence Brigade" Soldiers serving at Camp Taji, Iraq. Three U.S. flags (center) displayed behind building 543 brightened an otherwise dusty July 4 afternoon. Clockwise from below, right: The "gray out" brought a fresh layer of fine dust to the Pod 3 area; cut visibility for motorists and pedestrians alike; and obscured traffic signs.

Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

July Colors



The afternoon of July 29 brought a repeat performance from Mother Nature, this time with a rust tint. Above, left: Headlights mean the difference between seeing the approaching Humvee and barely seeing the parked MRAP vehicles behind it. At left: A Soldier walks along 56th Street. Background photo: The brigade colors (center, right) are just visible in front of the brigade building.



Chaplain's reflection

We have run the race

In the ninth chapter of the First Letter to the Church in Corinth we read, "You know that while all the runners in the stadium take part in the race, the award goes to one man. In that case, run so as to win. Athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. They do this to win a crown of leaves that withers, but we a crown that is imperishable." (1 Cor. 9:24-25.) NAB

As we look back at the past year we will no doubt reflect on many significant events. In some respects it seems so long ago that we mustered at Camp Shelby and in other ways it seems like just yesterday. You may recall that time and time again we were reminded that the mission was to be likened to a marathon race and not a sprint. In this respect the words of First Corinthians, quoted above, are very appropriate. We trained, we prepared, we said our good-byes, we sacrificed, we planned, we executed orders

and missions and we denied ourselves all sorts of things. We did these things not win a laurel wreath or to have a medal pinned on our uniforms or to receive praise and glory. We did it for our loved ones, our nation, the people of Iraq and ultimately for one another.

All of us can hopefully look back upon this past year with a certain sense of pride and achievement. There is but a small percentage of our nation's population that is willing to serve in its military. That means that great responsibility is placed in the hands of but a few, but for those of us willing to take up the mantle of service and duty great reward can be achieved. These rewards are not necessarily found in our DD 214's or in awards and citations. They are found in the sense of purpose and accomplishment that we take with us in our journey of life.

I encourage you keep the

memories of what you did here in a special place. Sometimes it is difficult for us to know, understand or appreciate the impact that we have on the lives of others. Know this that lives have been changed for the better by what you have done. The people of Iraq have freedom; the country of Iraq has stability and our nation has security as a result of what you have done here.

Relationships and bonds that have been forged here will stay with you for the rest of your lives. It is something unique to the military that experiences shared, in the midst of hardship and difficulties, have the ability to establish relationships that achieve a depth seldom attained through other means. Cherish these and maintain them to the best of your ability.

Finally, as we prepare to return home I ask you to be patient. Be patient with your loved ones, family and friends



as you celebrate reunion. Be patient with your co-workers as you return to work and other responsibilities. Most especially be patient with yourself. Take the time to truly enjoy reintegration with all the components of your life. Congratulations on a mission extremely well done. Take your imperishable crown and wear it proudly. I hope to see all of you when we have returned home.

**Pro Deo et Patria
CH (COL) Bert S. Kozen
"Independence Spirit"**

The path forward: Finalizing education plans

**By 1st Lt. Robert Prah
56th SBCT Education Officer**
Now that you are nearing demobilization, planning vacations and reunions, and relaxing after a year deployment, it's also time to finalize your education benefits. There are a few very important steps that must be done to a "T" in order to expedite the approval of your new Chapter 33 / Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits.

How do you request to change to the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefit or apply for the first time?

The first thing you want to do is make sure you have all your paperwork in line. It is recommended, although not required, to wait until demobilization and after you receive your DD 214 to formally apply for benefits. Once you have your DD 214 and any other copies of orders prior to mobilization, visit https://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp_ssl/intro1.asp and begin the Veterans Online Application (VONAPP). This online application also gives you the opportunity to apply for

VA compensation, pension, vocational rehabilitation, and burial benefits.

To file for education benefits, soldiers of the 56th Stryker Brigade may use the VONAPP program. For soldiers returning from Iraq or who have previously served on title 10 orders may check the option for Chapter 33 / Post 9/11 G.I. Bill.

Many soldiers will ask the question, "How can I get my application processed quickly?" The answer to this is to have all your



paperwork in order and complete the application as thoroughly as possible. The more complete you application, the faster the Veterans Affairs can process it.

Often enough, soldiers ask the question, "Will using the online application (VONAPP) process my claim faster than the hard copy application?" The answer is two-fold – Yes and No. VONAPP does guide you through the form and supplies you with help topics along the way. If you are looking
(Continued on Page 29)

West Chester University – zip code of 19383	Actual	Paid or Covered
Tuition per semester:	\$2,777.00	\$1,666.20
Approx housing / rent:	\$450/month	\$1,292.00 BAH/month
Book stipend: \$250-\$500 semester		\$600.00/year

The above information is based off a single soldier / student attending West Chester University of Pennsylvania after a 12 month deployment to Iraq. The student is enrolled in an undergraduate program and taking between 12-18 credit hours for the fall 2009 semester. All values in the "paid or covered" column reflect a 60% benefit with serving at least 12 cumulative months of active duty. The amount of money paid or received would increase to 70% with 18 months, 80% with 24 months, 90% with 30 months, and 100% with 36 or more cumulative months

The above amount does not factor scholarships, applying for and using EAP or FTA

Women's History Month: Female Soldiers critical to success of our ranks

By Sgt. 1st Class
EUGENE BURNS
56th SBCT EO NCO

When the phrase "this man's Army" is used, do people like Susan B. Anthony, Rosa Parks, Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley, or maybe The Adjutant General (TAG) of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, GEN Jessica Wright come to mind?

They should. They're the ones who began and continue the effort for women's equality. On Aug. 26, 2009 the women listed above will be honored as will the women of our nation, our military, and our lives, like our wives, our sisters, our daughters, our mothers, our friends, our battle buddies, or the others supporting us on the home front or fighting along side us on the battlefield.

Women of all races and all backgrounds have climbed the military ladder to success and in doing so erased some stereotypes of long ago.

"Your mother wears combat boots" was once considered derogatory but today it might mean my mother makes more money than yours, or my mother protects our nation, or even my mother deploys with me. Today the military is an honest living for any woman no matter what race or background and that was made possible by all the women who came before them, beginning with Rep. Bella Abzug (D-NY), who in 1971, pushed the U.S. Congress to designate Aug. 26 as "Women's Equality Day." The date was selected to commemorate the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, granting women the right to vote. This was the culmination of a massive, peaceful civil rights movement by women that had its formal beginnings in 1848 at the world's first women's rights convention, in Seneca Falls, NY. The observance of Women's Equality Day not only commemorates the passage of the 19th Amendment, but also calls attention to women's continuing efforts toward full equality.

This day of "equality" however, didn't come without a price. Just as many suffered and died while fighting for our civil rights, women suffered and died for what they believed to be their civil right and in some cases, civil duty.

Contrary to slanted opinions

about women there is a long historical precedent for women in some form of warfare - though not always in a uniform. For the early pioneer women "home defense" was as routine as drawing well water. For example, in the Revolutionary decade the first known woman to serve and receive a pension for her service was Margaret Corbin who fought with her husband at Fort Mifflin. In 1779 Congress voted her a disability pension of one half a soldier's pay and one suit of clothes or the equivalent in cash. Years later, another Revolutionary heroine, Deborah Samson, was granted a pension by the Massachusetts legislature in 1804 and in 1822 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania awarded Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley a pension of forty dollars a year "for services rendered" during the war.

The first and only woman to ever receive The Medal of Honor was Dr. Mary E. Walker, a contract surgeon during the Civil War. The first woman to receive The Purple Heart was Annie G. Fox while serving at Hickam Field during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941. The first woman to receive The Bronze Star was 1st Lt. Cordelia E. Cook, Army Nurse Corps, during WWII in Italy. She was also awarded The Purple Heart and became the first woman to receive two awards. Barbara Olive Barnwell was the first woman awarded the Navy-Marine Corps Medal for heroism in 1953. She was a Marine Staff Sergeant from Pittsburgh, Pa. and a member of the Marine Reserve who saved a soldier from drowning in 1952. Col. Oveta Culp Hobby, the first Director of the WAC, was the first woman to receive The U.S. Army Distinguished Service Medal in 1945.

The first woman to ever enlist was Philadelphia Loretta Walsh enlisted in March of 1917 and became the first Yeoman (F) in the Navy.

Since Desert Storm women in the military have been effectively performing their jobs world wide. According to the Defense Manpower Data Center over 1,000 women participated in U.S. military operations in Somalia between 1992 and 1994. In 1995 over 1,200 women were deployed to Haiti for peacekeeping duties.

To date over 5,000 women have served in the peacekeeping operations in Bosnia. More than 170,000 women have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002, according to the Pentagon, nearly four times the number during the Persian Gulf War.

Iraq is no different. The 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team boasts many female warriors just as diverse and talented as their fellow male warriors. Some even serve alongside their husbands, sons, and brothers but all are paving the way and opening doors for future generations of women to accomplish even more in this man's, and women's, Army.

QUOTES from 56thSBCT Female Soldiers

"Woman is a label for civilians. I am an American Soldier. I train, and work, and fight and live in the same conditions that the men do. I am capable of saving a life or taking one if need be. I maintain my physical fitness not on the 'female scale' but on a scale that allows me to achieve optimal performance at all times. I fire my weapon, expert every time. I push myself everyday to succeed in a man's world and I do. I leave my family for long periods of time without reservation because it is my duty. I do not allow others to diminish my accomplishments and I always strive to do my best. In my heart I am equal to every other soldier. I now wait for the rest of the world to agree but for now I chuckle, pick-up my M4, put on my eyeproof and walk across Camp Taji, Iraq to deliver an article on 'Women's Equality in the Military'. I bet the enemies' bullets and rockets consider me completely equal when it comes to KILLING a soldier." – Staff Sgt. Nicole Keller, White, Serving in Iraq with her husband

"As a woman in the Army, I wear many hats. I am a mother; a girlfriend, a Soldier; an NCO, a mentor; and a student. I try my best to stay strong and be a warrior; because that is expected of me as an NCO and a mother. I am constantly competing with my male counterparts proving that I am just as strong and competent as they are. I am a corrections NCO. I work in a male prison. I am approximately 5 feet tall. I con-



stantly have to assert myself as a leader and as an authoritative figure, because I am a woman. I feel that women bring a balance to the services. Sometimes my presence alone can defuse a situation. Not only am I tough when I need to be, but I am also caring and compassionate when I need to be. We are a great asset to the military. I have learned to be true to myself. We all joined the military for our own personal reasons. Just remember to stay focused on your end result and strive for excellence because it is attainable." – Staff Sgt. Tina Brokenbrough, African American, Active duty attachment to 56th SBCT.

"After college, the military was the best decision I've ever made. In order for me to be successful I had to have a strong moral compass and will. Although we like to think the military is without bias and a place where women can be almost anything they want to be, it isn't. Our military still has men who come with their individual prejudices and perceptions of females and their abilities. It is up to us to prove them wrong. It's up to us to excel physically, stay rational, be stable, and never look at the minimum requirements. Always strive for the highest scores and the highest honors. Be the difference and make the difference and never listen to anyone who says you can't do something because of the gender you were blessed with. All that being said, never ever compromise yourself as a woman, a lady, or a warrior. Make yourself proud and your families prouder. Be a leader." – Capt. Maria Claus, Latin American, FLARNG

MND-B commander commends 56th SBCT, pledges to continue Iraq mission

Independence—Roll On!

The Pennsylvania Army National Guard's 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team has served north of Baghdad since February 2009. From the start, these citizen-Soldiers took the fight to the enemy every day and night. Working with Iraqi Army and Police, Soldiers of the Independence Brigade's 2-104th Cavalry, 1-111th Infantry, 1-112th Infantry, and 2-112th Infantry captured numerous high-value Al Qaeda terrorists and affiliated militants. They found huge buried caches of ammunition and weapons. The 1st Battalion, 108th Field Artillery fired their 155mm howitzers in anger for the first time since World War II—and with great effect, pummeling the enemy with more than 2000 rounds. The 328th Brigade Support Battalion sustained it all, and with the 556th Military Intelligence Company and 856th Engineer Company, fought it out alongside their Pennsylvania brothers and sisters. This superb brigade lived up to the finest traditions of the 28th Infantry Division, and added new luster to the history of that storied formation.

Soldier to Soldier ...

All have contributed to the fight

As we near the end of this deployment, we look forward to what we must do to finish our mission. However, to look forward, we must look back. For some of us, this journey started in 2004 from fielding Strykers, to progressing through the brigade's Warfighter exercise and to the mobilization. Since then, our glide path to war has been built on SRPs, NCO-ERs, annual training, leader training, strength reports, promotions, manifesting, several packing lists and briefing after briefing.

Soldiers received the new IBA, then the IOTV. We have lived in block buildings, giant circus tents, dog kennels, barracks, JSS (Joint Security Stations) and CHU (Containerized Housing Units). We adapted to 80-degree weather in Camp Shelby, Miss., to rain and snow at Fort Polk, La., to ice at Fort Dix, N.J., and acclimatized to 120-degree heat here in Iraq. Most of us will have moved a minimum of seven times. We also now hold or share the record for the longest JRTC (Joint Readiness Training

Center) Rotation. Along the way, we have manned ECPs (Entrance Control Points) and conducted rail head operations. We have conducted air operations, DCLPs (supply convoys) and numerous combat patrols. The artillery has fired the most in the division. We have attended several key leader engagements and have partnered with the Iraq Army and worked with the Iraq Police. We have combined the force with Soldiers from other states, IRR, active duty, Air Force, Navy and ePRT. We have worked with contracting, RMS and KBR. The list of tasks accomplished goes on and on. Each and every one of you has contributed to the mission and this is a tribute to your hours of sweat and hard work.

As we get ready to depart, there is still a lot of work ahead of us. We have many suspense dates that must be met—requirements that every soldier must meet and tasks that every Soldier must do. As we redeploy we must remember safety. Every Soldier will have a battle buddy. I do not want to

Baum got a fix on enemy fighters in a tree line. The platoon called for illumination rounds and pinpointed the enemy. Then, in the gray light of dawn, they closed in by fire and maneuver. Baum led by example. In a vicious close-quarters gunfight, the Guardsmen shot one insurgent in the leg as the others ran for it. But that enemy got off a lucky shot and killed Baum. Baum's last living act was to inspire his men to finish the job. They did it with discipline, capturing the hostile and, after questioning him, finding a huge buried stockpile of weapons and ammunition that this insurgent had been guarding. Roadside bombs on that route tailed off for weeks. Baum's courage set the standard for the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team and for all of Multinational Division-Baghdad. And it taught the enemy something they have learned every day since: These Pennsylvanians don't ever quit.

That example is a good one for us all. This month, the 56th SBCT heads home to a well-deserved break and well-earned accolades. As we bid farewell to these tough



Guardsmen, it's up to the rest of us in MND-Baghdad to stay on it. That we will, the way our 56th SBCT brothers and sisters taught us. We'll look out for each other. We'll find the enemy. And we'll finish strong.

First Team! Team First! Roll On!

Daniel P. Bolger
Major General, U.S. Army
Commander, MND-Baghdad &
1st Cavalry Division



out this deployment. Therefore, we need to finish as strong as we started.

We must never forget our fallen and wounded Soldiers. As the 56 SBCT CSM, it has been my honor and privilege to serve with you on the battle field of Iraq. I will see all of you on the High Ground.

INDEPENDENCE 7 Out!

"Strength through Honor"

John E. Jones
56th SBCT
Command Sergeant Major

Commander's Corner

Families, employers silent heros of 56th's successful deployment

When I wrote my first commander's column for *Independence Gazette* I quoted a young Soldier who said, "It's just time to do it." Well as we prepare to redeploy, I think we can all say unequivocally, that you all did just that; you did it, and you did it damn well. I remain amazed at your resiliency, loyalty, dedication, and professionalism to get the job done. Not only did you achieve every goal, but you did so establishing a new standard within the Army.

There were many milestones achieved during our journey of transformation and mobilization. Let me take a minute to explain some:

- We are the first and only Stryker Brigade in the Reserve Component

- We were the first formation in the National Guard to transform, setting a standard of excellence within the Guard

- We are the largest contingent to be called up for mobilization in the State since World War II

- We had the lowest REFRAD rate of any BCT to mobilize within the Guard

- During JRTC, many of the Brigade's TTP's are now being used as best practices for the entire army

- We are the first unit of the 28th Division to fire artillery in a conflict since World War II.

- We have awarded 11 combat awards for valor

- We have conducted well over 1200 combined patrols with the ISF, to include six combined air assault operations.

- We have closed out approximately 100 projects at a cost of around \$22 million. These projects were not just stop-gap measures designed to fill an immedi-

ate need for the people but were also well tailored to help Iraqis help themselves.

- We captured seven brigade-level high-value targets along with 80 other targeted individuals, greatly increasing security for the Iraqi people in our area. We have not only made conditions safer we have also helped the area to grow economically while aiding improvement of essential services.

There are many more that I am sure you are all aware of, but the bottom line is you can be proud of your accomplishments.

Have we made a difference? Absolutely. We have captured the attention of many who are impressed with our success. When you look back on your tour, know you have made a difference in Iraq. Through our partnership and mentoring of the ISF, they are taking on greater responsibility in maintaining security. The government in now being empowered to plan for and complete projects that provides basic needs for the Iraqi people. The true value of your efforts cannot be measured in dollars or megawatts of new power generated. The value will be found in the Iraqi people. They now have opportunities that previously did not exist and it is now their turn to carry the torch and provide for what you have laid the foundation for. You have provided them with the basic needs that they need to be successful, security, food, water, electricity, and many more other things.

All of this did not come without sacrifice. Some of the members of this brigade sacrificed life and limb in the course of their duties. Our nation will never be able to repay the debt that is owed to them and their families. As we depart

we remember two of our Soldiers who were killed in action, Staff Sgt. Mark Baum and Spc. Chad Edmundson. Our thoughts and prayers are with their families. We will always remember them for what made them great Soldiers and what made them great people to the friends who knew them best.

We need to thank our employers. Without the support of your employers, this mission and the successes we have enjoyed would not have been possible. They have had to endure all the missed time at work for training and then the year long deployment. It is important to ensure that you thank them and recognize them as we return home and you return to work.

Our communities have played an ever important part of our deployment and share in the successes as well. During the course of this year we have received so much support from our communities. They send care packages, phone cards, toiletry items, movies and video games. It shows their patriotic spirit and their support to their citizen soldiers. This is something no other organization shares in the military. Our ties to our communities are important and we need to recognize them upon our return.

Most importantly, we need to thank the silent heroes, our families. Whether it is a mother or father, husband or wife, brother or sister, son or daughter, they have sacrificed immensely during this past year. It is a year that none of us will be able to get back, but it is a year in which you should all be especially proud of what they have done back home. They too are patriots in their own ways. Nobody



fully understands the sacrifices of a military family. When a mother has to be both the mother and the father, when the oldest child steps up to fill the shoes of a mother or father who is deployed, it is a difficult task, and in many respects, much more difficult than what we go through day in and day out. I could not be more proud of our family members back home for their support. First let me thank them for their service not just to the Soldiers, but to a thankful nation. We miss and love them dearly, and make sure when you get home you tell them that.

You have lived up to the history and great lineage of honors 56th Brigade and 28th Infantry Division. You have all taken your place in its history just as our forefathers did in 1747. Your hard work and dedication will be forever written in its pages. It will stand as a record of your accomplishment for all times. We will always be bonded together in this experience, for we are truly a Band of Brothers and Sisters. To serve with you all has been my greatest honor and privilege of my career. I want to thank you all for your sacrifices and dedication.

"Strength through Honor"
Marc Ferraro
COL, IN
Commanding
Independence 6

Path

(Con't from Page 26)

to complete a compensation or pension application, they can be difficult, depending on the amount of information requested. The online application also helps edit items so that you will have fewer typing errors. For soldiers returning with the 56 SBCT, the VONAPP gives you the ability to attach documents such as DD 214 or other necessary paperwork in addition to mailing a copy as well.

When using the online application option, the Department of Veterans Affairs will automati-

cally generate an e-mail that will be sent to the e-mail as provided on your application notifying that your application has been received.

For a complete listing of VA benefits, please visit the following website:

http://www1.va.gov/OPA/vadocs/current_benefits.asp

For a complete listing of updated education benefits, please visit the following websites periodically as they are updated as new information is received:

Federal Tuition Assistance: [\[man.ngb.army.mil/benefits\]\(http://man.ngb.army.mil/benefits\) Education Assistance Program: <http://www.milvet.state.pa.us/DMVA/2651.htm>](https://minute-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

G.I. Bill: http://www.gibill.va.gov/pamphlets/Ch33/Ch33_Pamphlet.pdf

Scholarships: www.iava.org & www.sva.org
Upon demobilization, please do not hesitate to contact [1LT] Robert Prah, Director of Veterans Affairs for California University of Pennsylvania, at robert.prah@calu.edu or robert.prah@us.army.mil for any questions concerning your military education benefits.

THE ULTIMATE WEAPON...



...IF USED CORRECTLY

INDEPENDENCE 7

Going Home

