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## Soldiers hand over Baghdad mail operations to contractors

By Staff Sgt. Nate Orme  
3rd Personnel Command PAO

BAGHDAD INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, Iraq—After enduring months of intense heat, long hours, dust, pigeon guano, and Spartan living conditions since their arrival in May, Army postal units have nearly completed turnover of military postal operations to contractors.

The turnover began last October, when the first KBR postal workers began to arrive, said Lt. Col Steven Heggen, commander of the 461st Personnel Services Battalion, a Reserve unit from Decatur, Ga.

Once, the Joint Military Mail Terminal was manned exclusively with soldiers from the 461st PSB and its down-trace units from the Guard, Reserve and active Army. Now, but for a handful of postal soldiers, the terminal is nearly all staffed by KBR employees. Heggen said the handoff was necessary partly because the Army does not have the number of postal units to support continued operations.

To date, the cavernous terminal has processed over 90 million pounds of mail, distributed in over 1,000 mail convoys to a dozen points in Iraq, Heggen said. Mail convoys, consisting of one to 12 tractor trailers each hauling two 20-foot or one 40-foot mail-filled metal containers, go out daily. Each convoy is escorted by military "gun trucks"—two or three 5-ton trucks outfitted with gun turrets mounted with a machine gun, usually a 50-caliber. KBR employees drive the tractor-trailers as they have done since the first mail trucks entered Iraq in May, while transportation unit soldiers operate the gun trucks. Beginning in May, postal soldiers armed with M-16 assault rifles also handled the escort details, riding "shotgun" with KBR drivers. In July, transportation units picked up the escort detail.

The giant mail terminal building was originally found in decrepit condition, as it had not been used for over a decade except by a small division of pigeons which had covered the floor with their droppings. All that and the mounds of dust and debris were cleared away, Army engineers came and modified parts of the structure, and countless objects and trash were hauled out before operations began, Heggen said. The building, which appears to have once been an Iraqi Airlines cargo storage facility, was chosen because of its all-important loading docks and large covered area.

Opened to relieve the load on the JMMT in Kuwait, which now supports camps only in Kuwait, the terminal in Baghdad supported almost all the Army and Air Force post offices in Iraq, until mail began to be flown directly to other points, namely Mosul and Kirkuk.

For the first month, everything from electricity and water to hot meals were in scarce supply for the postal soldiers. MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) made up two of three meals a day, while a small chow tent served hot meals once a day. Sleeping arrangements were wherever they could be found. Some soldiers set up in the office areas of the building, some in spare mail containers, and still others in an 8-

story building half a mile away dubbed the "crack house" due to its degenerated condition.

As the months went by the JMMT improved. The building was electrified by a contracted Iraqi company, air conditioning units were put into offices, better toilet and shower facilities (no more hose attached to a bucket of cold water) became available, the large Bob Hope Dining Facility and a PX opened across the highway, and even the Internet was beamed in via satellite. But most importantly, the postal units got the upper hand on the mail, conquering the logistical

nightmare of supporting over 100,000 troops who are constantly moving around in a war zone.

The last real challenge the soldiers and KBR employees of the JMMT had was during the Christmas mail surge.

"It was horrible," laughed Sgt. Janet Resto, a soldier with the 912th Postal Company from Orlando, Fl., and a transportation traffic manager in her civilian job. "It began before Thanksgiving and lasted until the second week in January. No days off, we worked 14-18 hours every day. We got so much mail it was incredible. But we never got behind. We even got Christmas off since we were caught up. Soldiers appreciate what we do here. They say thank you. It's nice to hear that."

The Army will continue to have a small presence at the terminal as oversight for KBR operations, Heggen said. Currently, 461st soldiers still process mail for 10,000 soldiers from local units based at the airport, via the post office across the street run by their Reserve 394th Postal Company from Long Beach, Calif.

According to KBR manager of the JMMT, Randy Jarrell, KBR currently has 56 employees working at the terminal. After arriving in September, KBR employees first cross-trained with the Army units to learn their system.

"We've changed some processes since then so we wouldn't have to utilize as many personnel," Jarrell said.

The KBR records clerk works closely with the Army to update records, called the theater routing scheme, of soldiers moving from camp to camp. KBR employees also needed to get clearances to process registered mail, one of the last major functions that postal soldiers had recently handed off to KBR. Many of the KBR employees have worked at the United States Postal Service or are former postal soldiers, Jarrell said.

Living conditions are essentially the same for KBR employees as they are for the military. They can eat at the dining facility or they may choose to eat at the Burger King stand nearby, said to be one of the busiest in the world. For some, it has been a test at "roughing it."

"Most were pretty enthusiastic to begin with. Some of that excitement is slowly wearing off," Jarrell said, but added that was to be expected in any situation. "Very few went home because they decided it wasn't what they thought it would be. It is less than we expected. Any time you start a new project it is challenging. It's a learning experience for all. Our people have proved their 'stickability' here."



**461st PSB soldiers working in the redirected mail area at the Joint Military Mail Terminal in Baghdad.**



## Spotlight

### Army postal soldiers earn valor in Iraq

By Staff Sgt. Nate Orme  
3rd Personnel Command PAO

BAGHDAD, Iraq--"I told the two Iraqi males to get in the back of the truck," said Capt. Juan David Pena, displaying concern for the property of two innocent strangers while in the midst of commandeering their truck at gunpoint during an anti-Coalition ambush of Pena's small reconnaissance convoy.

Pena was able to take control of the truck and extract himself, two other soldiers, and the body of a civilian contractor out of the ambush.

For their performance "in keeping with the highest traditions of military service" three soldiers from the 461st Personnel Services Battalion-Pena, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Robert Meyerhoff and Spc. Travis Duarte-have each been approved to receive the Bronze Star for Valor. Meyerhoff has also been approved for the Purple Heart for injuries sustained during the ambush.

The events began the morning of Sept. 3, explained Meyerhoff and Pena recently, soon after their convoy of two non-tactical vehicles (i.e., SUVs) left the secure confines of the joint military mail terminal at the Baghdad International Airport. They were headed to the new Army post office at a camp near the ancient city of Babylon, mapping out a route along the way to be used for mail delivery by KBR truck drivers.

Shortly after heading out onto a major highway, Meyerhoff determined they needed to be going in the other direction. While making a U-turn, the convoy was suddenly hit by a barrage of bullets, instantly killing Vernon Gaston, a civilian KBR employee, who was driving the vehicle with Meyerhoff, Pena and Duarte.

Duarte, carrying the substantial power of a squad automatic weapon, bailed out as the vehicle, without driver, careened over a berm and continued to attract bullets. Meyerhoff then jumped out and exchanged fire with the suspected enemy location, followed seconds later by Pena exiting the besieged vehicle.

Duarte quickly found cover in a ditch and began to return fire with his SAW, providing cover for the two other men. Meyerhoff, injured in the calf where a bullet had ripped through him during the first volley, began to force himself toward the vehicle, now stopped where it had hit a wall. When Meyerhoff collapsed on his leg, Pena rushed out and dragged him by his flack jacket the rest of the way, and both took cover behind the vehicle. Separately, each of them checked on Gaston and determined he was dead-a bullet had pierced his temple just under his Kevlar helmet. The two then assessed their situation.

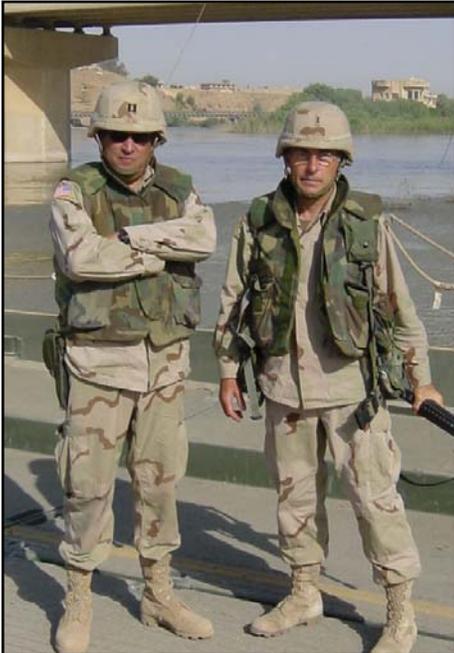
Unable to contact the other vehicle, which escaped the ambush but was unable to assist, Pena, with two good legs, dashed over to Duarte, while Duarte with SAW and Meyerhoff with M-16 assault rifle provided him cover. After a few moments, Meyerhoff, summoning untapped adrenaline, made a mad limp over to the other two. Pena, M-16 in hand, then went to the road, heavy with moving traffic, and stopped a small truck. The two young, scared Iraqi males inside complied with Pena's orders to get in the back. Soon, Meyerhoff and Duarte were also in the truck, Duarte in the back with the two Iraqis, where he told his fellow soldiers that he "had their back."

The three went back to the crashed vehicle and collected Gaston's body, Meyerhoff providing cover while struggling with the pain in his leg that was making him dizzy and near to passing out.

Once back on the road, Pena drove against traffic for over a mile, with Meyerhoff momentarily forgetting his bloody leg while furiously directing people to get out of the way. Finally, the truck was able to cross to the right side of the road. After an equal distance, the truck reached a military compound where the soldiers fired a few rounds to signal someone's attention. A passing military convoy saw their distress and assisted them to the 407th Forward Support Battalion encampment nearby. The two young Iraqis then got their truck back.

Meyerhoff was taken to the trauma center, followed by surgery. Days later he would be sent to Germany and eventually to Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington D.C. for further treatment. Meanwhile, Pena and Duarte went back to the mail terminal at the airport and both soon were back to work.

"I didn't want to stay in the states," said Meyerhoff, a former Marine rifleman who served in Vietnam in '68-'69. "The mission wasn't accomplished. (See VALOR, next page)



**Capt. Juan David Pena, left, and CW3 Robert Meyerhoff stand for a photo on a bridge in Iraq.**

## Soldier Talk

*If you could travel back in time, what event would you visit?*



**The birth of Jesus because he's my lord and saviour.**

Spc. Pedro Palanco  
131st Trans. Co.



**The World Fair in St. Louis around 1895. It was one of the great wonders of the world.**

Staff Sgt. Larry Arrington  
803rd QM Co.



**The parade in 1963 when JFK was shot to see with my own eyes exactly what happened.**

Spc. Nicki Miller  
1168th Trans. Co.



**When Henry Ford first mass-produced the automobile.**

Sgt. Jason Cowell  
1168th Trans. Co.



**I would go back and choose a different career path in the Army.**

Sgt. 1st Class Cheryl Knight-Davis  
724th MP Bat.



**The resurrection because that's the foundation of my faith.**

Master Sgt. Dan Fishel  
3rd PERSCOM

## News Briefs

(*VALOR, from p.2*) I got a medical clearance to get back. I have to do therapy for my leg it's all."

"Really, it was more of a sense of honor (to return)-to finish the mission," said Meyerhoff. "When you're in the military, you have two families. Even when home, you miss the relationships and camaraderie."

Meyerhoff credits that feeling to the collaborative environment created by Lt. Col. Steven Heggen, commander of the 461st PSB, a Reserve unit from Decatur, Ga.

"Col. Heggen's leadership allows people to expand and take on additional responsibilities. His leadership style really aids in the motivation and dedication of soldiers. We work as a team. When the ambush happened, we didn't second guess each other. The trust was already there," Meyerhoff explained.

Before returning to Iraq, Meyerhoff was able to visit his wife and 16-year-old son at home in Valle Crucis, N.C., welcomed by the sight of trees lined with yellow ribbons along his driveway and neighbors and friends deluging the Meyerhoffs with home-cooked dinners, wine and gifts.

Pena also went home, but later, on regular rest and recuperation leave over Christmas. There, he was greeted first by family at the airport and then by neighbors waiting at the entrance of his Atlanta, Ga., neighborhood.

Unlike Meyerhoff, who, with a wink, yarned that getting shot at was old hat from his "Nam" days, Pena said the experience

changed him.

"It made me more alert every time we go out," Pena said. "You realize how quickly life can change in a matter of seconds. It felt good to be around someone you knew under fire. Though injured, he (Meyerhoff) had my back. And Spc. Duarte reacted fearlessly and without hesitation."

Pena and Meyerhoff's words evoked the American spirit of fairness and decency displayed even during war-hard to imagine in most other militaries-that caused Pena to remember that the two scared Iraqis would want their vehicle back after it was briefly commandeered. It is a poignant example of the fundamental difference between the Americans, who do not blame average Iraqis for the criminal, world-destabilizing behavior of their now-deposed leadership, and the few "dead-enders" in Iraq who would kill anyone-one man, woman, child, friend, ethnic foe-without compunction to achieve their tortured goals.

Killed KBR driver, Vernon Gaston, 46, who had served on the Lampasas, Texas, city council back home, was laid to rest at the First Baptist Church in Lampasas on Sept. 12. He is survived by his three sons, a daughter and his wife Kaye.

All three soon-to-be-decorated soldiers are back working at the mail terminal alongside KBR employees, ensuring that thousands of soldiers receive their mail while in Iraq. The three are scheduled to remain in the Operation Iraqi Freedom theater until the 461st PSB returns this spring.

### C-23: Big Little Plane

By Lt. Col. Robert Johnson  
CFLCC Public Affairs Officer

It sits like a big green bumble bee on the pavement and you ask yourself, "Can this thing really fly?"

Like the bumblebee, the Army's C-23 Sherpa airplane certainly looks like it would defy logic and gravity if it did fly. With its stubby wings, bloated body and twin tails, this small but able cargo aircraft can not only fly, but excels in the role of intra theater transport of cargo and personnel.

"It's a great little plane," said Staff Sgt. Edward McKenna III, crew chief for one of the Sherpas of I Company, 185th Aviation Battalion stationed at Ali Al Salem Airbase.

The C-23 can be configured to haul cargo or personnel. It can easily handle twenty people or three pallets of cargo, said the Mississippi native McKenna. The plane may be slow, but it can reach most distant airfields without a fuel problem. It's appetite for fuel is much less than the CH-47 Chinook medium-lift helicopter. Because of this, it's economical to fly the Sherpa when speed is not essential.

"We fly almost everyday to somewhere in the theater." An air crew gets at least three missions a week since the aircraft was brought into Kuwait back in June and we fly anywhere in the theater except Baghdad, added McKenna.

"We tried flying into Baghdad once, but we're just too slow for the threat." The plane got shot at several times before it got onto the ground. So we stay away from high threat areas and use other tactics to stay safe, said McKenna.

This day's mission was not into Baghdad, but further north into Kirkuk as part of a three plane convoy ferrying school supplies for a civil affairs program in the 173rd Infantry Brigade. Each plane was loaded with two pallets of school supply materials.

"We have everything from crayons to glue sticks," said Staff Sgt. Steve Silva, the second crew chief on the flight.

Silva, a National Guard Soldier from California, has been flying C-23's since 1998. The mission to Kirkuk was a regular part of Silva's routine and he guided the "Sherpa rookie" passengers through what to expect during the 2 1/2 hour flight.



**A C-23 Sherpa awaits takeoff for a flight to deliver supplies to schools in the town of Laylan, Iraq where 1st Lt. Kyle Barden and his brother, Taylor, started a charity to donate such supplies, like those donated by Home Depot in the photo at lower right.**

"We're not pressurized, so when we climb to above 14,000 feet, you may get a headache if you don't use the oxygen masks," instructed Silva. And, because the back door doesn't seal, the cargo-passenger area will get pretty cold during the trip.

Silva further pointed out the creature comforts of the aircraft that include a not-so-gender-friendly tube for bladder relief in-flight. No meals would be served today and the in-flight movie would be the Iraqi countryside from 14,000 feet as seen out the many large windows on the aircraft.

Despite its ungainly appearance and awkward size, the C-23 provides a relatively stable ride. The Sherpa floats like a butterfly with its smooth flight. Smooth until descending for the landing, anyway. Then the plane stings like a bee.

"We will be above 14,000 to give us protection from small arms fire," said Silva. "But when we start to descend for landing, we will drop at a rate of about 2,000 feet per minute. It's a fast drop and your ears may hurt."

As the plane approached Kirkuk Air Field, it started a steep dive until it was seemingly just above the treetops and houses. At less than a thousand feet,

faces of children and men tending sheep could clearly be seen as they looked skyward at this flying marvel. A smooth landing, a quick refuel and off-load of supplies and the green bumble bee was ready to fly again.

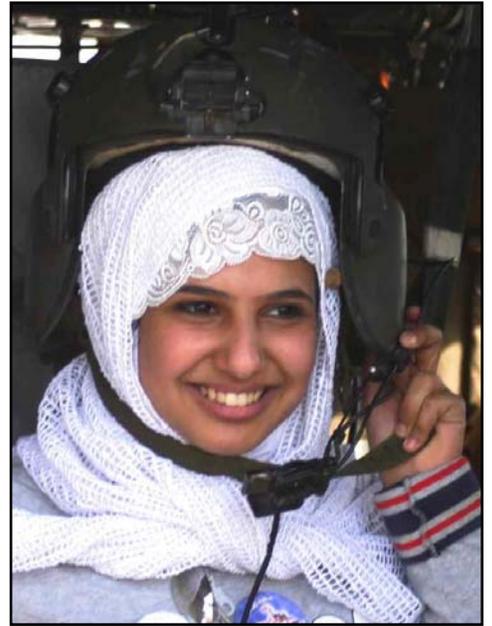
As the Army's cargo aircraft, the C-23 Sherpa is dwarfed by its larger cousins of the Air Force.

"The Sherpa holds about one-eighth the cargo of a C-130," noted Silva. And with its wings removed, the plane would probably fit into the belly of the C-17. But that's not how the C-23 got into theater.

"It was flown here." The company is made up of detachments from Missouri, California, Mississippi and Connecticut and they rallied the planes to a central location in the states. Then every aircraft was flown from the states to Kuwait with stops in Canada, Newfoundland, Iceland, Scotland, Germany, Italy, and Israel. Then over Iraq and into Kuwait. It took them nine days to get here, said a proud Silva.

"Nine long days," added McKenna.

Nine days to arrive and nine months in action have proven this bumblebee ready for flight.



**Guest host? About 200 Kuwaiti high school-age girls, their teachers, and a prince came to Camp Arifjan to meet American female soldiers for a career day coordinated through the Kuwait Scientific Center. Sites were set up in Truckville, at the Army Materiel Command, the medical clinic, and at the airfield. Vehicles and equipment were on display at every stop. At the chowhall, they exchanged autographs and e-mail addresses between bites.**



## Bon Temps

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