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PROUDLY SERVING LSA ANACONDA

Can you spot the rocket launcher?

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Women make their mark on the mission

by Staff. Sgt. Glen Chrisman

1744th Transportation Company Public Affairs

LSA ANACONDA, Iraq – The face of war has changed in many facets over the years. One aspect that continues to evolve is women in the military.

More than 200,000 women currently defend America in our Armed Forces. According to the Department of Defense, about 15 percent of today's military is comprised of females. That compares to 10 percent in 1990, 4.6 percent in 1975, and 1.4 percent in 1970.

The 1744th Transportation Company surpasses the national average, with about 21 percent of their 170 Soldiers being female. Most of the female Soldiers with the Streator, Ill. based National Guard unit say diversity is good for our Armed Services.

Sgt. Maggie Corcoran, 21, of Champaign, Ill. said she works hard to prove she is as good as any Soldier out there.

Spc. Heather Rutledge, 19, of Columbia, Ill. is a prime example of how a woman can do a job that many men have traditionally done.

Rutledge is a gunner on a Security Escort Team that speeds out in armored vehicles protecting damaged trucks until a wrecker can haul them to a coalition operation base.

The Soldier from Southern Illinois is qualified on four out of five weapons used by the 1744th and takes pride in being a female sitting in the turret of a gun truck.

"I really like it," Rutledge said. "Because I am smaller I can move around better than a big guy." The teenage Soldier who just graduated high school one year ago maintains that diversity in the military is a good thing. "It proves that we can do it just as good as the male Soldiers," Rutledge said with a smile.

Pfc. Heather Graham, 20, of Ottawa, Ill. says she feels equal to the male Soldiers most of the time.

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Here comes the cavalry

Soldiers prove their skills to earn their spurs

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Photo by Sgt. Kevin McSwain

Spc. Tony Brollini prepares to throw a simulated grenade at the enemy at a grenade throwing station during a spur ride exercise at Logistical Support Area Anaconda on March 18. Soldiers attached to 1st Squadron, 167th Cavalry (RSTA) participated in the spur ride in order to earn the right to wear spurs during ceremonial occasions.



"I serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values."

I am Sgt. 1st Class Kendall T. Booker from Lanett, Ala. Company B, 125th Finance Battalion >> Detachment Sgt.

Determination, pride in her job helps mechanic do tough tasks

by Sgt. KaRonda Fleming

Anaconda Times

LSA ANACONDA, Iraq – A female generator mechanic takes pride in her job of ensuring that Soldiers are mission ready.

Spc. Veronica C. Gutierrez, with the Headquarters and Support Company, 449th Aviation Support Battalion, 36th Combat Aviation Brigade said she has faced difficulties in her job.

“You are only as strong as you think you are,” she said, explaining how her strength sometimes is not as great as she would like for it to be.

Here at Logistical Support Area Anaconda, the variations in weather pose the biggest challenge, the San Antonio, Texas native said.

“One day, it might be raining here, and the next day it could be sunny or cloudy,” Gutierrez said. “However, the rain is what gets us here at the generator shop.”

She said when there’s rain, it is very difficult to go out and do services and maintenance on the generators.

“Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do to get the job done,” she said.



Spc. Veronica C. Gutierrez

Patience is a distinguishing advantage Gutierrez possesses. She said she is capable of taking on very tedious tasks, which is something she thoroughly enjoys.

“There was an occasion where I had to break a generator down completely and put it back together again,” Gutierrez said. “It took a lot of time, and there were a lot of nuts, bolts, small parts, and a lot of wiring to reassemble. I just took

my time and slowly repaired it.”

Joining the military is one of the best decisions she made in her life, she said. It has improved not only her life, but her children’s lives, too.

She said she joined in 2005 and was the oldest female in her basic training platoon.

“I never gave up,” Gutierrez said. “You can accomplish any goal and reach any dream as long as you have perseverance.”

She said she has five children, and they email her daily telling her how proud they are of her, and she then tells them how proud she is of them.

“They don’t have to necessarily fall into my footsteps, even though my three boys all say they are going to go into the service now,” Gutierrez said. “I want to look back in my life and say that I have accomplished something, and that I have no regrets.”

She said she has a lot of pride in her job, the military, and her family.

“I enjoy it, I think I enjoy it too much sometimes,” she said. “I like the job here. I like taking things apart and putting them back together. I just love it. There’s not another job I would rather have.”



Spc. Veronica C. Gutierrez with the Headquarters and Support Company, 449th Aviation Support Battalion, loosens the bolt on a turbo charger that was recently taken out of a generator.

Gauntlet

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convoy if they see something suspicious.

Geren said small details can make the difference. When he spotted the improvised rocket launcher, he was in charge of the Buffalo, an oversized armored vehicle equipped with a mechanical arm to examine the possible threats they find.

“You’re really just looking for something out of the ordinary,” he said. “Sometimes you’ve got to take a second look at it. You know when something is off.”

The battalion has uncovered more than 550 explosive devices since it began its daily hunt. Normally, the engineers find the devices before the explosions find them.

“We find a lot more than goes off on us,” Rau said.

Because they travel the same roads over and over again, day after day, the Soldiers have built a familiarity with the area that has become second nature.

“We go down this road so much, that if a rock moves, we know it.” Spc. Erich Smallwood, a driver from Truman, Ark., said.

Soldiers discussed their numerous close calls, describing various rocket launcher attacks, close calls with improvised explosive devices, and what it’s like to be moving targets for area snipers.

There was the time their vehicle

stopped, only to find it was straddling a landmine. Or the long firefight they faced in November. Or the mortar attacks where the engineers have watched the shells land closer and closer as the enemy fine-tuned its aim.

Several said they don’t tell their families about these experiences. Mays, who in civilian life supervises the construction of tractor trailers, said his family knows that he clears roads, but he doesn’t get into details when he talks to them.

“We don’t like them to know we’re doing the most dangerous job in the area,” the platoon sergeant said.

At times, nothing can happen for long stretches. Then they have to fight the boredom of hours of driving with little result. Rau, who graduated from college with a degree in criminology just before his deployment, said his fellow Soldiers and the mission keeps him focused.

“We communicate a lot. It keeps everyone alert,” Rau said. “What keeps me alert up here is if I mess up, some of the guys in the back of the convoy can get hit.”

Smallwood, sitting in the driver’s seat next to him, works as a lifeguard for his civilian job and said survival also plays a part in staying attentive. “Your life is on the line.”

Many of the farmland roads the unit travels are pocketed with potholes caused by IEDs. Even the smooth sections aren’t as peaceful as they seem. Concrete patches mark past explosive craters.

Civilian cars pulled over quickly as

the convoy passed. Children ran up to the road waving and pointing to their mouths, seeking food. Occasionally, an adult driver smiled and waved, but most watched the military vehicles without any expression at all.

Spc. Adam Williamson of Whiteville, Tenn., serves as a gunner in Iraq and a carpenter in the civilian world. He said you can tell a lot about the situation by the way people react and behave. When the shooting starts or the explosions hit, the gunners have to make fast decisions, particularly when discerning bad guys from innocents.

“It’s frustrating and you have to be quick,” Williamson said. “Your situational awareness has to be very keen.”

The constant presence of civilians offers other hazards. Whether the engineers are “interrogating” a possible explosive or clearing the roadside of debris, they know they are being studied. The unit strives to avoid habits that could be used against it.

“These guys are watching you every day,” Smallwood said. “You can’t set a pattern.”

Then there are the problems provided by other convoys. The unit members

said many combat logistical patrols are in a hurry and don’t want to stop for the cordons the engineers set up to protect traffic from potential IEDs.

Civilians and Soldiers alike have become angry and impatient at having to wait for the road ahead to be cleared, and some will deliberately drive around the cordon, members of the unit said.

Smallwood said some convoys seem to believe there aren’t that many explosive devices in the area, but that only tells him that the battalion is doing its job really well.

“They don’t really understand how many IEDs are out here,” he said.

As if to confirm this, another unit found a 130 mm round along the road and detonated it that afternoon. Shortly after, a land mine was discovered in the middle of the road 1st Platoon had just traveled on that morning.

The platoon and the 756th Explosive Ordnance Disposal team accompanying it moved forward to take care of the hazard, which ended with the crack and thunder of a safe detonation. Another blackened hole was added to the road.

As the convoy drove back to its headquarters after more than eight hours of driving, it passed the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office, a yard holding military vehicles, destroyed by IEDs.

Williamson pointed it out as a reminder of the dangers improvised explosives and rocket launchers offer the unwary.

“That’s what happens when you don’t find them,” he said.



Engineers use the mechanical arm of the Buffalo armored vehicle to check a land mine planted in the roadway



At left, Spc. Adam Williamson, a gunner from Whiteville, Tenn., with 1st Platoon, Co. A, 875th Engineer Battalion, searches for potential explosive devices alongside the road. Above, the convoy negotiates a road pitted by improvised explosive device detonations. Below, Explosive Ordnance Disposal detonates a land mine in the road.

The gauntlet

by Staff Sgt. Gary A. Witte

Anaconda Times

LSA Anaconda, Iraq – You need stamina. You need patience. And most of all, you need a sharp eye to do this job.

After two hours on the road, the slow-moving convoy stopped to examine something spotted by one of its vehicle commanders, Sgt. Patrick B. Geren of Fort Smith, Ark.

The berm, covered in patches of grass, was about 30 feet from the road and appeared much the same as everything else. There was seemingly nothing to look at but more countryside, but the members of 1st Platoon, Company A, 875th Engineer Battalion knew better.

In another vehicle, the crew spent several minutes explaining exactly where the object was located, although their passenger couldn't see it. Finally, there it was – the tube of an improvised rocket launcher – little more than a small black dot against the landscape.

If left there, it would be used again.

Uncovering this kind of deadly surprise is the mission of this Arkansas National Guard unit based in Jonesboro, Ark. The battalion constantly drives the roadways around Logistical Support Area Anaconda and other territories, hunting improvised explosive devices.

"Every time you find one, it makes you feel good because you're potentially saving someone's life," Sgt. Walter E. Rau, a team leader from Piggott, Ark., said. "Every IED has the po-



tential to hurt someone."

All but a few of the platoon members have personally experienced the impact of an IED hit and they have earned their share of injuries. One of the Soldiers not accompanying this mission was still recovering from a concussion gained during a recent explosion.

Company Commander Capt. David Moore of Conway, Ark., noted their work continues day and night, regardless. Since arriving here in September, Company A itself has driven more than 28,800 miles.

"Even on the holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving these guys were still clearing the route," Moore said. "They don't get much rest and continue to do the mission everyday."

On this Saturday morning, 1st Lt. George Collins of Hot Springs, Ark., finished up the pre-mission briefing and included a few reminders to his men about procedures – plus a warning about complacency.

"These guys are not out there to pop your tire," he said. "They're out there to kill you."

Before they climbed into their vehicles, the platoon knelt together, their hands on each other's shoulders. The platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Kahlon Mays of Paragoul, Ark., led the platoon in prayer. It was time to put on their armor and go.

While technology plays its part, the simple act of watching everything around them is one of the engineers' key defenses. Every Soldier has the authorization to immediately stop the

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Above, a RG-31 armored vehicle maintains security during a halt on an area roadway. At right, members of 1st Platoon, Company A, 875th Engineer Battalion take a moment together to pray prior to leaving on their mission on March 17. Their battalion has uncovered more than 550 improvised explosive devices and improvised rocket launchers since the beginning of their deployment in September.

