

Support personnel in Kuwait bear load of troop rotation

Units from Ohio key to handling supplies for forces in Iraq

By Joe Hallett
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

PORT ASH SHUAYBAH, Kuwait — In the vastness of the dusty, oil-fouled yard that is the end of the line for hundreds of tanks, trucks and Humvees — and the end of the war for thousands of U.S. troops — a woman from central Ohio was running the show last week.

“We need to sort this all out, make sure it gets in the right ships, because we’re feeding anywhere from two to four (vessels) at a time,” Navy Master Chief Gail Pellett shouted above the din at this port 45 miles south of Kuwait City.

As the senior enlisted member of Columbus-based Cargo Handling Battalion Nine, Pellett, 47, of Newark, commands 150 sailors responsible for load-



Military vehicles jam the deck of the Cape Horn, a cargo ship docked at the port of Ash Shuaybah near Kuwait City. Ohio Reserve and Guard members handle freight for troops based in Iraq.

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ing up to 3,000 military vehicles each week on cargo ships bound for the United States. She and 72 other Navy reservists from the battalion were activated Jan. 5 for a year

to assist the biggest rotation of U.S. troops since World War II. “This is the largest logistic effort since D-Day that the military has undertaken,” said Capt. Ray English of Pittsburgh,

commander of the Naval Expeditionary Logistics Support Force Forward, with 505 of the 3,200 sailors in its Columbus unit and three other battalions activated for the effort.



GULF DISPATCHES

As the United States begins its second year of war in Iraq, *Dispatch* Senior Editor Joe Hallett and photographer Tim Revell offer a series of stories about American troops.

Through May, 130,000 mostly Army and Marine troops who have spent at least a year in Iraq are being replaced by 110,000 fresh troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Moving them and their equipment up and down the ambush-prone, 693-mile highway connecting Camp Arifjan, the coalition base for support

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operations in Kuwait, to Mosul in northern Iraq, is mostly the job of U.S. military Reserve and Guard members. They comprise two-thirds of the U.S. force in Kuwait, through which flows 80 percent of the supplies for the forces in Iraq.

"Kuwait remains the center of it all," said Army Maj. Gen. Stephen M. Speakes, commander of coalition ground operations in Kuwait.

The scope of the historic rotation is told not only in troop numbers but also in the freight loaded and unloaded here through March. The cargo of 95 ships would weigh as much as 61,848 African elephants. The 14,415 containers, if stacked, would be as tall as 91 Empire State Buildings. The 40,000 vehicles washed for the trip home would take 176 tons of quarters at a stateside carwash.

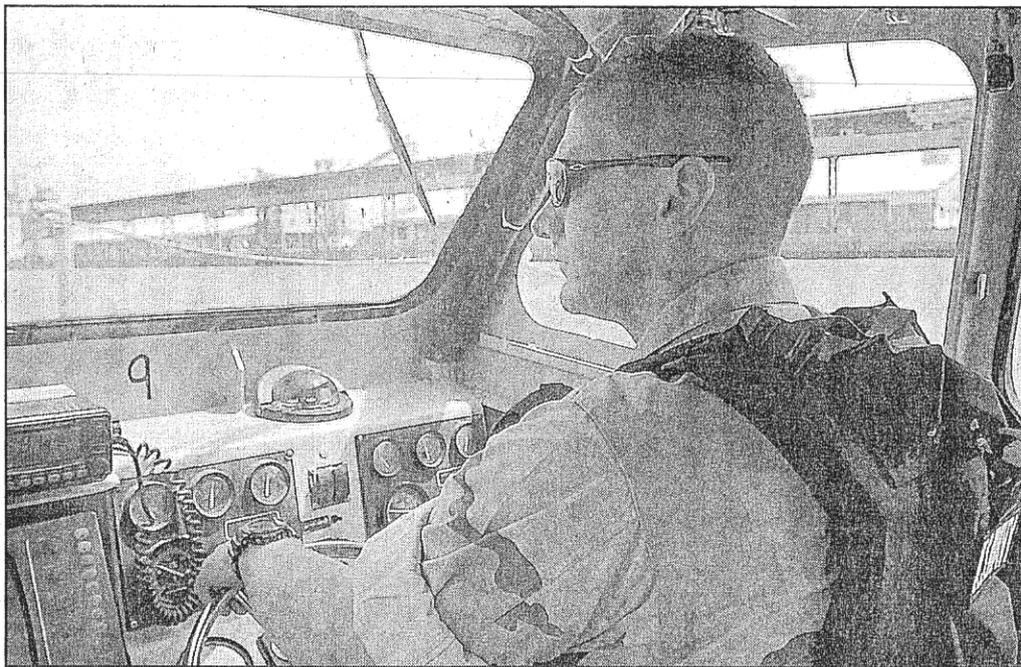
Then, too, 5 million military meals a week have been eaten and more than 170 million gallons of fuel used in the rotation.

Speakes said the operation will be evaluated in April to look at "what we did right and what we did wrong," because it might have to be repeated next year.

"We believe force rotation is something we're going to plan on for the next several years," Speakes said. "We're doing it for the first time on this scale and we've learned a heck of a lot."

Ohio Reserve and Guard members are in the thick of it, some in key positions. At Camp Wolverine near the Iraqi border, Staff Sgt. Donald Fitchett of Columbus, a member of the Army Reserve 325th Finance Battalion, makes sure 2,700 troops get paid.

"We run the bank here, and if the soldiers have any pay problems, we take care of them," said Fitchett, 40, a corrections officer at a prison in Orient.



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Navy reservist Mark Kaludy, 31, of Hudson, patrols the port of Ash Shuaybah in Kuwait for suspicious boats that could belong to terrorists.

Fitchett said his activation could last 18 months — too long away from his wife, Emma, and their three daughters.

"I miss everything back home: the girls, the noise, normal-day life, yardwork, housework, everything I took for granted," Fitchett said.

On patrol against terrorists in his 27-foot boat with two mounted machine guns, Navy reservist Mark Kaludy, 31, of Hudson, Ohio, said he and his four-member crew rarely encounter trouble.

"The point is to make yourself appear to be such a hard target so it's really not worth the attempt and they'll look elsewhere to make their point," Kaludy said as he perused the ship-dotted harbor for suspicious boats.

"I love it," Chief Petty Officer Clark Lindner said as he oversaw the loading of 700 tanks, trucks,

Humvees and helicopters of the Army's 4th Infantry Battalion onto the decks and into the hold of the Cape Horn at the docks of Ash Shuaybah. "I love being on ships, the people, the camaraderie you have with everybody.

"You can't be out here without a sense of patriotism," said Lindner, 40, of Donnelsville, Ohio. He works for a welding materials manufacturer but likes his military job better.

Gunners Mate Sandra Silva, a 14-year veteran of the Columbus Police Division, is less enamored with her job in the deploying yard where equipment is stored for fetching by units headed for Iraq. But she is equally proud of her service, saying she re-enlisted in the Navy Reserve knowing she likely would be activated.

"It's an obligation and I felt it was important," said Silva, 37, of

Grove City. "I love my country. We're here, we got rid of a tyrant in Iraq, and we're trying to help that country stabilize."

Keeping soldiers and sailors safe at Ash Shuaybah is the responsibility of Chief Petty Officer Lloyd Early, the 39-year-old port safety officer from Gahanna.

In Columbus, Early is the special-agent supervisor in the Ohio attorney general's health-care fraud section. In Kuwait, he worries most that troops headed home after surviving a war might get careless and hurt in the bustling shipyard.

"They are guys, most of them around 19, who faced death every single day, and then they come here and are asked to drive trucks in the yard or onto a ship," Early said. "They're almost home. You can see the steam coming off. You can't let them relax too much — not just yet."

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