



Photo by JO1 Kevin Elliott

U.S. Navy Reserve Force personnel assigned to Navy Cargo Handling Battalion Four (NCHB 4) Charleston, SC, load general stores on board the Military Sealift Command (MSC) modular cargo delivery ship SS Cape Gibson, during operations supporting exercise "Rim of the Pacific" (RIMPAC) 2002. RIMPAC 2002 is designed to improve tactical proficiency in a wide array of combined operations at sea, while building cooperation and fostering mutual understanding between participating nations. Countries participating this year are: Australia, Canada, Chile, Peru, Japan, the Republic of Korea and the United States.

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NORFOLK – In late March 2003, LCDR A. Todd Wilson put his law practice in Pittsburgh on hold and reported for duty with Military Sealift Command (MSC) Central in Bahrain. In early April, CSC Albert Rybak left his job as a contract computer programmer in Tampa and reported for duty with the same command.

For the next seven months, they performed duties that Wilson described as essential to the success of the MSC's mission in the Middle East. In December, they returned home with feelings of satisfaction – and to wives who had shouldered family responsibilities without them.

"Without a doubt, helping Military Sealift Command manage its shipping in the Central Command area of responsibility was the most meaningful contribution I have ever made as a Naval Reservist," Rybak said.

As he was making that contribution, his wife was driving their two sons to and from school and sports practices daily – and blaming him, not Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein for the lack of help, Rybak said. Wilson's wife, who was seven months pregnant when he departed, gave birth to their fifth child in May, adding him to a household that also included her 82-year-old mother.

RESERVISTS

crucial to sealift success

Wilson, of NR MSC North Persian Gulf 105 out of Naval Reserve Center Pittsburgh, began his active-duty experience as assistant operations officer for MSC in Bahrain. He soon was assigned as port operations officer in Aqaba, Jordan – where he supervised the loading of cargo for North Carolina National Guard units returning to the United States – and finally as watch officer for cargo operation in Shuaybah, Kuwait.

His experience as an estate planner proved useful as he negotiated with local officials and coordinated Navy operations with them, Wilson said. As a group, the 20 Reservists assigned to MSC Central were invaluable, he said.

“There are only four active-duty officers assigned to MSC Central,” Wilson explained. “They were responsible for transporting all of the wartime cargo to the Middle East and could not have done it without the mobilized Reservists.”

Rybak, of NR Commander, MSC 108, out of Naval Reserve Center Tampa, Fla., initially was assigned as the MSC’s representative for port operations in Port Mesaieed, Qatar. He shared working spaces with the Military Traffic Management Command and – for the first several weeks – slept in a tent at the Army’s Camp As Sayliyah.

Next, Rybak became operations chief and command duty officer watch-stander at MSC Central headquarters in Bahrain. His computer skills were useful in processing message traffic and maintaining spreadsheets, he said.

In Norfolk in December for demobilization, Wilson and Rybak crossed paths with LT Trey Howerton – like Rybak, a member of NR Commander, MSC 108 – who had spent a year in Diego Garcia and Kuwait with Commander, Maritime Prepositioning Ship Squadron Two,

and who was on his way back to the Middle East.

“My deployment was truly the best thing that ever could have happened to me,” said Howerton, a maritime sales engineer in his civilian job and an officer in the Merchant Marine.

He had not served on active duty before being called up in September 2002.

He learned a new specialty, force protection, at the same time he was adjusting to Navy ways, from how to handle message traffic to the workings of an operational chain of command.

“Thank God I had a great chief,” said Howerton, now force protection officer for Commander, Afloat Prepositioning Ship Squadron Four in Bahrain.

His organization and presentation skills have been important in his new military assignments, as he kept track of more than 20 ships at a time, Howerton said. He has helped to bridge the gap between the Navy and the merchant fleet, too, he said.

Although his civilian boss was unhappy that he was deployed, Howerton has been corresponding with his civilian co-workers, to keep up with industry news.

He also has been exchanging e-mails with his father, who served in Vietnam.

“I think that drew us much closer,” Howerton said, adding that whatever sacrifices he has made are small compared to those of the troops who suffered casualties.

“Yes, our jobs were important, but we have to remember the ones we’re supporting: the men and women in the field directly in harm’s way. ... These men and women are my heroes,” he said. ♦