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V CORPS BRIDGE-BUILDERS LOAD UP FOR SECOND TOUR IN SUPPORT OF OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

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HANAU, Germany — Soldiers of V Corps' 502nd Engineer Company were ready and waiting for their train to arrive.



CAPT ERICA IVERSON

Soldier from the 502nd Engineer Company of V Corps' 565th Engineer Battalion, 130th Engineer Brigade load a bridge bay onto a rail car as part of their load-up for the unit's second deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

They assembled mid-morning August 16, along with their comrades from the 320th Engineer Company (Topographic) for a second day of loading their heavy equipment onto German rail cars for shipment to Iraq. The 502nd, a bridging company that is part of the corps' 565th Engineer Battalion, 130th Engineer Brigade based on Pioneer Kaserne here, is in the last stages of preparation

for its return to Iraq after only 11 months home from their first deployment.

Approximately 17 trucks with trailers, cranes and bulldozers were lined up to be driven onto the train this day while the bays of a medium girder bridge sat next to the rails ready to be hoisted onto the flatbed rail cars.

"The 320th Engineer Company is helping to push out the 502nd," said Sgt. 1st Class Richard Carlson. "Personnel from the 502nd are driving the vehicles onto the train, which will carry them to the seaport for loading onto a ship bound for Iraq. About 45 Soldiers from the 320th are helping with the blocking, bracing and ground-guiding. We're making sure we get it done quickly, but safely."

The rail-loading operation was scheduled to take four full days before all the 502nd company's equipment got on its way.

A major operation like this usually draws some attention from the higher headquarters and this one was no exception. Ed Hoffman, the V Corps safety director, arrived from Heidelberg to check on the operation.

"We're monitoring the rail operations for all corps units that are deploying or redeploying," said Hoffman. "The equipment here is a little bigger than normal, but we have the systems in place to accomplish this loading safely. We're another set of eyes here for the command."

Approximately 200 Soldiers of the company will return to Iraq in mid-September. "Most are veterans who've been there before. Going back, it's the job -- it's your duty," said one Soldier.

Five Soldiers from the 77th Maintenance Support Team based on Hutier Kaserne here will also go "downrange" with the 502nd to assist with maintenance.

V Corps Deputy Commanding General Maj. General Walter Wojdakowski also arrived to observe the loading and to speak with the officers and Soldiers about the ongoing mission in Iraq.

“We have a bunch of units going back and the morale and preparation is high, almost as high as at the 502nd,” said Wojdakowski as he spoke with the commander of the 502nd, Capt. Joshua Stringer. “I think there’ll be some bridging missions there. The insurgents have destroyed a number of bridges in Iraq which are critical to the infrastructure, and that’s what these guys do.”

“They [units presently in Iraq] are repairing the existing bridges in Iraq. I think we’ll go in and remove the temporary bridges that were laid on top while the permanent bridges were being repaired,” said Stringer.

Wojdakowski also took time to recognize the accomplishments of four Soldiers by presenting them with V Corps coins. Pfc. Brad Keen, Sgt. James Winberry, Sgt. 1st Class Dwayne Cordier and Lt. Sharon Edens all had a moment to speak with the general as he presented their coins.

“I was runner-up in the Army-wide Grizzly competition,” said Edens after she received her coin. “That’s a competition for the best platoon leader of the year. It’s based on your experiences and accomplishments over the past year, and I was deployed with the 502nd in Iraq for that entire time.”

The rail operations continued after Wojdakowski left the site for a meeting with the newly arrived 130th Engineer Brigade commander, Col. Thomas W. Kula. The 502nd has spent months readying its equipment and personnel for the return trip to Iraq.

"In preparation, we recently completed a mission readiness exercise at the Aschaffenburg Training Area and then we deployed to Grafenwoehr," said Stringer.

"There we conducted weapons ranges where all Soldiers re-qualified on their assigned weapons and executed a convoy live-fire exercise. We also practiced a 'maintenance halt' where we stop the convoy, pull security and perform maintenance. That's a common practice as we'll be convoying into Iraq from Kuwait."

(A related story on that exercise can be found on the "News" page of the V Corps web site.)

With the ongoing attacks on American convoys in Iraq, convoy live-fire training has become a requirement for all deploying units.

"We'll do it again in Kuwait before we deploy (into Iraq)," said Stringer.

Once the equipment was on its way, so were the Soldiers. The troops headed off on "block leave" to enjoy time with friends and family before heading back to the rigors of Iraq.

