

RETURNING TO CIVILIAN LIFE - SOME MEMBERS OF 163RD STRUGGLE AS THEY READJUST

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For Donald Montgomery, the moment came in the booth of a Denny's restaurant. Between bites of breakfast with his wife, Angela, a semi roared past the diner.

The windows vibrated. The floor shook. The lights above them flickered. Montgomery briefly reverted into survival mode. Instinct told him to dive under the table, food and all.

Then it hit him: I'm no longer in Iraq.

Almost three months have passed since Evansville's 163rd Field Artillery returned home after a yearlong deployment to Iraq. The guardsmen's mission has switched from training the Iraqi police in a war-torn country to settling back into their everyday – and sometimes by comparison – mundane lives.

For some, the transition has been as easy as re-enrolling in college classes or returning to an old job. But others have struggled to find long-term employment and relive memories of Iraq every time a car backfires.

Montgomery, 32, said moments like the one at Denny's are rare, but "I've had my sleepless nights," he said. "I've had times where, for whatever reason, I (get) nervous and jittery."

Montgomery joined the National Guard at 17 before his senior year of high school, following his father, who retired from the military after a 27-year career.

"It seemed like an easy way to stay out of trouble," Montgomery said. At the time, the thought of fighting in a war "was something I would never expect," he said.

The 163rd was deployed to Iraq in August 2005. The local soldiers spent time training and supporting the Iraqi police in Najaf and Baghdad.

Montgomery, who drove a truck, said traffic around the capital city was often bumper to bumper. Road conditions were poor from reconstruction and constant bombings.

"I guess the best way to explain Baghdad would be if you took Laubscher Meadows landfill, put a St. Louis traffic grid on it and then put New York City traffic on it," he said.

The 163rd came home in October. All 155 soldiers returned without any significant injuries. Hundreds of flag waving supporters lined the streets to greet them as they rode to the Armory on fire trucks and buses.

Initially, Montgomery didn't think the experience in Iraq changed his behavior, but that has changed. Sounds, such as the weather sirens that are tested every Friday, remind him of Iraq, if only for an instant.

"Whenever I hear that sound, I have to take a second look around to see exactly where I'm at," he said.

Rules of the road

"(But) the worst problem I've had is just driving around. Over there, Iraq had three basic traffic laws: No. 1, United States military vehicles have the right of way; No. 2, Iraqis don't obey traffic laws at all; and No. 3, most of the intersections there was no kind of traffic control device whatsoever."

Montgomery recently found a job at O'Reilly auto parts. The military offers employment assistance to soldiers returning from active duty. Federal law requires employers to offer returning soldiers the same or comparable job they held before they left.

Disputes are rare, said Maj. Rob Palmer, a spokesman for the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, a federal organization that mediates disputes between soldiers and employers.

"Most of the employers we've encountered see it as their patriotic duty," Palmer said. "And they see that that's one additional way that their company supports the nation."

When Kevin Waters, 41, left the Indiana State Police to join the 163rd, his pay and benefits were suspended. When he came back, Waters had to retrain before he returned to work.

A platoon sergeant, Waters supervised 37 soldiers in Iraq. "Iraq was scary," he said. "It was nasty. It was boring over there."

The Iraqis had poor police skills, he said. They had to be trained on everything – how to run a shift, patrols, searches and investigative techniques. Sometimes, "they would just refuse to do it," Waters said.

Waters is assigned to Posey County, where he also lives. Railroad tracks run near his home, and every time a train thunders by, the tracks make a sound similar to an explosion.

"That freaks me out every time," Waters said.

Phillip Reibold, 26, of Petersburg, Ind., road in a convoy that patrolled the streets of Baghdad. The patrols lasted between four and eight hours and alternated between daylight and night to avoid predictability.

Reibold, a squad leader, said his men became so familiar with the routes that they knew when to expect bombings.

"We were pretty scared for a while," Reibold said. "And then we kind of got used to it."

Reibold has returned to his old job at Jasper Engines and Transmissions.

"I get anxious and have a lot of leftover energy because I'm so used to the high-stress environment, and now I don't have it," he said. "But other than that, everything is pretty smooth."

About a year ago, the Veterans Administration created a Seamless Transition Program for guardsmen and reservists returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Providing assistance

The program outlines medical and financial benefits and provides contacts for soldiers suffering emotional problems, said retired Col. Randy Muston, the program's transition assistant adviser for Indiana.

"All they're thinking about is going home, so a lot of the stuff doesn't get done," Muston said. "They'll say they're OK when they're not OK. They'll say they don't need something when they really don't know because they want to go home."

Kevin Goins, 28, of Winslow, Ind., has been to the Veterans Affairs Clinic in Evansville for treatment of a shoulder injury he suffered while doing pull-ups in Iraq. Goins, who is attending college, was preparing to leave the military when the 163rd was deployed.

"I was a little upset with it, but I signed up, and I had a duty," he said. "I had to do my job."

Caption: Photos, 2

VINCENT PUGLIESE / Courier & Press

Kevin Goins holds his son, Hayden , 2 1/2 months, while spending the day with his family on Thursday in Winslow, Ind. Goins returned from Iraq with the 163rd Field Artillery at the end of 2006 and is readjusting to civilian life as he attends school at Vincennes University. Robyn Goins , left, feeds their 2 1/2-month-old son, Hayden , while Kevin Goins , far right, plays with the couple's daughter, MaKenna , 5, on Thursday.

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