29th Signal Battalion

Family Newsletter • Issue 4 • May 2004

Message from Iraq

Lieutenant Colonel Dan Kestle

Marrhaba (hello) family and friends of the 29th Signal Battalion!

Situation report (SITREP) time: The soldiers of the battalion continue to perform magnificently. They have installed a portion of the largest tactical communications system ever. Over the past couple of months the network supported the largest movement of troops since World War II. Amazing if you think about it. Here are a couple of facts that will have you beating your chest with pride – our soldiers are processing approximately 20,000 calls a day; since installation of the network the battalion has processed over 5,343,000 calls! If we could just charge commercial rates…

As you know Iraq is still a combat zone. And although the bulk of the battalion is now stabilized we do have some teams that move around based on mission requirements. I'm sure you'll hear that some areas our teams support experience more hostile action than others. No worries – the soldiers are trained and there are a whole lot of units committed to ensuring communications are protected!

Along these lines I ask that you support the command in ensuring your loved one does not violate operational security (OPSEC). At a minimum they should not be passing specifics of our unit's employment, current or future operations, or enemy activity. There'll be plenty of time for war stories when we return. And you know the only thing that can ruin a good war story is an eyewitness – imagine the stories you'll hear in the privacy of your home!

The 29th team is making this mission a success. It's easy to present "gee whiz" facts to get your heart pumping but much more difficult to articulate how well everyone is performing their individual and collective tasks. From family readiness groups, rear detachment, administration, supplies, fuel, food service, maintenance, and signal – everyone is pulling their weight and then some. Your loved ones know how critical they are to the success of the battalion, but so are you. If your loved one has failed to thank you for your support let me cover the slack – Thank You! You are an integral part of the team. Your challenges are no less daunting than those of our deployed soldiers. I appreciate your sacrifices.

This month I'd like to give a big HOOAH to all of the mechanics. Day in and day out they are the most exposed to climate; and it is getting hot (we've been brushing up against 100 degree temps off and on for the last week)! Without vehicles and generators we'd be running communications over tin cans and strings – not very efficient. Well done and keep up the fires to all of them!

God Bless all of you and our soldiers.
LTC Kestle "Clear and Open!"

SFC's Word

Sergeant First Class Tommy Carson

From the BAHAMA's, rather..BALAD, Iraq ☺

Greetings Family members from the Great Middle East!

I can surely tell you that it feels like we are on the Beach with all the sand and sun we get! ☺ Temperatures are in the 100's already and it is only May 5th! Just your typical spring in the Desert.

We are 1/3 of the way finished, we are really excited, but this middle portion will be the toughest with the hot summer. But rest assured we are all ready. Fans, Airconditioners, Screens, Bug spray, lotions, you name it. We are prepared for anything that comes our way! Except for the 150 degree temperatures. ☺

Everybody is busy moving into trailers as we speak, so life should be getting better for everyone. These trailers are nice and furnished, and soldiers will have a place they can call home when not on shift work. They also have the movie theater, swimming pools, Gym, and a wonderful Dining Facility that is like a buffet back in America. Along with the PX here…life is not all that bad over here.

The Iraqi school is being built as we speak. It is a brand new school being built from the ground up that costs almost $80,000 dollars. The 29th Signal Battalion has overwatch of this school and YOU are a big part of that success.

Stephanie Pompa is in charge of Operation Spouses Help Iraqi Children and the entire Northwest is kicking in. If you have ever wanted to be a part of something bigger than life, this is your chance! OPSHIC is a huge success all over the Northwest. Call Stephanie today and find out how you can help make a direct impact in the future of Iraq…the children!

(Continued on Page 2, SFC's Word)

Mark Your Calendars

June 13 ..... Ice Cream Social
3:00 PM Shoreline Park

Sept 25..... Battalion FRG Meeting
Saturday

Nov 20.....Redeployment Workshop
Saturday

Brothers Meet in Iraq

Captain Shaw Pick

I have been deployed now for 100 days. The first few months were kind of crazy, but have settled down quite a bit lately. I'm a busy guy, but even for someone as busy as a Company Commander, there is still a little monotony as you establish a schedule (training meetings, command and staff, site visits, PT, chow). It is during the inevitable downtime that you start thinking about your family and friends, and the faithful dog that you miss. We live in a wonderful age, where even in the midst of a combat zone, we can call and email home every few days. These are wonderful benefits that I'm ever grateful for, but I really miss my wife and family.

So, imagine my surprise when I heard a knock on my door at 4:55 am one day last week and opened it to see my brother Dino standing there! My brother is LTC Daniel Pick, and he's assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Amman, Jordan. Now, we're a really tight family, and since he joined the Army in 1987, we have seen each other about once a year on average.

When I deployed, I told him I'd keep in touch, just in case he found a reason to fly into a combat zone to see me. I was half joking, and didn't think he'd actually be crazy enough to do it. See, Dino's a veteran of both Desert Storm and OIF I, so I figured he'd had enough time on the ground in Iraq. Once the shock wore off, I asked him how he had gotten to LSA Anaconda (If he had taken the MSR, I was prepared to tackle him right there for risking his neck like that). It turned out he'd been in Baghdad on business and hopped a C-130 heading north. We had about 12 hours to hang out, smoke cigars, and catch up before he had to head back. The highlight, however, was calling my mom on his satellite phone and letting her talk to both of her sons together in Iraq.

I'm very fortunate to have such a role model, professional mentor, and great American as a brother. It was good to see him, and really tough to say goodbye. Maybe our paths will cross again in these sands.

(SFC's Word, continued)

Cities, School districts, Seahawks, families, everybody is kicking in on this project and is something you will remember for the rest of your life!!!! Thanks Stephanie for spearheading this huge task!! She needs all the help she can get, so please give her a call??

If your husbands' Reenlistment window opens over here (12 months from ETS) then there is a chance he can get between $5 and $10,000 dollars…tax free and lump sum!! That will be great for the holidays, for vacation when we return and many other things too. Tell them to come see SFC Carson to find out if they qualify for this huge cash bonus!!!

KEEP THE PACKAGES COMING….the looks on their faces when a package comes for them is truly a KODAK moment! You are lifting their spirits one hundred fold when you send them a package!

You spouses are simply incredible! Your support with packages and prayers, your involvement with the Iraqi Schools, you are truly making this one of the great deployments of all times! Keep up the good work and we appreciate all of you so very much!!

Most of you know me, I can put together a pretty mean party. Once we get finished with leave, vacation, and all that…we will have us one mean party! Sound good? We will get some food, music, gifts, raffle prizes, and have us one of the biggest party's of all time in conjunction with a four day weekend! Sound fun? I promise it will be the party of a lifetime!! ☺ First I have to get the BC and CSM to bless off on that, I don't think that will be an issue, especially with Kate Kestle on our team…she can talk her husband into this with no problem, right Kate?

Rear Detachment Update

Captain Dixon Brockbank

Soldiers, families, and friends of the 29th Signal Battalion, I hope this newsletter finds you well. The Rear Detachment has been holding down the fort while the battalion executes their war-time mission, and I hope that you have been receiving the support and assistance that you need while your loved one is away.

We are trying to get information out to you in a regular and timely fashion; sometimes distance and mail don't quite get it there as quickly as we would like. The Family Readiness Groups are continuing to meet monthly, and I encourage each of you to participate. In this, the old adage certainly holds true: "the more the merrier." We continue to show slideshows of the soldiers in Iraq and take pictures and short video clips of spouses that attend the meetings—so come! The FRG leaders have done an outstanding job in coordinating events and activities.

In addition to the FRG meetings and the newsletters, we are in the process of making the website a more useful and useable tool. Pictures of our deployed soldiers are currently on the website, as well as contact information for the Rear Detachment. The link for the website is: **http://www.lewis.army.mil/29thsigbn/.**

Thank you for all that you are doing to support your loved ones during this time of separation. Our thoughts and prayers are continually with you.

"Support the Fight!"

Well, I have just hit the one-month mark, and many of your loved ones have completed nearly 30% of their tour here in the hot, dusty country of Iraq. Actually, this place often surprises me with moments of unexpected beauty, so the heat and dust are not all one experience here.

Your question is: "Chaplain, how are they doing over there; how are things going?" Any time a soldier deploys away from his/her family, the soldier experiences a whole new level of pain and discomfort. Any time that deployment involves activities in a combat zone, the pain and discomfort join up with a host of other stressors unique to operating in a hostile area. At this point in our deployment two things make the situation worse: 1) the unbearable heat has started to emerge, and 2) people have settled. First, the heat needs little explanation; imagine the hottest you have ever been, and then imagine opening your oven to take out a cake or a sheet of cookies; add those two things together, and then imagine wearing 50 lbs of metal, Kevlar, plastic, and OD green straps and webbing. It's HOT; and exhausts people and makes them irritable.

Second, "settling" occurs here not because of a lack of things to do, but because most of the things most of the people do here quickly become routine and tedious. Most folks have been here over a quarter of the year 2004, and the equipment has been placed, all the sites brought into the system, and now they watch for problems. Many have reached that place where they think about home, and many deeply miss their loved ones and the things they used to do with them. Many are in crisis, and even minor crises become major problems when you try to work them over here; let alone the major crises that have come to some. People here live in close proximity, so they are smashed up against everyone in the world except the people they really want to be close to. Most have become settled into a routine that only changes when a tedious tasking comes their way, and they live, night and day, with people who are really starting to get on their nerves.

And we have to be here. We can't set up the communication equipment and then leave. It has to be monitored. This is the reality of signal work. It is vital to the overall mission, and can become tedious when everything is in place and working properly (which, ironically, is what we want).

Now that I have painted a picture of the obstacles, let me explain the other side of the coin. Morale, in general, is good. I have laughed here as much as I have cried, because I have worked with some of the most optimistic, strong-hearted American soldiers that I have ever met. I have spent time with dedicated people who work hard to provide for their subscribers, who have spent countless hours overcoming various difficulties in order to ensure that the elements of this area can talk to one another. Fuelers, mechanics, system operators, section chiefs, team chiefs, cooks; soldiers from Private to CSM and from 2LT to LTC working day-in and day-out to make this mission happen. Most of us live in some sort of building, and those that do not now, will be soon. We have food to eat, real toilets, and you can catch a hot shower regularly. Electricity works for us 99% of the time, so we have lights, air conditioning, and other nice things that help make life a little more pleasant. We have a lot for which to be thankful.

So, "this is no picnic," as they say. We are not camping. We live in a serious and dangerous area that is a part of a combat zone. That is no joke. And it is hot, dusty, and busy. However, we are making it, one day at a time, one week at a time, and one month at a time. And we are not **just** making it. We are succeeding in our mission with the help of those nice things that make life a little easier.

What do we need from you? Prayer, tangible demonstrations of support (letters, cards, care packages, etc.), and "emotional presence." You make us to be present in your environment in concrete ways when you talk about us among yourselves, when you place pictures of us for the kids to see regularly at key places like the living room coffee table, the place where meals are eaten, on bedside tables, etc. Remember us to one another in positive ways. Rather than complaining about this situation (which all of us are tempted to do, believe me), talk positively about us to one another and anticipate the good things that will come when we return. That is what these troops need: positive energy circulated among yourselves and shared with us in real ways.

I am your chaplain, and I am with your loved ones. They miss you, they are working hard, and they want the best for you. I send with this note my hope that you will do all that you can to dispel rumors, refuse to bicker and gripe amongst yourselves, and do all that you can to produce and share the positive energies of hope, love, patience, tolerance, and joy. You ask me what we need over here? That is what we need from you, and if you can join me in this challenge, you CAN impact the troops here with that positivity. I send also a great deal of love from a number of soldiers who have said, "If you talk to them back there, let them know we love and miss them." All of you remain in our thoughts and prayers.

Sincerely,
Sean Levine
Proud Chaplain of the 29th Signal Battalion

Tip of the Month

Tell 'em…

Set up a tape recorder and picture of your soldier on a table where all family members can reach. Fill the tape with thoughts, reports of the day, jokes, and maybe even a serenade or two. Each person should feel like they can contribute freely. Make it easy for the little ones to participate too!

Your soldier will love listening to every word and note.

From Chaplain Cox
Deployment Workshop, April 24, 2004