Lab Veterans Relate Experiences on the Front Lines

David Eddy stands with some Afghani children outside a former British fort in Kabul.

Flight Surgeon and Navy Commander Bruce Thompson is shown checking on Afghan children in the nation's northern region.

Lab employee Patrick Stevens (far right) led an explosive ordnance disposal team that cleared roadways in Afghanistan of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This photo was taken a short time after Stevens and his team were struck by an IED.

(Editor's note: This article was the first of a two-part series about Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory employees who have served in the military in the fight against terrorism. It focuses on employees who were deployed to Afghanistan and other areas. It is being published in The Independent in conjunction with Veterans Day.)

By Stephen Wampler

In the nearly eight years since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, about 45 Laboratory employees have answered the call of military service, going to Afghanistan, Iraq and other areas to fight in the war against terrorism.

The majority of Lab employees who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces overseas have gone to Iraq (about 30), while others (about 10) have "pulled duty" in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, the United Arab Emirates and other nations.

Additionally, at least five LLNL employees Ryan Johnson, James R. Jones, Shane Kim, Stevan Mays and Erwin Rodrillo have served enlistments in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The stories and experiences of their military duty are as many and as varied as they are.

After a 10-year career flying CH-53E "Super Stallion" helicopters in the U.S. Marine Corps, Jeff Freeman joined the Laboratory in 1992. He is an occurrence reporting officer in the Contractor Assurance Office of the Director's Office. Freeman continued in the Marine Corps reserves for the past 17 years, retiring as a colonel in March of this year. Following 9/11, he was recalled to active duty and served in the Gulf of Aden in 2002 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Later, in 2004, he served again in Operation Enduring Freedom, flying CH-53E helicopters in Afghanistan.

"With all of the training, deployments and hard work, it was fulfilling to bring it all to bear for Operation Enduring Freedom," Freeman said. "I was there for Afghanistan's first free election (remember all of those purple thumbs?). The look on the people's faces after that moment is a mental picture that will live with me forever.

"I led a mission on the afternoon of the election to transport hundreds of thousands of ballots from the northern territories to Kabul for processing and counting. If we'd had a mishap and had somehow lost those ballots, the election results could have been much different than they were," he declared.

Robert Stanghellini, who is part of the Lab's Security Organization, served in Afghanistan's Zabul Province from January 2004 to June 2005. He was sent there as a part of a California Army National Guard unit.

"Every single Afghani I talked with said Afghanistan is a better place since the Taliban had been removed from power," Stanghellini said. "I came to realize that all the Afghan citizens wanted was a safe place to raise their children and the ability to make an honest living, without the fear of a tyrannical oppressive government."

To the best of his knowledge, Lab employee Joseph Grams was one of the first LLNL workers to be deployed to Afghanistan. "I actually quit the reserve unit I was in because I wanted to immediately deploy to Afghanistan," said Grams, who is in the Lab's Security Organization. Grams served a total of four tours in Afghanistan.

Lab employee Patrick Stevens led a three-man explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team for six months in 2008 that cleared roadways of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). His team was hit by IEDs three times in about three weeks and on two occasions Stevens was almost killed.

Working in Paktika Province about 150 kilometers south of Kabul, Stevens and his team were riding in a Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle on Aug. 14, 2008 when they dipped into a deep wadi or creek bed. An IED with two 20-pound landmines exploded.

The explosion lifted the V-hulled, heavily armored, 23-ton vehicle about two to three feet off the ground, according to observers. Stevens hit the roof of the vehicle, came down, was unconscious for about 30 seconds and then checked on the condition of his crew and vehicle.

"I didn't realize I was hurt until I exited the rescue vehicle and found I couldn't walk." In time, Stevens regained his ability to walk and stayed with his team.

The mission of Stevens' team was to render safe/disarm or destroy, and gather evidence of any unexploded ordnance, IEDs, weapons caches and homemade explosive devices found while conducting route clearance patrol operations.

In the first two months of their deployment, the team neutralized more than 50 insurgent IEDs and conducted more than 40 post-blast analyses of IED strikes against coalition and Afghan forces' vehicles and facilities.

"Our missions would typically consist of clearing the road (or dirt trails) ahead of 100-plus locally driven supply trucks headed down to coalition forward operating bases between 60 and 160 kilometers away. We usually drove between the speeds of 5 and 15 kilometers per hour, so the days were slow and long," Stevens said.

"The route clearance patrol missions would take six to 20 days to complete, about double what the original time frame we were given before we left. We lived out of our vehicles and slept on cots next to the vehicles at night in case of attack.

On a typical mission, we would be engaged one to four times a day by insurgents, usually at long distance, with inaccurate small arms fire and an IED or two," Stevens recalled. "We had always trained for wartime, but more for the Cold War. In Afghanistan, every area is different. You never knew what to expect."

A master sergeant in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, Stevens returned to work at LLNL on June 15, 2009 after recovering from back injuries. He works in the Cyber Security Program as a system administrator/cyber analyst.

In his earlier years in the military, Lab employee Karl Barber served as a U.S. Army Ranger for four years. During the summer of 2004, as a member of the California National Guard, he was recalled to active duty.

Barber served with the Army in Afghanistan from August 2004 until September 2005 as a forward observer and combat optical laser targeting (COLT) team chief in the Ghazni Province. Situated between Kabul and Kandahar, Ghazni is in a very mountainous region and bears the name of a town, the province and a forwarding operating base for the United States.

Two of Barber's principal missions included serving on a quick reaction team that would depart by helicopter to provide assistance and conducting information operations, such as learning about the living and security conditions in different villages in their region. During the winter, the soldiers would perform re-supplies for cut-off villages, providing blankets, candles, food and other items.

"When I was deployed, the only part of my life that I missed was being with my wife," Barber said. Midway through his 13-month long deployment, Barber was allowed to return home on leave to Northern California. During an airport stop in Texas, the owner of the Chuck E. Cheese pizza chain and his wife visited with the returning soldiers and bought them drinks.

Barber mentioned to the couple the troops' humanitarian assistance to Afghan villages. As a result of that comment, the owner's wife had four crates of "Beanie Babies" – about 10,000 in all – shipped to Barber for distribution to Afghan children.

"The Beanie Babies were a great ice-breaker," Barber said. "When we wanted to talk with the parents, this was the way to start a conversation."

Barber is now part of the Laboratory's Cyber Security Services team.

Clinton Pitts of the Lab's Security Organization put in a tour of duty in Afghanistan through the California Army National Guard from August 2003 through April 2004. As a sergeant first class, he served at the Kabul Military Training Center, the presidential palace

and the outlying areas. He was responsible for providing tactics and weapons training to members of the 1st Battalion of the Afghanistan National Army.

Under Pitts' leadership, the 1st Battalion had its first combined arms nighttime live- fire exercise, something that was then unusual for the Afghan Army.

Lab employee Mike Guiso spent 10 months in Afghanistan, from August 2002 to May 2003, after he was recalled to active duty in the U.S. Army from the California Army National Guard. A medic for his Army team, Guiso patrolled in the lower Hindu Kush mountains in Bamian Province with the Afghanistan National Army, conducting training for the Afghan Army and combat operations against the Taliban.

"The people were receptive and fairly positive toward Americans. Throughout much of their history, the Afghan people have been occupied, most recently by the Soviets and the Taliban. They looked at us less as occupiers and more as liberators."

As a medic, Guiso not only attended U.S. soldiers, but also provided medical assistance to the Afghans, treating snake bites, burns and minor trauma, cutting out a small cyst, and even assisting in the delivery of a baby.

In between combat operations against the Taliban, Guiso brought in doctors and set up a medical clinic that saw 1,300 people in three days. His team also brought in two veterinarians to examine some 800 animals. Guiso works in the Laboratory's Security Organization.

David Eddy had been in the U.S. Army between 1989 and 1993 and from 1993 on in the U.S. Army Reserves. He served in Afghanistan between March 2004 and March 2005. In Afghanistan, Eddy, who works in the Lab's Security Organization, was the leader of a Tactical Human Intelligence Team. "Basically, we went out and talked to mayors, elders, police chiefs and random people who came forward to bring us information. We assisted the combat commanders in developing threat assessments."

Ryan Johnson of the Lab's Security Organization is one of at least five LLNL employees who have "pulled duty" in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Johnson served seven tours, ranging in length from three months to 11 months, for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, as well as two additional tours.

In Afghanistan, he was stationed in Bagram and Kandahar, serving as a crew chief/door gunner on MH-47E Chinook helicopters that supported different U.S. ground forces. "Afghanistan is actually a beautiful place. There is an awful lot of poverty. The people don't have much. It's green in many places, mountainous and it snows heavily in the winter. The water is especially clear. It is a large country and much less populated than Iraq."

Another veteran of both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars is Shane Kim of the Laboratory's Security Organization. Kim served in the U.S. Army (through the California Army National Guard) in Samarra, Iraq from February 2003 to March 2004 and in Bagram, Afghanistan from September 2007 through July 2008.

Erwin Rodrillo of the Laboratory's Security Organization served with the U.S. Marine Corps in Iraq for two tours and in Afghanistan for one tour. Rodrillo was part of the Marine infantry that fought in the initial Iraq invasion in 2003. After that, he then served in Afghanistan in the Kandahar, Jalalabad and Nangalam areas and then again in Iraq in Fallujah and Ramadi.

James Jones, Jr., a senior scientific technologist at the Lab's High Explosives Application Facility, served in Iraq through December 2004 and then in Afghanistan from February 2005 through May 2006. Jones was on active duty in the U.S. Army for 13 years and is currently in the California Army National Guard.

Bill Hollingsworth, a senior electronics technologist who works in the National Ignition Facility's Optics Group, has been a member of the California Air National Guard for about 28 years. In 2004, he was called up for a six-month deployment to the United Arab Emirates, where he worked with the Global Hawk Unmanned Surveillance Aircraft in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq). Hollingsworth assisted in launching and recovering the aircraft.

Christopher Kohl of the Laboratory's Security Organization was deployed in Bahrain from November 2002 to July 2003 as a part of the U.S. Air Force security forces (or military police). One of Kohl's duties was to serve as the base's tactical automated security systems manager testing, troubleshooting and repairing the early warning detection system placed around the perimeter of the base.

Gus Reyes, a nuclear assessments analyst in the Global Security Principal Directorate, has had U.S. Navy deployments to Bahrain and Turkey during the past four years. His first deployment to the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet Headquarters in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf was from April 2005 to April 2006. Reyes held the position of director to the Naval Coalition Center, collaborating with naval liaison officers from 16 different nations in support of maritime security operations in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Later, Reyes served a shorter deployment in the Office of Defense Coordination in Ankara, Turkey from January 2009 to April 2009 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. There, he worked closely with the Turkish General Staff in support of regional stability operations in northern Iraq.

"It has been striking to see how a minority, including extremist groups such as Al Qaeda, can grossly undermine the wishes of the vast majority. Without the presence of a strong and decisive police and military force, this violent minority can continue to determine the quality of life for the rest of a nation's population. The U.S. is trying to help nations like Iraq and Afghanistan establish these types of authority," Reyes said.

Lab employee Matt Edwards, who is a deputy supply chain manager in the Business and Operations Principal Directorate, served in Guantanamo Bay from February 2005 to February 2006. While there, he served as the facility's legal assistance attorney, providing personal legal services (wills, powers of attorney, family law advice) to U.S. military service members stationed there.

Since December 2008, he has been in Kosovo, where he serves as the deputy command judge advocate. "We have an office of five attorneys and four paralegals. I run the day-to-day legal operations while taking care of procurement law matters," Edwards said.

The overall article: https://newsline.llnl.gov/_rev02/articles/2009/jul/07.17.09-afghanistan1.php

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