

'Blackfoot' vehicle transports unique group, runs on high morale

PFC. BRADLEY J. CLARK

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE MAREZ, Iraq – It's about 8 feet tall, 15 feet long, 7 feet wide, weighs over 10,000 pounds – and when people see its family members on the battlefield, normally they would be scared.

Unlike its relatives, this Humvee transports a unique group of Soldiers who have an ability to make even the worst of situations into something that could bring smiles to the faces of everyone around.

It's not hard for the occupants of Blackfoot 6, Blackfoot Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment's commander vehicle, to turn every experience outside the wire into an enjoyable one.

"Our truck has the highest morale out of any other," said Sgt. Paul "Doc" Loos, squadron senior line medic.

One of the reasons the occupants of the commander's Humvee have the highest morale is because of Loos.

"Just being around Doc calms you down," said Sgt. Elliot Edmunds, cavalry scout and driver for Blackfoot 6. "You can't faze doc; he will deal with any situation and move on."

While Loos plays his part in the vehicle, Edmunds takes the lead when it comes to the morale boosting.

"He hits that line of being professional and joking around, but he never crosses it," said Loos. "Everybody loves him. No matter where we go, people just come to him because he has this ability to make everyone happy."

Just because two people in the Humvee are fun doesn't mean it will always be fun; sometimes a third person is needed to step it up. That third Soldier is Spc. Lonnie Sykes, cavalry scout and gunner for the commander's vehicle.

"If I'm feeling down and Doc is feeling down then Sykes is right there to pick us back up," said Edmunds. "We're in this together."

Loos also believes that the mind state of the team has a lot to do with their commander, Capt. Christopher Almaguer, commander, Blackfoot Troop.

"A big reason why things are so good is because the CO has a great relationship with [Edmunds and Sykes]," said Loos.

The commander went on to add that because of the great relationship he shares with his troops, they know when they have to take over the situation.



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Cavalry scout Sgt. Elliot Edmunds, B Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, directs an Iraqi policeman which direction to cover during an operation south of Tal 'Afar, Iraq, July 13. Edmunds' unit has been deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom for more than 12 months.

"My guys bring a physical and mental toughness and fearless leadership to the vehicle," said Almaguer. "If I'm tired or down, they pick up the slack, stay on the radio and steer the unit."

An example of the team's ability to brighten days would be when one of their convoys came to a four-hour stop because of a vehicle malfunction. The Soldiers went from Soldier to Soldier offering cold drinks and a few jokes to lighten the mood.

"You have to make the best of a bad situation," said Edmunds. "Sometimes you have to laugh to keep from crying. Then I always remember, the more it sucks now, the funnier it's going to be when we look back on it."

The Soldiers in Blackfoot 6 have three more months left of brightening days for fellow troops before they head back to Hawaii and begin to look back and laugh at those moments during their tour in Iraq.

Soldier leads pledge, becomes naturalized citizen

1ST LT. KENDRA EVERS

27th Brigade Support Battalion

FORWARD OPERATING BASE MAREZ, Iraq— As another Fourth of July rolled around, Soldiers in Iraq spent the holiday far away from family and friends.

And while the Fourth of July is normally a time to celebrate the independence of America, barbecue with family and friends and shoot off fireworks, this year the holiday became extra special for one Soldier serving with the 27th Brigade Support Battalion because she was able to celebrate it as newly-naturalized citizen of the United States.

Alongside 38 other Soldiers and Marines, Pfc. Karla Aviles, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 27th Brigade Support Battalion, participated in a naturalization ceremony July 2 at Logistics Staging Area Anaconda, Balad, Iraq.

Aviles has been serving in the U.S. Army for more than two years, and has lived in the United States even longer.



COURTESY PHOTO

Pfc. Karla Aviles, 27th Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, left, takes the oath of U.S. citizenship at a naturalization ceremony July 2 at Logistics Staging Area Anaconda, Balad, Iraq.

A native of Mexico, she moved to the U.S. when she was 8 years old.

"My mother wanted a better life for me and my brothers and sister," Aviles said.

At the time, her mother had family in New Jersey and went there ahead of her children to secure a place to live and work, then had her children come join her a year later.

Home, to Aviles, is New Jersey, where she lived until she joined the Army. She is the only one in her immediate family who joined the U.S. Armed Forces because, she said, "I always thought it'd be fun."

In order to become a naturalized citizen, there are many things that first need to be done, and, according to Aviles, it isn't that easy. First, she said, you have to live legally in the United States for at least five years. Then, when you apply, it is sort of like applying for a security clearance because they conduct a thorough background check, along with a history of work, and school. But the process is much faster if you are already serving in the U.S. military, she explained. The average time to complete the process is one year, whereas for military members, it can be as fast as three months - a small gift to give to those who sacrifice their time to serve the United States.

Once the paperwork is complete, applicants must go before an official designee who interviews Soldiers for naturalization, and they are asked a series of questions on American history.

"What is one thing you can do as a citizen that you can't do as a resident?" Aviles said. "Vote! I remember that one."

Aviles was selected to lead the other Soldiers and Marines who were being naturalized in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at the ceremony July 2 and admitted to being a little nervous that she would mix up the words.

Her family is very proud of her, she said, but she herself doesn't feel as proud now as she did when she joined the Army.

"I grew up in the United States; I already felt like a citizen," she said. "I was much more proud when I joined the Army and was able to serve my country. I think if you are defending your country, you deserve to be a citizen."

Iraqi teen warns Soldiers of bomb, kidnapped sister returned

1ST LT. NICHOLAS P. PAOLINI

2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment

BAGHDAD, Iraq – Just as the Scout Platoon, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment was returning to Camp Liberty on the city's west side July 20, they drove past a 16-year-old Iraqi youth who was trying to get their attention. They were no more than a half mile outside the gates when they stopped to see what the big deal was. It isn't unusual for children to run towards American convoys holding their hands up asking for soccer balls or the infamous, "chocolate, mista."

"We drive past these kids almost everyday," explained Scout Platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Michael Alexander. "Every day they run outside waving and cheering. A lot of them give us the thumbs up sign. The 16-year-old boy had his hands together about chest high and then threw them apart as we were passing."

Alexander knew right away what the boy was trying to tell them – there was an improvised explosive device close by.

"I stopped the platoon right then and there," explained Alexander.

The scouts have become accustomed to numerous false reports of IEDs, but will never ignore a warning.

"I treat them all as if they were (all) true," he explained.

The scouts then began talking to the boy through their interpreter to determine where the roadside bomb was located. The boy explained how three men came to his house and tried to emplace an IED in the road. The boy stopped the three men from placing the bomb, and somehow, got them to go away. However, the men took the boy's six-year-old sister.

It was at this time Alexander noticed the boy had some bruising on his face.

"The boy must have given those guys a tough time 'cause he looked pretty roughed up," Alexander said.

Armed with a description of the three men, the scouts set out to find the kidnappers and suspected roadside bombers. The Scout Platoon drove in the direction the boy said the kidnappers fled.

Their first stop was to check with the nearby Iraqi army checkpoints to see if they have seen the three men and little girl. The Iraqi army said they saw no men fitting the description.

"We were just about to give up hope when we saw a young girl wandering around," he explained.

The scouts went up to her with the interpreter to see if by some chance it was the missing girl. It was that family's lucky day. It was the missing girl. The girl explained she ran away from her captors. The scouts brought the girl back to her joy-filled brother.

"The brother was so excited when we came back and the girl hopped out of the Hummer," said Alexander. The scouts were also glad they were at the right place at the right time to help out the family.

"Kidnappings happen all too often here in Iraq," Alexander continues, "I just hate seeing these kids getting caught up in the violence. It's just a shame."



PFC. BRADLEY CLARK

Mock emergency in Iraq

Fire fighters respond to a mock emergency scenario at the airfield on Forward Operating Base Marez, Iraq. Rescue crews practice emergency drills weekly to ensure airfield staff are prepared for any type of emergency that may arise for both fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft.