

Convoy Protectors

Airmen-Soldiers pull convoy duty in the heat of Iraq

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts
photos by Tech. Sgt. Scott Reed

“Basham get down!” the convoy commander shouted to his gunner as 3rd Platoon rapidly approached an abandoned car. He feared deadly shrapnel from a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device planted by terrorists to halt the progress of Operation Iraqi Freedom. His fears proved wrong, but as the convoy pressed onward, the charred remains of trucks and twisted remnants of guardrails bore witness to past attempts.

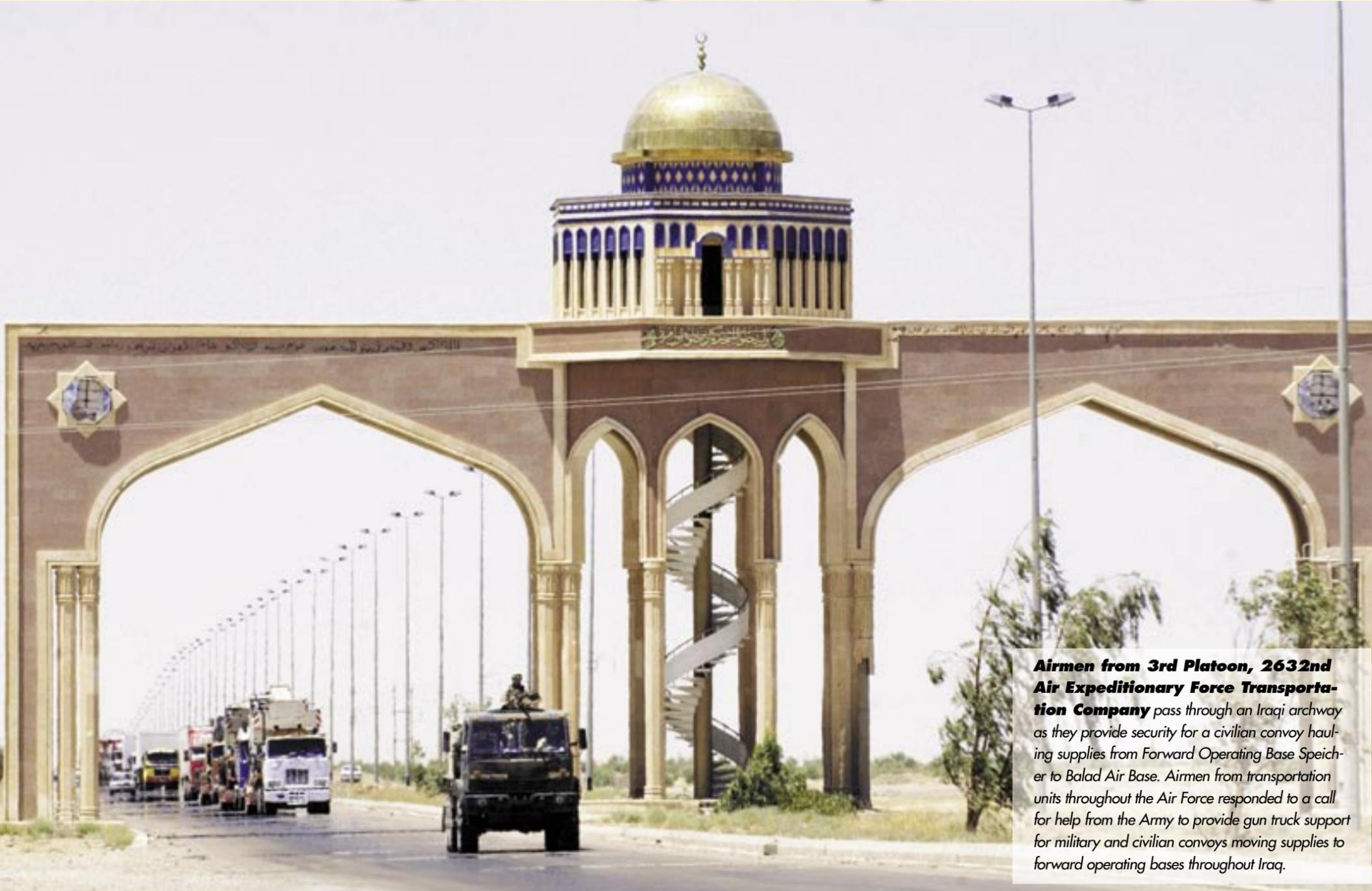
Such carnage is a familiar backdrop to convoys moving food, fuel, munitions and other vital supplies to U.S. military outposts throughout Iraq. What was unusual about the scene on this day, however, were the service members providing security for the 60 civilian truckers making the trip from Balad Air Base to Forward Operating Base Speicher near Tikrit. The convoy commander was Air Force Master Sgt. T.J. Jones, and his platoon of gun trucks was composed of fellow active duty and Air National Guard vehicle operators from around the world.

The Army has primary responsibility for providing convoy security escort in Iraq, but when the demand for its services exceeded capability, the Air Force responded to the call for help. After initial convoy training at various Army posts in the United States, members assembled in Kuwait for five additional weeks of preparation. The Airmen then convoyed to Balad in early April where they replaced a group of Soldiers and became the 2632nd Aerospace Expeditionary Force Transportation Company.

Their new home, about 45 miles north of Baghdad, is also known as Logistics Support Area Anaconda by the approximately 10,000 Soldiers and 2,000 Airmen who share the former Iraqi air base. Balad has become a major supply hub servicing outlying military posts by military airlift and convoys.

Baptism by fire

Just as they completed the swap-over with their Army predecessors, hostilities peaked. Balad became the most heavily attacked U.S. installation in Iraq in April when



Airmen from 3rd Platoon, 2632nd Air Expeditionary Force Transportation Company pass through an Iraqi archway as they provide security for a civilian convoy hauling supplies from Forward Operating Base Speicher to Balad Air Base. Airmen from transportation units throughout the Air Force responded to a call for help from the Army to provide gun truck support for military and civilian convoys moving supplies to forward operating bases throughout Iraq.



Against the backdrop of an Iraqi sunrise, Senior Airman Bryan Fletcher inspects a .50-caliber machine gun mounted on a gun truck used by Airmen to escort military and civilian convoys hauling supplies from Balad to military posts throughout Iraq. This day's convoy faced its share of tense moments, but didn't encounter any improvised explosive devices hidden in guardrails or abandoned vehicles which have plagued other convoys.

approximately 70 mortars and rockets landed inside the installation — one of them claiming the life of 20-year-old Airman 1st Class Antoine Holt, whose tent was struck April 10 during a mortar attack. The level of violence was even worse for convoy troops, who faced some form of terrorist attack nearly every other time they departed the gate.

"You know something is going to happen," said Master Sgt. Matt Wickham, whether it's encountering protesters, a vehicle breaking down, a direct attack or IEDs planted the night before.

Saturday, June 12, 6:08 a.m. — Airman 1st Class Brian Basham moved purposefully in the dusky morning light to prepare the gun trucks parked in front of the large tent called home. It marked the 15th convoy for the young Airman from Little Rock Air Force Base, Ark., where he has a newborn son he's never held in his arms.

"You try not to think about it," he said of the danger he faces regularly. "It's definitely an adrenaline rush; it's scary, especially when you see IEDs go off. But after awhile, it all becomes routine."

Also routine are rituals like handing out Lifesaver mints. "Our lifesaver for the trip," Airman 1st Class Jonathan Russell said with a smile as he handed out individually wrapped pieces of candy.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Jones returned from the Army's 7th Transportation Battalion headquarters where convoy commanders received last-minute intelligence before their trip. The route looked "relatively safe," he said, noting that the Army had removed three improvised explosive devices the past three days, and that the route had been free of violence since an attack by rocket-propelled grenades and IEDs injured three people five days ago.

He was advised to watch for decoys designed to encourage drivers to stop, exposing convoy members to the possibility of a subsequent attack.

"You're damned if you do, and damned if you don't," Sergeant Jones said of dealing with decoys. But the goal, he explained, is to keep the convoy moving and minimize contact with the enemy.

Violent encounters

But sometimes that's unavoidable, as Tech. Sgt. Michael Harris found out when IEDs blew up two trucks in front of him and a firefight ensued. In the confusion, he was unable to identify the source of enemy small arms fire, but eventually located the origin of the AK-47 and took out an enemy combatant. He received the Army combat patch, as have many fellow Airmen. Some have been awarded the Purple Heart.

During a convoy to Baghdad International Airport, Staff Sgt. Amelia Grahn was thrown headfirst through the windshield of her gun truck after it smashed into the truck in front following an IED explosion. Stunned and injured, she pulled herself off the hood and climbed into the unmanned gun mount standing ready to deliver fire with the .50-caliber M-2 machine gun if needed.

Despite the aura of war they live under, however, Sergeant Harris remains focused on their primary mission. "We're not delivering the spoils of war. We're delivering freedom and democracy to the people of Iraq," said the Shelby, Ohio, native stationed at Kadena Air Base, Japan.

"Unless you're here, you're really not able to understand what they face," said Col. Gary Shick, commander of the 732nd Expeditionary Mission Support Group that oversees Air Force convoy operations as well as Air Force engineers, communications and petroleum, oil and lubrication specialists also assigned to joint duty at seven locations throughout Iraq.

"It's a remarkable story," said the colonel before sending 3rd Platoon on its mission to Forward Operating Base Speicher, a 60-mile journey estimated to take about two-and-a-half hours. "You're seeing the best of human endeavors. These Airmen are doing some vital work under actual combat conditions."

And word has gotten out. Airmen escorts are requested by Army truckers, and Soldiers have stopped by for a look at Air Force procedures in maintaining the .50-caliber machine gun.

7:16 a.m. — With Sergeant Jones in the lead vehicle, a Humvee, the four gun trucks departed for the staging area to pick up 60 drivers with empty fuel trucks needing a security escort to Forward Operating Base Speicher.

"The hardest part is not knowing what's going to happen," said Sergeant Jones, reflecting on the upcoming convoy while making the short drive to the staging area. "You could be the smartest guy in the world, but it won't do you any good. You don't see it until it's on top of you. You see the flash and then hear the boom, but by then it's too late to do anything about it. But they make it easy for me," he said of his fellow transportation brethren.

7:20 a.m. — Staff Sgt. Jason Montes stood perched in the gunner's position overlooking a sea of cargo trucks in the staging area where drivers express their eagerness to depart after spending the night with their trucks.

"It's scary but exciting at the same time," said the

Houston native stationed at Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho. "I try not to think about it too much. It psyches me out. Hopefully we'll have a good run and get back to home base, mission complete."

His wife, Laura, worries about his deployment and the mission he's doing, so he calls her to let her know he made it back OK. She always asks what happened, but the young staff sergeant doesn't provide details, such as the day he felt the concussion of an IED explosion about 45 feet behind him that left his truck with shrapnel holes.

"She takes it really hard," he said of his presence in Iraq. "I don't really tell her what's going on. She worries enough, and I don't want to give her extra stress."

Heading out

7:43 a.m. — Third platoon gathered around Sergeant Jones for a last-minute brief. Two Army Humvees will join the convoy, he was glad to report. He reminded his crew to look down inside passing cars, check mirrors to make sure no one is left behind, no dismounts for gunners, beware of parked cars — "If something doesn't look right, we'll alter the course" — mark coordinates in case a medevac mission is necessary, and litters are in trucks three and four.

"If anyone is injured, we've got to get them and get the hell out." When he finished the brief and asked for questions, he received silent stares. "All right, let's mount up."

8:04 a.m. — The convoy departed the staging area, and within seconds Sergeant Jones had a phone in each ear dealing with a truck that may have dropped out because of mechanical failure. The convoy stopped, and Sergeant Jones was busy typing on his text message system, one of five communication alternatives.

8:22 a.m. — The convoy rumbled through the heavily fortified installation entry control point with all vehicles accounted for, departing the relative safety of the "green zone" inside the base and entering the "red zone" as the world outside is referred to.

"As soon as you hit the gate, it's a surreal feeling," Sergeant Wickham said the day earlier at the company operations center. Once outside the gate, he said, all joking stops.

"Lock and load," said Sergeant Jones as his Humvee left the base behind. "As soon as we're out of the gate we're vulnerable."

The danger outside the gate is mostly transparent. People on convoys are among the few to see life beyond the barbed wire. It's a scene of flat, hard-looking country

A welcome sign informs Airmen gun truck operators their convoy is nearing its final destination, as well as revealing signs of war and neglect that have marked the history of Iraq during the past 13 years.



interspersed with gardens of sunflowers, vineyards, lean-to fruit stands and women and children herding sheep, goats and cows. Small children smile and wave at the convoy. An older youth runs beside the Humvee and tries to make a quick sale of a CD for \$2. A small boy motions hand to mouth in a gesture for food reminiscent of Iraqis after the first Gulf War.

The four 5-ton work trucks have protective machine gun turrets cobbled out of heavy duty armor welded and bolted into place. Sergeant Wickham described them as a cross between Mad Max and the Beverly Hillbillies going down the road. A wooden roof on one gun truck protects against the brutal Iraqi sun, but offers little resistance to shrapnel that punched holes through its exterior.

8:44 a.m. — The convoy turned right onto Main Supply Route Tampa, and stretches about six miles as the vehicles gained speed on a major Iraqi highway. Sergeant Jones issued constant instructions to his driver to speed up, change lanes or motion a motorist out of the convoy. Convoys now share the road with other motorists which complicates matters, Sergeant Jones explained, as opposed to a few weeks ago when the military “owned the road.”

9:07 a.m. — A shiny blue cooler was spotted closely beside the right side of the road, and Sergeant Jones yells in a tone of controlled urgency for Sergeant Montes to stay down while they pass. Moments later he pointed

out the guardrails of a bridge, adding, “Guard rails are always hot spots for IEDs.”

9:44 a.m. — An Army team swept the road of IEDs. Eight minutes later an Army checkpoint in the opposite direction is seen protected by shiny concertina wire and Soldiers lying in the prone position with their weapons pointed perpendicular to the highway. “It’s always nice to see those,” Sergeant Jones said with a smile.

9:58 a.m. — Two civilian cars joined in the convoy, and Sergeant Jones quickly positioned his Humvee to motion them out of the way. He kept at least one phone implanted in an ear while keeping up with text messages.

10 a.m. — For the first time since departure, a steady lull occurred and Sergeant Jones had a few moments to sit quietly, relax and share a few words of light conversation with Airman Basham. The phone beckons, and he’s back into the game.

10:40 a.m. — The convoy arrived at Forward Operating Base Speicher, a nondescript outpost where Sergeant Jones looked forward to the usual “drop and go” that allows a faster and safer trip back home. As the convoy slowed to a crawl, the breeze disappeared from the open windows through which Airmen wearing helmets and body armor extended their M-16s, and the temperature seemed to quickly escalate. While waiting to enter the base, Airman Basham discussed what life would be like returning to the real world of vehicle ops.

“It’ll take some getting used to,” he said. “This has be-

come the norm. But I’m sure it won’t take too long to get back into the swing of things.”

His first deployment also leaves him with a new perspective on life: “Anything after this will seem like a vacation,” he said laughing. But his thoughts were mostly on getting reacquainted with his wife and meeting his son, Devon Ray, who will be three months old before he has a chance to hold him.

Vigilant return

12:34 p.m. — After a tasty lunch in a surprisingly modern dining facility, Sergeant Jones called everyone together to announce they would be escorting back 60 trucks loaded with a variety of cargo that included trailers used to replace tents as living accommodations at Balad. No one expressed disappointment in the change of plans that prevented an early return home.

1:25 p.m. — The convoy departs, and within minutes things quickly go wrong. Truck No. 4 is unaccounted for, and the next 10 minutes are spent traversing the convoy until it’s finally located. No explanation for what happened. Communication, he noted earlier, is their biggest problem.

1:57 p.m. — “Basham get down!” came the warning cry to his gunner, and he ordered Sergeant Montes to swerve around the potential threat parked alongside the road. Once past, Sergeant Jones turns to his driver and with a smile said, “Are you going to keep being my driver even though I yell at you?” Sergeant Montes didn’t reply, but the expression on his face conveyed his respect for Sergeant Jones who consistently made quick and tough decisions throughout the day in the same calm and confident manner.

2:33 p.m. — A truck broke down, and the convoy stopped. “Hide me behind one of these vehicles so I won’t get shot at,” Sergeant Jones said matter-of-factly to his driver to stop beside a parked truck while he assessed the situation. Airmen were ordered out of the vehicles to provide security for the convoy. A radio report said the repair could take up to 30 minutes. Sergeant Jones grimaces. Truckers are usually given only 15 minutes to make repairs before leaving their rig behind for later recovery. The drivers made repairs faster than expected, and the convoy rolls on.

3:42 p.m. — Sergeant Montes smacked himself on his helmet two times to stay awake. “You going to make it, Sparky?” Sergeant Jones laughed.

3:52 p.m. — The left turn onto Main Supply Route Milton came into view, marking the final short leg of the trip. A quick exchange occurred between Sergeant Mon-



tes and Sergeant Jones whether to stop or press on in front of an Army convoy approaching from the right. The decision was made for them as the green fleet lumbered past and the Air Force convoy stacked up as far as the eye could see.

His vehicle immediately moved in behind as the last Army vehicle passed. Within seconds both convoys stopped when a heavy load fell off an Army truck. A friendly driver dismounted his 18-wheeler and wandered near a gun truck, appearing eager to strike up a conversation. A gunner complimented his Ray-Bans, to which the proud owner said he paid \$100 for them. “You paid too much,” the gunner joked. People began moving toward their vehicles, and the joint convoy got underway.

4:26 p.m. — The convoy rolled back into the green zone, and Sergeant Jones exited the Hummer at the gate to file a trip report. Minutes later the gun trucks were again parked at the tent, and 3rd Platoon Airmen methodically went about emptying their trucks. A few Airmen broke out their Lifesavers and ate in the same manner as a victory cigar. There was talk about a barbecue the next day. Then news came they would be taking on another convoy instead. It all seemed the same to a weary-looking Sergeant Montes.

“It’s just a relief to get back,” he said, looking forward to relaxing after the highs and ensuing lows that define a day spent on a convoy. He then trudged away — perhaps to find a phone and call his wife. ☺

In keeping with tradition, Staff Sgt. Michael Voltmer, a member of 3rd Platoon, 2632nd Air Expeditionary Force Transportation Company, gives each Airman a “life saver” before mounting their gun trucks to escort a civilian convoy across Iraqi highways and through threats of terrorist attacks.