Civilians Brave the Desert Storm

Mike Holcomb's story is a common one among American soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia during the war: He survived three Scud missile attacks in the early days of Operation Desert Storm. A lot of soldiers survived Iraq's Scuds; a tragic few died. What's uncommon is that Holcomb is an Army *civilian* employee, a logistician who volunteered to be in Saudi Arabia and, according to his boss, could have gone home on the first available airplane. The contributions made by Holcomb and hundreds of other civilian employees in the Persian Gulf have been all but lost in the hoopla surrounding the military victory against Iraq and the homecoming celebrations for the returning soldiers.

The pilots who pounded enemy positions for more than a month and the soldiers and marines who later chased the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait won the war. But they couldn't have done it without the support of the civilian employees who deployed with them. Many service members may owe their lives to the Army civilians who helped maintain equipment and sped up the process of getting parts and other support from 60 logistics agencies at Army installations worldwide. "If the Army civilians do their job and get the equipment fixed on a tank, they save four lives," said Jan Finegan, an Army Materiel Command (AMC) public affairs specialist who spent time in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq in February and March. "If they get soldiers' commo [communication equipment] fixed and ready to use so they can call in MEDEVAC [medical evacuation], then they save lives. That's what the civilians are here for. It's not an exercise—this is for real."

Some 250 AMC logistics assistance representatives (LAR's) served with Army units in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel during the war. Many of them lived in the same tents and ate the same food as the soldiers. The LAR's were AMC's primary means of staying in touch with soldiers in the field.

Army civilians serving as medics were on the scene in Dhahran, treating the victims of a February Scud attack that killed 28 Army reservists and wounded 97 others. Being civilians, LAR's could have quit and gone home if they wished, but not one of them did. The average age of the civilians deployed to the Persian Gulf was 46.

"The military has received a lot of accolades for their accomplishments in Desert Storm, but civilian volunteers who went and served were a big part of the story," said Colonel James Hinebaugh, commander of Red River Army Depot in Texas. Hinebaugh said about 140 depot civilians volunteered for duty in Saudi Arabia during the war. Just like the soldiers who served in the Gulf, each of the civilians has a war story to tell.

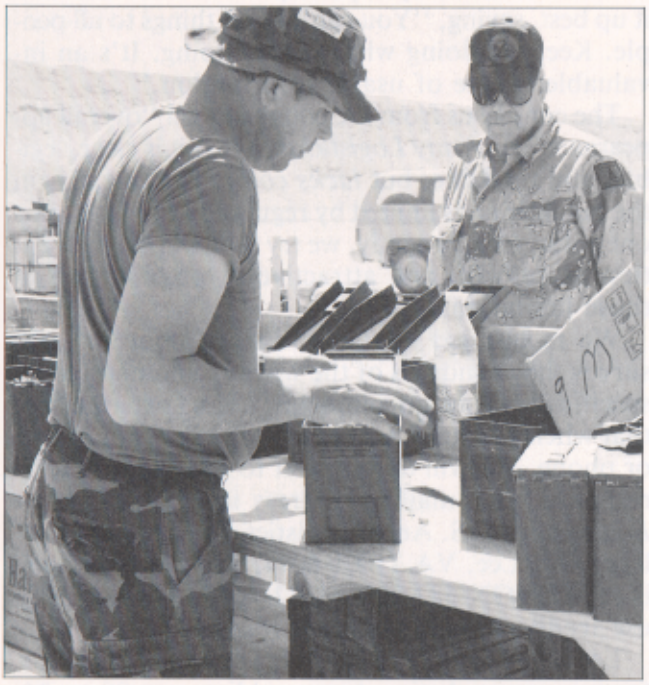
Mike Holcomb, for example—a 48-year-old retired master sergeant—said, "I spent 24 years in the military, including 2 years in Vietnam, but I wasn't mentally prepared for the environment I walked into." Holcomb said his "job was fine," but he didn't think the living conditions would be so primitive. "I found out I'm too old for this," he said. "I saw Vietnam veterans raring to get over there. I was, too, but I found out I'm not young like I used to be. Doing what I did, living like I did, was a drain." Holcomb helped ensure the 82d Airborne Division's tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missiles; Dragons; and other short-range land combat systems were ready and working. While living conditions were hard for him to handle, the lack of publicity for Army civilians by the American press corps in Saudi Arabia was not a problem. "The focus is where it should be—on the military," Holcomb said during the war. "They're here to do the job. We're here to help them."

Chuck Petit, from Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, helped expedite maintenance actions for weapons systems. He responded to an AMC call for volunteers before the war started. He was awaiting a flight at Dover, Delaware, when the news came that the air war had begun. He arrived in Saudi Arabia 2 days later. Petit said living conditions in Dhahran were adequate. He had a bed, running water, and a place to wash his clothes. "It was a lot better than the soldiers on the front lines were getting," he said. Despite work days that averaged 12 hours, Petit "was glad to have the opportunity to be a part of

it and to do a little bit."

Gary Henry, an equipment specialist from Redstone Arsenal, drove 14,000 miles in the desert to deliver and install upgraded laser lenses to units in the field. "It gave me a real sense of pride to see the magnitude of the U.S. Armed Forces concentrated in one place," he said. "I thought we must be really good in order to get all of this equipment ready to go in such a short time. Our contribution was small compared to the guys there in foxholes, but it felt good to be there and do the part we did."

Doug Turner, from Anniston Army Depot, Alabama, helped save the lives of wounded American soldiers following a Scud attack on a barracks in Dhahran 2 days before the end of the war. Turner was a few miles away when the attack occurred. "We had just finished eating dinner and were going back to our rooms. . . . We heard the missile warning sirens go off [and] at about the same time, we heard an explosion," he said. After donning his chemical gear, Turner waited for the all-clear to sound. Once it did, he rushed to the site and went to work. "These people had mostly shrapnel wounds, lacerations, and some puncture wounds," he said. "We did a basic check first and tended to the injuries that were obvious. . . . Then we tried to stabilize them and make them comfortable until they could be evacuated to a hospital. We were all pretty scared at first. We didn't know if any more Scuds would be coming, and we were in the middle of the street with no lights. At first, there was mass confusion and nobody knew what was going on."



☐A logistics assistance representative (above right) helps an Army National Guard ammunition specialist sort ammunition during Operation Desert Storm.

Al Perry, a howitzer specialist from Fort Sill, Oklahoma, arrived in Saudi Arabia on 11 January and described his experience there as "one big surprise. Everything happened too fast; every day we moved and kept on going," he said. Perry worked with the National Guard's 142d Field Artillery Brigade. When the brigade went to the field, he went with them. "We've been living with them . . . sharing the same tents," he said.

Finegan noted in the diary she kept during her stay in the Persian Gulf, "There are no washing machines but there are ways of doing laundry. One man tells me he washes his uniform by wearing it into the shower, soaping it up and making sure it's clean, then rinsing. Then there's the more conventional means of using a waterproof bag, adding water and soap, and shaking." Finegan wrote that "landing at Kuwait International Airport is like flying into a science fiction movie about a future world destroyed by some catastrophic event. The burned-out hulks of a 747 and a DC-9 lay where they collapsed."

Finegan also recorded in her diary, "The pilot warns us not to walk on dirt or grass because of mines. Craters made by cluster bombs dot the concrete, and shrapnel and unexploded ordnance litter the runway. I'd heard of shrapnel but didn't have any idea of what it really was. One of the guys picked up a piece about 6 inches long with ragged edges, handed it to me, and said, 'This is shrapnel.' It was deceptively heavy and I could only imagine what it would do to a person. I felt a flutter of fear, but it was a good lesson. That piece of metal brought home to me what could happen if I wasn't exceptionally careful. For the rest of the day I watched where I put my feet, walked only in footprints or vehicle tracks or on concrete, and picked up nothing."

These are just a few of the stories of a few of the many civilians who braved the desert storm to support our military. There are many more such stories—tales of heroism, self-sacrifice, and dedication to a cause. Like the LAR's described here, many other civilians played important roles in the success of Operation Desert Storm. **ALOG**

This article is based on an Army News Service release. The photo was provided by Jan Finegan, an AMC Headquarters public affairs specialist who served in the AMC Support Group in Saudi Arabia.