



# THE 861ST ENGINEER COMPANY PREPARES FOR DEPLOYMENT

By Sergeant John Cervone

**E**arly this year, Soldiers of the Army National Guard's 861st Engineer Company trained at Camp Shelby, in Mississippi, for their company's deployment to Iraq. The unit's mission there would be new and dangerous. These engineers are normally heavy-equipment operators and mechanics and are trained to build bridges and airfields, maintain sewer and water systems, and restore electricity. But in Iraq, many military operations require combat engineers. They find explosive devices and remove and safely detonate them as part of an effort to clear roadways. In addition, they impede enemy movement by using explosives to create obstacles.

The training the Soldiers received included clearing terrain obstacles, opening routes for armored fighting vehicles, and clearing minefields. Due to the explosive hazards facing our troops in Southwest Asia, extensive training was given on safely disposing of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and detonating booby traps. Defense against nuclear, biological,

and chemical (NBC) weapon threats was also included in the training schedule. To make the training at Camp Shelby as realistic as possible, simulated Iraqi villages were carved into the lush fields in a section of the training site. Trained role players acted as villagers, milling about and speaking Arabic. Adding to the sense of reality, the women covered their heads with scarves while some men toted AK-47s.

For additional training, the entire unit went to the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, to prepare for its upcoming mission in Iraq. NTC is the only instrumented training facility in the world that is suitable for force-on-force and live-fire training. This training helped ensure that Soldiers were adequately prepared to deploy into a combat theater. The training received simulated the tempo, range, and intensity of current and future conflicts. The depth and width of the battlespace gave the 861st the unique opportunity to exercise all of its elements in a realistic environment. The unit's training included the requirement to communicate over extended

distances, exercise casualty evacuation, and navigate in difficult terrain with few distinguishable roads. Other environmental conditions, such as a daily temperature range of 40 to 50 degrees, winds over 45 knots, and constant exposure to the sun helped prepare the Soldiers of the 861st for what to expect upon arriving in Iraq.

The training at Camp Shelby helped the 861st Engineer Company unit go from working behind the lines to the front lines, clearing the way for the rest. And the training at NTC stressed every system and each Soldier to their limit, allowing the Soldiers to assess their endurance level and how prepared they were—physically and mentally—to go into combat.



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**Soldiers of the 861st Engineer Company train to locate and destroy landmines and other explosive devices.**