

Live from Baghdad: It's Prime Power

By Staff Sergeant Robert Stephenson

It is probably the smallest unit currently mobilizing through Fort Dix, New Jersey, and yet its specialty makes it indispensable to the military. Alpha Company, 6th Platoon, 249th Engineer Battalion (Prime Power), is an elite unit of nine reservists from Attleboro, Massachusetts, that works on high-tension power lines and is responsible for making sure that all power keeps flowing through the system uninterrupted. Just as the Signal Corps is the Ma Bell of the military, the prime-power unit can be considered the ConEdison of the military. The fact that there are so few soldiers who are able to work on high-tension power lines means that the well-traveled unit works all over the United States and overseas on a regular basis.

Normally on active duty about two or three months out of the year, the unit is brought in for Federal Emergency Management Agency missions, disaster relief, and power assessments—in addition to its regular training missions. The unit also receives orders from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for active duty special work. As power-distribution experts, the unit is the only one authorized to work on “energized” or live power lines. This means that its soldiers can make repairs while up to 30,000 volts of electricity surge through the lines. About 80 percent of the unit members are civilian power line workers. Although the Army does provide a 2-month school for power distribution and a 1-year school for power generation, having civilian experience gives soldiers the needed expertise to be able to handle live wires.

Having such a specialized unit in the Army has its distinct advantages. When the unit goes places, literally millions of dollars are saved. Working live is important in missions where power



Soldiers from Bravo Company, 6th Platoon, 249th Engineer Battalion, erect a pole as they repair the high-voltage electrical system at Baghdad International Airport.

must run continuously during the repair process, such as at military airports. Besides the cost savings, another advantage of using the prime-power unit over civilian contractors is that its soldiers already have all the clearances necessary to work in secure areas.

In September, Alpha Company replaced its sister unit (Bravo Company) in Iraq, where it is helping rebuild the infrastructure of major cities such as Baghdad. Among other missions, Bravo Company's power-distribution unit completed work on power lines that had been attached to a bridge destroyed during the conflict in Iraq. Those power lines carried electricity to one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, which is currently being used as a U.S. military headquarters.

As might be expected, the soldiers in the unit who work for municipal and local power companies take a pay cut when deployed, but that doesn't seem to faze them. They believe that what they do is important and that they contribute a valuable service to their country. 

Staff Sergeant Stephenson, a New Jersey National Guard soldier, is currently mobilized with his public affairs unit at Fort Dix, New Jersey, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, where he serves as the NCOIC of the broadcast section. When not deployed, Staff Sergeant Stephenson works full time as the Public Affairs NCOIC for the New Jersey National Guard Counterdrug Task Force.

Note: There are no active duty transmission and distribution specialists (MOS 52G [21Q as of October 2003]); they are all members of the Army Reserves. The 21 MOS 52Gs stationed in Attleboro, Massachusetts, are divided into Alpha and Bravo Companies, 6th Platoon. Both are part of the 249th Engineer Battalion, which is headquartered at Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

Photos by CW2 Donald McRae



The crew sets a pole near the CJTF-180 building at Baghram Air Base, Afghanistan. A total of 130 45-foot concrete poles were set there by the 249th Engineer Battalion.