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Nebraska Guard unit recalls ambush in Iraq

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The rocket-propelled grenade screamed into the truck's hood just two feet in front of Pfc. Ricky DeLancey, spraying the Nebraska National Guard soldier with shrapnel and glass.



On the dangerous stretch of highway south of Baghdad, citizen-soldiers from Nebraska's 1075th Transportation Co. found themselves in the middle of 30 minutes of hell.

Iraqi insurgents continued raking the stricken truck with withering gunfire, one bullet grazing the Duncan, Neb., soldier's head before blowing the Kevlar out of the back of his helmet.

DeLancey turned his burned and bloodied face to the truck's driver, Sgt. Terry Ricketts, an Omahan shot through the leg and pinned beneath the truck's shattered dashboard.

"We're going to die," DeLancey said, not a hint of panic in his voice.

"Yeah, I know," Ricketts flatly replied.

On a highway south of Baghdad, the young, part-time soldiers from Nebraska's 1075th Transportation Company found 30 minutes of hell.

In an unusually large and coordinated attack March 20, the convoy of National Guard troops and civilian contractors was ambushed by up to 50 heavily armed insurgents.

Army officials called it the biggest and most sophisticated convoy ambush in Iraq since April 2004, a disaster in which eight soldiers and contractors died and one man - who later made a celebrated escape - was taken hostage.

In the harrowing Nebraska ambush, it appears the insurgents, many carrying handcuffs, again were intent on taking hostages. Their early success in stopping the convoy left the Nebraskans in grave danger.

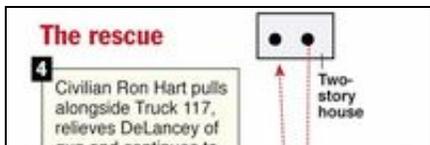
But once the lead stopped flying, every military and civilian driver in the convoy made it out alive.

And 27 insurgents lay dead on the roadsides - one of the highest battle tolls in the two-year-old war.

The way the March 20 attack was fought off by the Nebraskans and then routed by a crack squad of Kentucky National Guard military police has been discussed in the highest levels of the Army as a textbook tactical defeat of an ambush.

But more than that, it's a story of heroics under fire by a handful of brave citizen-soldiers:

- A 20-year-old from Duncan who greeted his seemingly imminent death with an angry hail of machine gun fire.
- A Kentucky shoe store clerk whose grit in the fight prompted one publication to dub her "GI Jane."
- An unassuming nursing student from Clarks, Neb., whose grace under fire helped lead her platoon out of the insurgent death trap.



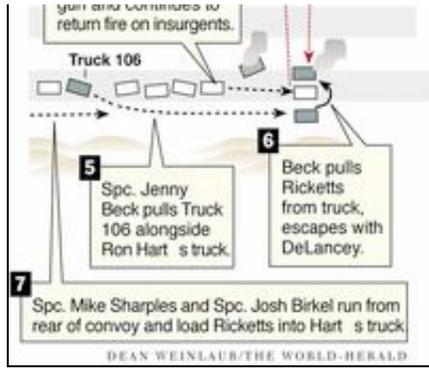
"In times like that, you don't care whether we should have gone to war in Iraq," said Lt. Charles Gilkey of Lincoln. "All you care about is your buddies need help, and you're going to get them out of there."

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The noonday sun was high over the Tigris River valley as 14 truckers from 1st Squad, 1st Platoon of the Nebraska 1075th surged north in their latest "Iraqi Express" run.

The four-day mission between Kuwait and the main U.S. base camp in Baghdad was so familiar to the Columbus-based unit that they knew every roadside bomb crater, counting more than 100 on one notorious stretch.

They had camped overnight at Camp Scania and were approaching Baghdad along the Bismarck Road, a heavily traveled, four-lane divided highway running through scrubby farmland.

The 33-vehicle convoy included seven Nebraska National Guard trucks interspersed with what the soldiers call "white trucks"- defense contractor-owned semis driven by civilians.

The soldiers rode two to a truck, switching off behind the wheel. In one of the lead Guard trucks, Ricketts and DeLancey were paired as co-drivers for the first time during their Iraq tour.

Ricketts, a prison guard and a guitar player in a heavy metal band at home in Omaha, didn't know much about the young rural kid who was still trying to decide what he wanted to do in life. But Ricketts already found that he liked DeLancey's easygoing way and sarcastic sense of humor.

DeLancey knew the 27-year-old Ricketts mostly as a big fitness buff. At the end of a mission, when most soldiers would sleep, the Creighton Prep grad would head to the gym for a two-hour workout.

In the next military truck back, Spc. Jenny Beck of Clarks was driving with an eerie, uneasy feeling in her stomach.



The 21-year-old was on her first mission since becoming engaged three weeks before to Spc. Tim Bos, who was driving the convoy commander's truck.

Before leaving Scania, she repeatedly told Bos she thought they should stay at the camp another day, though she couldn't say why.

"I don't want to leave. I just don't want to leave," she said. "Can't we just stay here?"

As the Nebraskans rumbled north, another convoy approached in the southbound lanes.

It was at that opportune moment the insurgents decided to turn Bismarck Road into a shooting gallery.



Spc. Jenny Beck, Clarks, Neb.

A rocket-propelled grenade crashed into the cab of one of the southbound trucks, disabling it. A hail of automatic weapons fire ripped into both convoys, muzzles flashing all around.

"Contact left!" a voice called over the radio as bullets pinged into the side of a lead vehicle in the Nebraska convoy.

Seconds later, another voice called out: "Contact right!"

The firing was coming from both sides. It quickly became apparent there were a lot of bad guys - extremely rare in a war where attacks usually come from small bands of gunmen or remote-controlled bombs.

Most of the fire was coming from the left, where black-clad insurgents were dug in behind sand berms, in a grove of shaggy trees and along dry canal beds.

The Army has one basic rule for a convoy under ambush: Get out of Dodge. Drivers are trained to accelerate to escape the "kill zone."

But a roadside bomb suddenly tossed a southbound civilian bus across the road like a toy. Then several unarmored white trucks at the front of the convoy stopped and were abandoned by terrified civilian drivers -most of whom spoke no English.

Ricketts, the first to encounter the obstacles, threw the wheel to the left to get around on the median. But with several tires shot out, his truck became mired in thick mud.

By the time other trucks had slammed on their brakes and maneuvered to avoid the vehicles ahead of them, trucks were haphazardly scattered all over the road, making movement nearly impossible.

It was time for the convoy's big guns to swing into action.

Escorting the truckers were three guntrucks - heavily armored Humvees with 50-caliber machine guns mounted on back - manned by Guard members from several other states. They pack such firepower that just the roar of the heavy guns has been known to put insurgents on the run.

The driver of the middle guntruck, an Illinois guardsman, bravely positioned his vehicle between the convoy and the attackers - a proven, relatively new tactic intended to draw fire off the trucks.

But when the guntruck fired its big gun, two or three shots thundered out before it jammed. The driver was quickly hit and wounded. The big guns on the other guntrucks similarly misfired, all apparently having been assembled improperly.

The Nebraskans were in great peril - stopped in the kill zone and left to defend themselves with small arms.

Before Ricketts could get a hand on his M-16 rifle, a bullet pierced the hinge of the armored door and went through his leg. It felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to his thigh.

Others heard his voice on the radio: "I'm hit! I'm hit!"

The radio crackled again: "Incoming!"

Ricketts and DeLancey barely had time to process the warning when a grenade landed on the hood with a thunderous boom.

A dozen trucks back, Spc. John Harris of Columbus and Spc. Jacob Graff of Ainsworth had bullets flying through their windshield and dash. Seeing no movement ahead, they decided it was time to find their own way out.



Spc. Leigh Ann Hester, Kentucky Guard MP



Pfc Ricky DeLancey, left, and Sgt. Terry Ricketts

Graff pulled out and began to pass the line of stalled trucks on the right side. But their movement made them a prime target.

Harris quickly was hit in the neck, the bullet hitting an artery and leaving him unable to speak.

"Are you OK?" Graff asked.

Harris gestured to say yes.

"You're not hurt?"

Harris waved it off, no.

"So, you're not OK?"

Harris finally just frantically pointed straight ahead, his gesture saying what his lips could not: Get us out of here!

Another shot hit Graff in the shoulder, which couldn't stop him from steering his truck across the muddy median and out of the kill zone.

But few others were escaping the firestorm. About a mile to the north, Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Uhl of Bellwood, commander of the convoy, felt helpless.

In the lead truck in the convoy, he and his driver had gotten through unscathed. They secured an evacuation zone and called in helicopters for the wounded.

As the long minutes ticked away, Uhl was desperately trying to learn what was happening back there. Though it would have gone against his training, he was about to go back into the kill zone.

A woman's voice over the radio told him not to do it.

"We're coming out," she said.

It was Beck, stuck in the middle of the convoy.

Some would later be surprised that the soft-spoken Beck, the only woman in the squad, would coolly take charge in the midst of mayhem.

But the former high school basketball standout had always been one to take care of what needed to be done. Somehow, she knew, the convoy needed to get moving.

Becoming the de facto platoon commander, she worked to untangle the mass of trucks, get them rolling and figure out what was happening ahead.

"Ricketts, can you hear me?" she called into the radio. "Has anyone heard from Ricketts and DeLancey?"

She couldn't help thinking they were dead.

In fact, DeLancey and Ricketts, still dazed after the rocket blast, were only beginning to realize they were still alive.

They heard Beck's voice but had no idea where it was coming from, their radio now lost in the wreckage of their truck. Both were sure the end was near.

Looking back on that foggy moment, DeLancey still doesn't know what came over him - perhaps a burst of adrenaline or some primitive instinct to survive. But in a profanity-laced tirade, he decided he'd go down fighting.

He kicked out what was left of the windshield, leaned over the hood with a light machine gun and raked the berm from where the insurgents were firing.

He fired a 200-round drum. After Ricketts, pinned beneath the dash, was able to use a free arm to shove another drum across the truck floor, DeLancey reloaded and fired again.

Official reports credit DeLancey with killing or wounding two to five insurgents, but it's based mostly on conjecture. What is known is the heavy fire coming from the berm was suppressed, taking heat off the stalled convoy.

About that time, MPs from the Kentucky National Guard rode in like the cavalry in an old Hollywood western.

Ten guardsmen from Kentucky's 617th Military Police unit aboard three guntrucks had been shadowing the southbound convoy from a distance. They now moved up to join the fight.

Their impact on the battle was immediate. It's probably no coincidence that a home movie of the ambush shot by an insurgent suddenly goes black just after the MPs rolled into the frame, their big turret guns thundering.

The Kentuckians pulled off the highway onto a side road perpendicular to the highway, out-flanking the insurgents' main position. Most of the MPs dismounted and took refuge along a berm, engaging the insurgents in a fierce gun battle. Three Kentuckians quickly were wounded.

"It was crazy," Kentucky Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester later told a reporter. "It was basically kill or be killed."

With most of the fire now off the convoy, Beck led a line of trucks forward, stopping after about 100 yards to inspect the smoking cab of Ricketts' truck.

She found DeLancey sitting on the ground beside a wheel. Ron Hart, a civilian contractor and Army veteran, moments earlier had relieved the wounded soldier of his machine gun and was laying down bursts of suppressive fire.

Telling the bloodied and scared DeLancey to climb into her truck, Beck ran to the mangled cab and anxiously peered inside. She later called it the scariest moment of her life.

Ricketts was lying in the cab, face to the floor.

Then he raised his head and looked directly at her. She may have been as happy to see him as he was her.

Ricketts told her he was hopelessly stuck, but she cursed at him and said she didn't care.

"There's no way we're leaving you here," she yelled.

She grabbed his arm. "On the count of three, you push and I'll pull," she said. "Do it for me and yourself. You're going to be OK."

It took all the strength she had, but Beck hauled the 205-pound Ricketts free of the wreckage and down to the road.

Hart helped her carry him to her truck. But after opening the door, Beck quickly realized there was nowhere to put him. Three people were already jammed in the lone passenger seat: her co-driver, the wounded DeLancey and a wounded civilian driver.

She later would agonize over whether she did the right thing, whether she should have found another way to get Ricketts out. But in the heat of the moment her only thought was to get on the radio to have the next Guard truck back pick him up.

She told Ricketts to take cover under the trailer of Hart's truck and left him in the care of Hart, who continued to fire.

Remounting her truck, she revved the engine and led a small convoy out of the kill zone.

Lying across the laps of Beck and her co-driver, DeLancey burst into tears as they raced up the road.

"It was fear, happiness, relief - everything," he said later. "I almost died, and I knew I probably wasn't going to die anymore."

Back at the rear of the Nebraska convoy, Spc. Michael Sharples of Fullerton was practically begging civilian contractors hiding in a ditch to get back in their trucks.

He ran to Spc. Joshua Birkel of Columbus, in the final truck in the convoy. We have to get these guys moving, he said.

That's when they heard Beck's reports that Ricketts was in the road ahead.

Under fire from the right, Birkel and Sharples ran more than 300 yards, found Ricketts and loaded him in the passenger seat of Hart's truck.

Finally, after 20 minutes in the heat of the kill zone, Ricketts was on his way to safety.

On their way to the rear, Birkel and Sharples again encouraged the civilian drivers - at times at gunpoint - to get back in their trucks.

Picking up stragglers on the way out, all drivers in the Nebraska convoy at last escaped the kill zone, leaving several wrecked trucks behind.

Minutes later, Ricketts arrived at the evacuation zone. No one was happier to see him than Beck, who by then was working with her fiancée to care for the wounded.

Before being loaded in a chopper, Ricketts asked Beck to call his girlfriend. "Tell her I'll be OK," he said.

Back at the ambush site, the Kentucky MPs had created a lethal kill zone of their own.

Squad leader Sgt. Timothy Nein tapped Hester, one of two women in the squad, to join him in routing the insurgents dug in before them. Armed with rifles and grenades, with the big guns providing cover, they rushed the nearest ditch.

Hester and Nein worked their way along the trenchline, squeezing off so many rifle shots and tossing so many grenades that Hester had to run back to the truck for more ammo.

After Hester had reportedly killed four insurgents with rifle shots and a fifth with a grenade, and Nein killed two others, they saw no more movement along the ditch.

All over the battlefield, a quiet calm was descending. The Battle of Bismarck was over.

* * *

In the aftermath, the Kentucky Guardsmen received much-deserved attention for the counterattack that turned a promising ambush into a devastating insurgent defeat.

Hester was singled out for her mettle, providing new fodder for the ongoing debate about the role of women in Iraq's combat zones.

Untold until now was the story of the Nebraskans' heroics. At least four have been nominated for valor commendations. There's talk in the unit of possible Silver Stars for Beck and DeLancey.

Beck says she couldn't care less about that. She just did what she felt was needed, she said, and was so scared she felt like throwing

up the whole time.

She has spent more time beating herself up about her decision to leave Ricketts than patting herself on the back. "I still disagree with the decision I made, but I can handle it now," she said. "I am just happy everyone is doing good."

DeLancey, Ricketts and Harris are all home in Nebraska now, recuperating.

Harris was the most seriously hurt, nerve damage leaving the left side of his face paralyzed and the prognosis for improvement uncertain. But around his neck he wears the "lucky bullet" that nearly took his life, feeling fortunate just to be alive.

On this Memorial Day weekend, it's a feeling shared by many in 1st Platoon.

Said Ricketts: "It was at the same time the best day and worst day of my life."

Editor's note: *This account of the "Battle of Bismarck" in Iraq was drawn from interviews with key participants and official reports from the Nebraska and Kentucky National Guard.*

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