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Janet Garvey recalls her time with the 343rd Medical Company during Operation Desert Storm

By Brian Funk, Editor

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Janet Garvey remembers the nervous anticipation she felt shortly after her unit, the 343rd Medical Company based in Galax, was called to active duty in November 1990.

Reservists were unsure what kind of situation they'd be thrown into, and despite the fact they knew they had a job to do, they were reluctant to leave their families behind.

For Garvey, though, the time was one of especially mixed emotions.

More than 100 army medics and other members of the unit reported to Fort Pickett for training. Roughly 25 of the unit were from Galax and the Twin County area.

Garvey — a Sparta, N.C., native — was a nurse training officer attached to the unit and had served with them since 1981. When the base commander summoned her to his office one day shortly before leaving for Saudi Arabia, she thought she'd be getting a hospital assignment.

Instead, she was promoted to captain.

She was the commanding officer of a unit about to go to war.

"That was very scary, and a little overwhelming," says Garvey, now a family nurse practitioner with Emergency Physicians Medical Group in Galax and a mother of three.

"It caught me off guard, but it was quite an honor to be asked."

They shipped out Jan. 3, arriving after their vehicles but before their tents and the rest of their equipment.

The 343rd was stationed in the middle of the desert, which Garvey said actually protected them. Those stationed near the ports were more susceptible to terrorist attacks.

During the war, the 343rd acted as an army ambulance service, providing much the same services as local rescue squads.

But, the environment was much different.

"We transported casualties from the theater of operations to the hospitals or treatment facilities, and we provided basic medical care."

They transported 1,400 patients and logged almost 100,000 miles.

The unit had a medical staff, mechanics and supply personnel and food service workers.

She said mess sergeant Bobby Shockley kept the group well-fed, and they didn't have to rely on the army rations that other soldiers ate.

Garvey said she had some frightening moments during the war.

"One of the scariest was the night of the air war. We had only heard rumors of what was going on. They woke us up at 3 in the morning and told us to get into our chemical suits and get into the bunkers."

She knew it was serious when they "broke out the war suits," as opposed to the training suits.

All through the night, they watched the flashes from the bombing of Baghdad.

"That was a long, long morning there in the dark, just waiting and not knowing and imagining the worst."

They monitored radio and TV broadcasts for news, and were relieved when CNN said the air strikes had stopped.

That's right — they got their news from TV, just like their families back home.

One of the 343rd's first missions was to help evacuate a nearby medical unit.

"Intelligence reported that there were terrorists or Iraqi soldiers nearby, and they had no transportation. We had to get them out."

She says she was proud of how her unit pulled together and accomplished their mission quickly.

"Still, there was that feeling of, 'What will we find when we get there?' That fear of the unknown."

Garvey said her greatest fear as a commander was losing a soldier.

"I was responsible for all those people. I didn't want to have to right that condolence letter to one of their families if they were killed."

None of the reservists were injured during their tour of duty, and they only sustained damage to one ambulance. It was hit by falling debris from a Scud missile that was intercepted and destroyed.

For the most part, the 343rd stayed out of danger. But, they got to see the aftermath of the air and ground war.

Garvey's photo albums show surreal scenes of devastation amid exotic desert locales.

Burned tanks and vehicles lining roadways.

Trenches filled with oil by the Iraqis and set on fire to stop tanks.

Unexploded bombs littering roadways.

The brightly colored façade of a Toys R Us store in Kuwait, marred by the devastation of a bombing raid.

Garvey said the unit didn't encounter too many culture clashes because they didn't interact with them much.

"We had to be careful not to offend anyone. It was hard for them to see the female soldiers."

The Kuwaiti soldiers in particular were fascinated by female soldiers "because they weren't covered up." Garvey has photos of one soldier with his arm around a female reservist in public — an action that would be forbidden with a woman of his own country.

The reservists handled the stress of being in the war zone in a very unique way.

One day, a soldier traveling through the desert on a mission noticed something shimmering in the middle of the desert.

He approached it, and discovered it was not a mirage.

"He came back and said, 'You won't believe what I found!'" Garvey said.

Just a few miles from their camp was an oasis — a resort run by an Australian nurse who had moved to Saudi Arabia.

It had swimming pools, tennis courts, a weight room and air conditioning.

The owner invited soldiers to unwind there.

Garvey said they took advantage of the offer. "Sometimes we'd just sit in the air-conditioned office."

Another odd instance was the day a Baskin-Robbins ice cream truck pulled up at the camp. Apparently, it had been sent from one of the nearby cities.

"It really boosted morale!"

Care packages from home also were appreciated.

"I think my husband [Doug] must have sent the most. He kept us all well-supplied."

Garvey said they missed the creature comforts of home, "but we didn't complain. It was the least of our worries."

The company returned home in May 1991 to a warm reception.

"We started seeing banners when we came into town, and the closer we got to the reserve center, the more we saw. The center was full of families and supporters."

Since the Gulf War, the 343rd has been moved to Richmond. Few of those who served with it in the Gulf War are still members.

"I hated to see them leave the area. It was hard for a lot of the people from this area to drive to Richmond to serve."

She said the 343rd brought together "a very diverse group of people... to do a job. We all worked well together."

The experience has left a lasting impression on her.

She said she'll never take things — like life, family and friends — for granted ever again.

"It was certainly one of the scariest and hardest things I've ever done, but I'm proud of how the unit did. It was an unbelievable experience."

She said the community support before and after they left "made us proud to be in uniform."