

Heroes With Bulldozers

By Mr. Ralph Peters

America's soldiers are always good for a surprise: The enthusiasm the Army's combat engineers show for our mission in Iraq would dumbfound even our military's most fervent supporters.

Privileged to speak with officers and NCOs from the Army's Maneuver Support Center in Missouri last week, I came away proud to have worn the same uniform as those men and women. Every one of them had served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Now they were briefly back home, working hard to incorporate combat lessons-learned into doctrine and training the young soldiers they'll lead during their next Mideast tours.

All that nonsense about a "broken Army"? What I heard was the conviction that we're not only doing the right thing in Iraq, but doing it far better than the media tell the American people.

Along with those combat engineers, the audience consisted of infantry, military police and chemical corps leaders—veterans all. Not one was discouraged by the political tempests blowing in Washington (where the hot air is a prime cause of global warming). The best word for what our soldiers displayed is *zeal*.

I only wish my fellow citizens were given an honest view of our troops, their morale and their accomplishments—along with a fuller sense of our military's complexity. Yes, the infantry leads the way, along with the other combat arms. But who hears about the combat engineers? Even though they often *lead* the infantry?

Well, here's to the heroes who clear the minefields, defuse the improvised explosive devices (IEDs), blow open the doors, dig the trenches, build the defensive barriers, renovate the schools and clinics, plunge into the tangle of wires that passes for an electrical grid—and fight as infantrymen when the need arises.

When you see those dramatic photographs of infantry teams taking down an urban target, the soldiers *up front* are often combat engineers, opening a path for the grunts to go in.


Every branch of our Army makes its own unsung contributions, but a glimpse at the combat engineers offers a sense of how complex the Iraq mission really is—and how bravely those in uniform have faced up to the challenges. So here are a few anecdotes from the officers and NCOs I met last week:

- All a soldier has to do to make headlines is to whine to a reporter. But we don't hear about the NCO lying in a stateside hospital ward who, after losing an eye defusing an IED, begged his visiting commander to help him get back to his unit in Iraq.

- In the past, active-duty leaders often dismissed the National Guard as "weekend warriors." Not anymore. The highest praise I heard was for a "dump-truck" outfit, the 1457th Engineer Battalion from the Utah National Guard, that served in Baghdad and central Iraq. A colonel described them as remarkably brave and resourceful. Operating at as low as 65 percent of their authorized strength, those mountain lions from the Rockies never ducked a high-risk mission—whether they'd been trained for it or not.
- When the highly paid contractors failed to show up with the bullets flying, combat engineers often were thrown in to get the electricity working out in the boonies. And they did. But all we heard about were the problems in Baghdad — where the contractors were responsible.
- Having just returned from Iraq, one officer said, "I'd give up my promotion to go back." Even allowing for the moment's enthusiasm, that family man *believed* that his sacrifices made a vital difference. Why don't men like him make the evening news?
- Even during an occupation, the Army has to train for its full range of missions. At a division commander's request, our engineers built a tank-gunnery range with 64 *miles* of protective berms to keep the main-gun rounds from going astray. One example among many—all in a day's work for the bulldozer boys.
- That day's work includes some of the most dangerous missions in Iraq—defusing IEDs. The equipment and techniques have gotten better, but it remains a nerve-racking challenge. Combat engineers *volunteer* to do it.
- As in the Army's better-known units, our combat engineers see impressive *re-enlistment* rates. Soldiers sign up knowing they'll be sent back to Iraq. Tough as it is, they love what they do. As one command sergeant major put it, "This is what they signed up for, this is what it's all about."

Of course, no list of this sort can begin to capture the courage of these soldiers. They have families they love and the prospect of long lives in the greatest country on earth. Yet, they continue to risk death or mutilation because they will not quit on America—or Iraq—in the middle of a war.

At a time when we're bombarded with so much doom-and-gloom nonsense from those who'd like to abandon the world to terrorists, it's a shame we don't hear more about the men and women who *stay* in uniform, who do our nation's toughest work and receive so little credit from the know-it-all safe at home.

Harvard and Yale? Keep 'em. The finest Americans are those who have gone through the School of the Soldier. A "broken military"? Nope. Anyway, if it was broken, the combat engineers would fix it. Under fire. 

Mr. Peters, a retired Army intelligence officer, has published and lectured extensively on military and international concerns. His latest book is "New Glory: Expanding America's Global Supremacy."

This article is a reprint from the January 20, 2006, New York Post.