

Why I Went to Baghdad



by Mr. Kevin Koch, DCMA Customer Liaison Representative to NAVSEA,
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Editor's note: Mr. Kevin Koch served as a volunteer member for the Theater Administrating Contracting Office (TACO) at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad from July – December 2004. The editor and staff of the Communicator felt his story to be a relevant example of DCMA support and so are publishing it at this time.

Everyone has different reasons for going to Baghdad – patriotism, money, adventure. My reason turned out to be a young, wounded soldier named Army Pfc. Chad Johnson. I had the honor of getting to know Pfc. Johnson during my stay in Baghdad, and his story caused me to fully comprehend the extent of DCMA's role in Iraq.



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My primary responsibilities were to establish and manage a DCMA command that supports the Iraq Project and Contracting Office (PCO). The PCO manages and is responsible for all activities associated with the \$18.4 billion appropriated by the U.S. Congress to support the reconstruction of Iraqi infrastructure, including program, project, asset, construction and financial management.

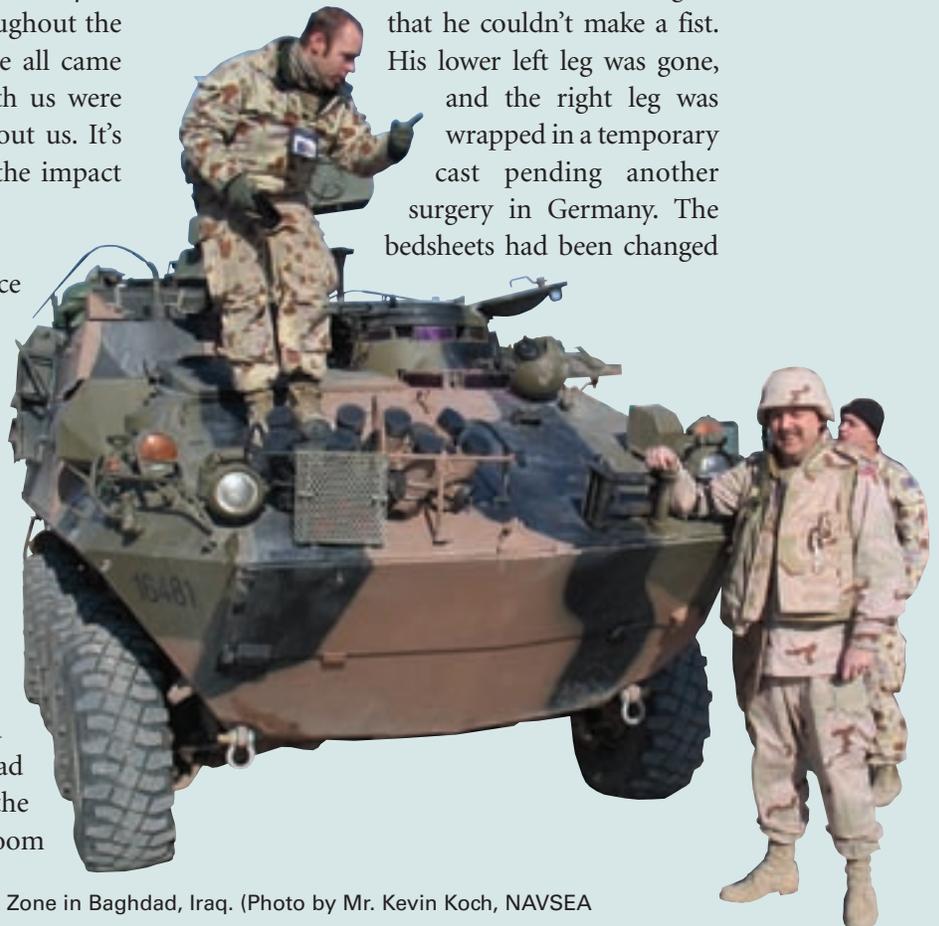
Sound like a tough job? It was. We worked 24/7 to support troops and reconstruct a torn nation while under daily attacks from rockets, mortars and suicide bombers and had earned the reputation that DCMA was the place to go if you needed something in Iraq. Quality assurance representatives risked their lives traveling the treacherous streets of Baghdad twice a day to ensure products were delivered throughout the city and southern Iraq. Although we all came home alive, others who worked with us were not so lucky. But this story isn't about us. It's about two specific days that reveal the impact of DCMA's work.

On Sept. 20, 2004, I was in my office at Saddam's captured palace when I heard the explosions of what I later learned were three car bombs. I asked Air Force Maj. Billie Smith if he wanted to join me in a visit to the combat support hospital (CASH) to provide comfort and amenities to the wounded. The CASH in Baghdad was accustomed to seeing the most severely injured soldiers and Marines. It was the only hospital in Iraq where the military's brain and eye surgeons handled the worst head wounds. Normally, perhaps half the patients coming to the emergency room

qualify as "acute" cases, a term that indicates severity and urgency.

One of the wounded was Pfc. Johnson. He had found himself in a daze on his back after being thrown 20 feet in the air from the first explosion. In the midst of smoke and chaos, he rolled to his stomach looking for a target, but something was wrong. He heard a voice, "Hold on buddy, you're gonna be OK. Don't look down — I'm gonna get ya outta here." As his rescuer tied a tourniquet, Chad realized that he had lost his lower left leg and his right leg was in serious jeopardy.

When we entered intensive care ward II, Chad was just out of surgery — scared, lonely and in great pain. His body was covered with cuts and abrasions from shreds of shrapnel. His hands were swollen to such a degree that he couldn't make a fist. His lower left leg was gone, and the right leg was wrapped in a temporary cast pending another surgery in Germany. The bedsheets had been changed



(Opposite) A view from the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, Iraq. (Photo by Mr. Kevin Koch, NAVSEA Washington, D.C.)

(Right) Mr. Kevin Koch (center), DCMA customer liaison representative to NAVSEA, with Australian Multinational Force Servicemen. (Photo submitted by Mr. Kevin Koch, NAVSEA Washington, D.C.)

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twice as the nurses struggled to control the bleeding and make him more comfortable.

Chad was a hell-raising, 20-year-old bull rider from Waxahachie, Texas.

As it turned out, I had graduated from a high school just 10 miles north of Chad's home, 10 years before he was born. He began to tell me his story, and I listened with sincerity and attention as he told me about his life and his family. It wasn't long before he began to talk about the horror of the day. He began by describing the man who saved his life. The man was somewhat of a rare breed: a young soldier who always did unusual things to battle the boredom and loneliness of being far from home — things like constantly making jokes and exercising in 125-degree heat while wearing 40 pounds of body armor and a helmet. This was the last person in the world that Chad expected to save him.

As I listened, I began to feel a father's pain for this young warrior. When I looked down at him, I saw my 17-year-old son looking back at me with the same color hair, the same smile and the same immortality. Before my very eyes Chad had become every father's son in Iraq, full of pride, bravery and unwavering spirit. After an hour I asked if I was bothering him, should I leave. I'll never forget his words, "No, Sir, I feel closer to my father with you here." I left him drifting off to sleep as the morphine took effect.

On my way out of Chad's room, I came across another hero sitting by himself with eyes full of tears. He was in full battle rattle and had just returned from a gunfight in downtown

Baghdad. I was compelled to stop, and no sooner had I placed my hand on his shoulder than another story of remarkable heroism began to unfold. This was a familiar story of an ambush that ended with killing the enemy and dragging a wounded buddy from harm's way. The soldier was now waiting to give blood in hopes of keeping his friend alive. It was hard to sleep that night. I prayed that the daily barrage of mortars and rockets would not hit the CASH as we slept.

The position I held in Baghdad provided the liberty of meeting virtually everyone in the Green Zone. There was very little that wasn't approved or coordinated through our office, and the CASH was no exception. We were in charge of the contract that provided the food, supplies, cleaning and all contracted services for supporting the hospital. It was my intent to see that Chad was on a flight to Germany that day. After talking to the flight coordinator, I was convinced the patient would be leaving that afternoon.

When I arrived at the hospital, Chad was sleeping, and there was an additional patient in the room, a soldier from El Paso, Texas. Once again I witnessed the fear and despair of a soldier who had lost a leg to combat. Again I listened as he told me that his single worst fear of losing a leg to a rocket-propelled grenade had come true. An Army nurse came in to change the IVs shortly after I arrived, and I asked how the new patient was doing. She explained that he would be fine, but his mother was a different story. They



(Top) Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Tim Bates, DCMA Iraq. (Photo by Mr. Kevin Koch, NAVSEA Washington, D.C.)
(Right) Navy Lt. Russell Baum Jr.'s Christmas tree at his office at DCMA Iraq in 2004. (Photo by Mr. Kevin Koch, NAVSEA Washington, D.C.)

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had called to advise her of his wound, but his mother was convinced her son had not survived because she could not talk to him. Fortunately I had a cell phone that we used to call his mother and wife to relieve their fears. With tears in his eyes the young man never once let on to his family how badly he hurt, his voice remaining strong and loving. I left the room so they could talk.

When I returned, Chad had awakened and decided to cheer up his new roommate. He boasted, “I’m gonna be the best damn one-legged bull rider in Texas. Hey, you’re from Texas — what size shoe do you wear? We can split the cost of new boots,” and, “When we get to Germany we’ll have a one-legged butt-kickin’ contest.” I could tell Chad was going to be OK.

It was getting close to flight time so I asked if there was anything I could do before they left, anything at all. You’ll never believe the answer: “Sir, if it isn’t much trouble, we are dying for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

Where do these soldiers come from, who give it all yet ask for so little? How could this be? How could a man as badly hurt as Chad put aside such pain to cheer up a comrade in arms? I remember thinking how sad it was that Chad’s father would never see the selfless acts I saw from his son that day, that a man could not be richer than to know he had raised such a son.

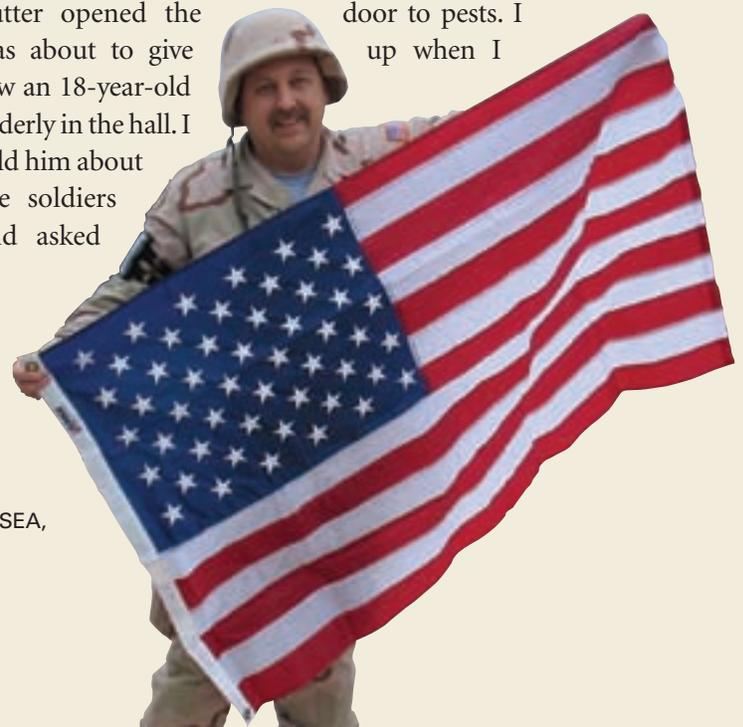
Needless to say, I now had a mission to get those sandwiches. The nurses were already torn up over the fact that they couldn’t find any peanut butter. They had experienced two of

the bloodiest days in their careers and were exhausted from stress. It seemed that trying to do anything in Baghdad, even a simple task such as finding peanut butter, was impossible. I turned the hospital upside down but could not find the golden butter. It was then that I began to see the impacts of DCMA. Everything in the CASH was there as a direct result of something DCMA had done. We controlled essentially all the life support in that hospital. Food, water, supplies, waste management, medicines, janitorial services — virtually everywhere I looked, I saw something that DCMA had provided. I could now see how we had made a difference and why I was compelled to go to Baghdad: the troops need us.

Although I controlled the expenditure of billions of dollars, peanut butter was not to be found in the CASH. The hospital was not capable of supporting a dining facility, so the food was delivered, served and removed from one of several centrally located kitchens within the Green Zone. Leaving behind supplies like peanut butter opened the door to pests. I was about to give up when I

saw an 18-year-old orderly in the hall. I told him about the soldiers and asked

I went to Iraq ... for the Chads, the nurses, the doctors and all the others who sacrifice so much for freedom. It was for the reward of knowing that the training I received from DCMA has provided unknown heroes the things they need to survive.



(Right) Mr. Kevin Koch, customer liaison representative to NAVSEA, feeling patriotic in Iraq. (DCMA staff photo)

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whether he could help. “Yes, sir, I think I may know where to look.” We went across a courtyard into the meals preparation area and started digging through cabinets, eventually finding a half-empty jar of Skippy™ peanut butter that had been left behind. Next was the bread — the best we could do was hamburger buns. Finally we found breakfast packs of assorted jellies and proceeded to make the thickest sandwiches of the century.



The nurses saw me carrying the platter up the stairs and broke into tears of joy. When I entered their room, the two patients were sleeping, so I left the sandwiches next to their beds. I hugged the nurses and left with a list of items they desired. Every single item was something they wanted to make the wounded more comfortable.

Ninety days later, I departed Iraq for home, eager to rejoin my wife and son. While waiting for my flight, I read the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. The front-page headline stated: “Pentagon Dinner Honors Troops on the Mend from Wounds Suffered in Terror War.” Directly below was a nice picture of Chad at the Pentagon in a wheelchair being greeted by Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. What more reward could I have received for my service in

Iraq than to know that Chad and his roommate were not going to be forgotten?

I now know exactly why I went to Iraq. It was for the Chads, the nurses, the doctors and all the others who sacrifice so much for freedom. It was for the reward of knowing that the training I received from DCMA has provided unknown heroes the things they need to survive. It was for all the parents who relied on me to protect their children with weapons, armor and supplies, where needed, when needed. Billions of dollars in equipment are flowing into the country under DCMA's oversight, and I had made a difference — my mission in Iraq had been accomplished. I had left my notch within the unknown ranks of countless others who carry out the noble mission of bettering mankind.

Fortunately I wasn't alone in this mission — I had a large support network of outstanding colleagues, to whom I am extremely grateful and would like to thank: Air Force Maj. Billie Smith, my predecessor and the original team lead; Navy Lt. Russell Baum Jr., administrative contracting officer (ACO) for the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP) Task Order 44; Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Timothy Bates, who ensured operational ability with proper communication and information technology; Army Maj. Russell McCullum, LOGCAP planner; Mr. Tim Johnson, quality assurance representative (QAR); Mr. Irby Tucker, QAR; Mr. Cliff Stout, property administrator; Air Force Maj. Michael Godwin, operations officer; Mr. Harold Price, “Task Force Howard,” State Department liaison; Mr. Tom Kennedy, QAR; Mr. Robert Hopkins, QAR; Mr. Eric Crown, lead ACO; Army Col. Andy Mills, former DCMA Iraq commander; Air Force Col. John Miles, former DCMA Iraq commander; Mr. Brad Freedman, former DCMA Iraq deputy commander; and Army Lt. Col. John Howell, former DCMA Iraq deputy commander.

(Above) From left: Air Force Col. John Miles, Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Tim Bates and Army Col. Andy Mills at the DCMA Iraq Change of Command ceremony in August 2004. (Photo by Mr. Kevin Koch, NAVSEA Washington, D.C.)