

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Area native recalls 20 years in Army



Lt. Col. Gray Cockerham, a Henry County native, recently retired after 20 years in the military. (Contributed photo)

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By PAUL COLLINS - Bulletin Staff Writer

Recently retired Lt. Col. Gray Cockerham, who grew up in Henry County, said the defining moment of his 20-year military career came during his first military command, during Operation Desert Storm in Iraq in 1991.

He was leading a platoon of more than 30 soldiers, whose mission was to create a lane through a mine field so coalition force tanks could attack the Iraqi Republican Guard.

It was a big responsibility for Cockerham who, at age 24, never had fought in a war before. Most of his soldiers were only 18 to 20 years old and had not been in combat before either, Cockerham recalled. At the time, he was an infantry lieutenant with the 1st Calvary Division.

Before the battle, he told his soldiers, "Everyone is going to feel fear. Courage is not absence of fear, but doing what you need to do despite your fears." He said the platoon successfully established a lane through the mine field. "That experience impacted me the next 19 years of my career," said Cockerham, the son of Pat Nolen of Martinsville. He added that mothers and fathers had placed the lives of soldiers in his hands, and "it caused me to view training in a much more serious way" and to realize that war can happen.

Cockerham now lives in Chantilly, Va. He is retired from the military and works as a civilian at the Pentagon. Today, like others, he likely is reflecting on the meaning of Veterans Day. The day, he said, means "gratitude for all those who have served before us to secure this country and what it stands for, freedom and democracy, and hope in the future (that) young men and women will continue to answer the call to serve"

He felt the most rewarding aspect of military service was "being part of something bigger than yourself, and not motivated by profit or personal gain, but judged by service to the American people. It's a very noble calling. I was proud to get up and to do what I did every day." Cockerham entered the Army as a second lieutenant in 1989 after graduating from the University of Virginia, where he earned a bachelor's degree in finance (with distinction) and was a Distinguished Military Graduate, Reserve Officers Training Corps. He went to U.Va. on a full ROTC scholarship after graduating from Fieldale-Collinsville High School in 1985. He was promoted to first lieutenant right after Operation Desert Storm.

From 1989 to 2001, he completed more than a dozen military training programs, courses and schools and received numerous awards.

In 1994, he was promoted to captain and assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, N.C. The 82nd Airborne is America's strategic response force with a presidential directive to deploy anywhere in the world within 18 hours of notification. He was a company commander in the 82nd Airborne, commanding 336 soldiers.

He was selected as one of nine Olmsted Scholars in the Department of Defense, and from 1998 to 2000, he studied at the Technical University of Lisbon, Portugal, where he earned a Master's of Business Administration degree.

He was promoted to major before attending the Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kan., in 2000-01. Then he returned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg in 2001, just before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. After that, the 82nd Airborne was told to be on standby for potential deployments.

Cockerham was deployed to Afghanistan in early 2002 as part of a seven-man planning cell to plan for deployment for an airborne infantry brigade to Kandahar, Afghanistan. He described Afghanistan as a tough combat environment with no big cities, tribal culture, rugged terrain, weather extremes and a poor transportation network.

After that brief assignment, he returned to Fort Bragg and in early 2003 was deployed with the 82nd Airborne to Kuwait City International Airport. There, he was to do a parachute assault on Baghdad International Airport, secure the airfield, receive additional forces to build up combat power around Baghdad and resupply to sustain combat forces.

These tasks were to prepare for the upcoming ground invasion of Iraq. After the first stage of the war in Iraq, Cockerham was redeployed to Fort Bragg in April 2003 to reassume the strategic response force mission. He then was redeployed to Iraq in the fall of 2003. He was second in command of the 782nd Main Support Battalion, which had more than 1,100 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division.

The western half of Iraq was the responsibility of the entire 82nd Airborne Division forces in Iraq (which included some other battalions) in conjunction with some other military units. Their area of responsibility was from the outskirts of Baghdad City to the Syrian border, including the "Triangle of Death," including Fallujah and Ramadi.

"That was the most violent area at that time in Iraq," Cockerham, now 42, recalled. He said coalition forces, who were doing humanitarian work such as rebuilding schools, roads and other infrastructure, were having to fight Iraqi insurgents and terrorists from Syria. And enemy forces were using a new way of fighting, he said.

"We weren't fighting other armies, but individuals and small groups of individuals" with homemade bombs, snipers, roadside bombs, rocket attacks and ambushes, he said. They would ambush but wouldn't stay and fight, he said.

He explained that it was difficult to locate and destroy enemy forces who were not wearing uniforms and not fighting as an organized group and "disappeared into the population as soon as they attacked you. In a big downtown market, your enemy could be in middle of the market

and you don't know. You don't know who the enemy is until they shoot at you." He returned from Iraq to Fort Bragg in April 2004, and in July of that year, he reported to Washington, D.C., to serve as the operations officer for Joint Task Force-Armed Forces Inaugural Committee (JTF-AFIC) for President George W. Bush's second inauguration. In April 2005, he became the assistant executive officer to the commanding general of U.S. Army Materiel Command, a four-star Army general, in Fort Belvoir, Va.

"If a soldier shoots it, drives it, flies it, wears it, eats it or communicates with it, AMC provides it," according to the AMC Web site. AMC has 149 locations worldwide, including more than 48 states and 55 countries, and a work force of more than 66,000 military and civilian employees, according to the Web site.

Cockerham worked in his AMC position from 2005 until he retired. He received a total of 17 military medals, ribbons and other awards during his military career. After his retirement, he began working, as a civilian, as a planning specialist on the Army staff at the Pentagon. His duties include managing infrastructure and logistics for Army installations worldwide, he said.