

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Local soldier is deployed on third tour of duty in Iraq



Sgt. Kevin Hairston

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Eight years after Sgt. Kevin Hairston signed up for the Army, he is serving his third tour of duty in Iraq.

This time, he has been in Tikrit for a little more than two months, working in communications with the 18th Engineer Brigade. It will be a year before his deployment ends.

Hairston has learned to make the best of his situation. He and his unit didn't even let a Fourth of July spent far from home get them down.

The post celebrated with "a bunch of festivities," he said, with cookout, games and sparklers. Hairston's unit battled it out with a "Rock Band" video game tournament.

"You can sit around and feel sorry for yourself and say, 'Oh, it's Independence Day, and I'm over here.' Or, you can have your own barbecue and have fun," he said.

Hairston is a 1999 graduate of Martinsville High School. He enlisted in the Army in June 2000, wanting to create a good life for his daughter, Zariah, now 8.

"The path that I was living was not what I wanted for her," he said via phone from Iraq. Around Christmastime, he will get to come back on leave and see his daughter, who lives with his father and stepmother, Rodgers and Georgia Hairston, in Spencer.

"The hardest part of being deployed is being isolated from your everyday life," Hairston said. "You have your off time, but you're not really 'off.' If something happens, you have to work." The best part of deployment, he said, is "the bond that you build with your unit. You have to come together as a family."

Hairston said his unit lives together dormitory-style, and each person has a roommate. "You get closer to people you normally wouldn't talk to," he said.

During this deployment, Hairston has Internet access and can talk to his family fairly often. "Where I am, you can communicate quite freely," he said.

The post also has air conditioning, sheltering the soldiers from the extreme desert heat. On his first tour in 2003, even running water was a luxury for the soldiers. Hairston recalls rationing water and food, eating meals ready to eat (MREs) and living in limited space with

lots of other people

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"Compared to the first time I came, this is like heaven. It's a complete turnaround from the way things were," he said of his current tour.

Hairston's first two tours were in Baghdad. The first time, in 2003, he worked in communications, and the second time he provided security to convoys traveling from one post to another.

"We got shot at a couple of times, but we were in an armored vehicle, so it was about the same as someone throwing a rock at us," he said.

Hairston added that his time overseas has changed his perspective.

"It humbles a person," he said. "It opens your eyes to see a lot of things people take for granted. When you come here (to Iraq) and see how other people have to live, it makes you appreciate how good you really have it."

In Hairston's current job, he has little interaction with Iraqi people. However, on his second tour, he met a number of local residents who worked on the post. Some tried to teach him words and phrases in Arabic.

"The people here have good hearts and are friendly," Hairston said. "The way some people judge, you see a few bad people from a certain place and think the entire place is bad, but there are good and bad people everywhere you go."

Meanwhile, his family is counting the months until his safe return.

"We're very proud of him," said Georgia Hairston, adding that the deployment is "nerve-racking. Every time you hear something, you just go to pieces until you hear from him again." Sgt. Hairston's enlistment will end in 2013. At this point, he said, he doesn't know if the military will become a career.

But he does know it did set him on the right path.

Now, he said, "I have different goals. If I hadn't made progress, I wouldn't be doing anything with my life. I've accomplished what I wanted to do."