

Erica said. "That day when we all raised our right hands 12 years ago (during enlistment), it wasn't what I thought. Twelve years ago, I was all ready to get out of the military after four years. It was a means to an end, to pay for college. The war was an obligation. We never questioned it. We were there, it was our job, they said 'go to war' and we did. We were the tip of the spear."

Her first tour in Iraq lasted approximately nine months.

"Because we were the invasion force, it was a pretty tough situation. It was pretty demanding," Erica said. "For the first six months, we didn't have water. We didn't have toilets. It was take a shovel and toilet paper and go to the sandbox – you walk 200 feet away."

Twice daily, her platoon had to burn all of its waste and trash in barrels.

"We slept on cots outside under the stars, and it was tough and a hardship for those nine months," she said.

After her stint in Iraq ended, she volunteered for a second six-month tour there, which began in November 2003.

In mid-2004, she returned to Germany. "We all had a chance to decompress. We all bought new cars, and we were living the high life. It was good to be back. Part of our compensation included time off, and I traveled everywhere."

This return to civilization, in particular, served to set life's priorities in order for Erica.

She arrived two days before the other troops, as she was part of an advance team that would plan their arrival. Erica and her boyfriend had just had a messy break-up, and she discovered the tires slashed on her car as her taxi pulled up to her apartment.

"It was about midnight, and all I wanted was some cold milk," Erica said. "So I had the taxi take me to a store so I could get some milk, and then take me back to my apartment. The electricity was off. All I wanted to do was take a bath, and the water was cold, and it was brown."

"I remember sitting there, in this cold, brown water, with a candle and drinking milk right out of the carton and thinking, 'You know what? I'm all right. Life is pretty good. I have flush toilets, I'm drinking milk, and I'm safe,'" she said.

The next morning, she awoke to see a blue sky and the green

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~ Maj. Erica Iverson

of grass and trees that she had been deprived of for six months.

After 2004, Erica fulfilled several assignments for the U.S. Army, in Europe and in the U.S.

Best part of military career

Last year, after seven years away from the U.S. military presence in the Middle East, she decided to return.

"There are a lot of reasons to deploy. There are a lot of reasons not to, but for me, personally, it was time," Erica said. "I had been in (Washington) DC for a few years, and I had pretty well rounded out my career, and I just thought it would be neat to have a deployment to Afghanistan to supplement my career and compare it to Iraq."

Last year, she traveled to Afghanistan on her own. She wasn't part of a unit. "I went as an individual augmentee, in which you tasked. Specific jobs are created."

She served in Afghanistan for 10 months last year. "I was supposed to be there for a year, and come home in January (of this year)," Erica said. "But in October, the asthma that I had first gotten while I was in Iraq really made me sick. I got whooping cough and then pneumonia. Afghanistan is the most polluted country in the world, and so it was really terrible. I did all of the treatment I could do in country, but there was nothing I could do (to get better). I was trying to do my job, but I was miserable."

Two months shy of spending a year in Afghanistan, Erica was medevacked to a military base in Germany.

She is happy, however, to have been able to make some positive accomplishments while in Afghanistan.

"What I was sent over to Afghanistan to do originally changed a little bit," Erica said. "I took on more responsibility once everyone was able to discern what I was capable of."

She began a foundation for Afghan women.

"There was 75 women from young girls to older business-



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