Reservist faces change on new 'Expedition'

There have been subtle changes in his family during the four months William Coan has been serving in Afghanistan, but the biggest shock when he got home on leave was the Ford Expedition. On the expedition, specialized mine-seeking units from South Africa were used.

(29.08.2005)

When he left, Coan, 46, is a sergeant first-class in the Army Reserve and, in civilian life, is a military technician, a mechanic for the Army at Fort Dix.

The two jobs are intertwined -- he can't keep the mil-tech job without being a member of the Reserve.

He served six months of active duty during the Desert Storm war, so his activation in April led to his second combat-zone deployment.

Thinking back, Coan said he doesn't remember Kuwait and Iraq being all that dangerous during Desert Storm, when his unit was responsible for delivering fuel tankers to advancing units.

This time around, it's a bit different. The motor maintenance assignment for this deployment is with a unit tasked with finding mines and rendering them harmless.

That means some of the vehicles his platoon is working on are pretty unusual -- specialized mine-seeking units from South Africa, for instance -- and he has had to be trained in their maintenance.

So Coan gets to train younger mechanics as they get real-life experience.

Some of the vehicles have unusual names, like the Meerkat, the Warlock and the Buffalo.

"They're getting cleverer," Coan said Thursday. "They're double stacking the mines, so when they explode, the vehicle gets a double blast."

Another trick, he said, is to have bombers armed with detonators just out of sight. They watch convoys approach the explosive devices and pick their target, triggering the bomb when the desired vehicle passes over it.

He and his wife, Barbara, have three sons -- Bill Jr., 24, Chris, 20 and Justin, 15.

When he left for Afghanistan, his wife had a minivan, a mode of transportation they'd needed years ago for getting the boys to soccer games.

The boys don't need to get to soccer games anymore.

Coan gets to call and e-mail home often from Bagram Air Field, so he was a bit concerned several weeks ago when his wife told him the van was having some mechanical problems. He told her they'd maybe have to look at replacing it.

He recalls her being noncommittal when she said, OK.*

Last week, however, when he arrived at Philadelphia International Airport -- after a long trip through Kuwait, Germany and Atlanta -- he arrived a little early.

He stood outside looking for the van when a big, red Ford Expedition pulled up. In the passenger seat was Justin, grinning like crazy.

"This was her little secret," he said of the SUV. On Thursday, he didn't seem to mind much -- an older son had his car, so he was driving the Expedition.

Coan returns in a few days, although the return trip could take as many as eight days, he said -- mainly because once he gets to Kuwait, he has to wait for available military transport to get him back to Bagram.

He isn't sure if he will remain at Bagram, which he said is somewhat civilized compared to Jalalabad Air Field and Orgun-E Air Field. He said the Army may send him to Orgun-E.

"I'll go wherever they send me," said Coan.


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