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39th prepares for home; 56th prepares for Victory ~ Arkansas hands over the 'keys' to Texas in replacement ceremony

*Story and photos by Maj. Craig Heathscott
39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs*

BAGHDAD - After 227 days of braving the elements of sand, wind and heat, it's time to come down—mission accomplished. The journey downward brings a sense of pride among those present as it signifies an end to the mission. And as the 'Bowie' flag continues its decent down the flagpole to the waiting arms of two veteran Soldiers—Staff Sgt. James Howard and Master Sgt. John Doss— it starts to sink in a little more. This is not a desert mirage, no, it's the real thing—"we're going home!"

"As Howard starting bringing the 'Bowie' flag down, I could visualize home," said Doss. "Oh, and the closer it got to my hands, the closer I was to realizing we really are going home. We're not there yet, but I know it won't be long now before that flag is flying over Ricks Armory in Little Rock, Arkansas. I think I'll like that view, yes, I think I will."

And not unlike the Soldiers that it represents, this colorful 'Bowie' flag stands for excellence. And those 70,000 individuals on Victory Base Complex understand it is this standard that has maintained security at the base for well over 200 days. And in its place, the same standard of excellence can be seen in the 'Arrowhead' flag from the state of Texas—another tradition-rich infantry brigade combat team.

In a 'neighborly-kinda' ceremony, the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team handed over the 'keys' to Victory Base Complex in Baghdad, Iraq, to their neighbors to the west back home, Texas—the 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. And while the full-compliment of approximately 3,200-plus Soldiers with the 56th only arrived two weeks earlier, these two brigades are no strangers to one another. In fact, the 56th visited Arkansas while the 'Bowie Brigade' was 'training in their own backyard' and even used Arkansas' backyard—Fort Chaffee Training Maneuver Center in Fort Smith—to conduct part of their pre-mobilization training.

The 56th went on to finish up their pre-mobilization training at Fort Stewart in Savannah, Ga., whereas the 39th went to Camp Shelby, Miss., where they will return for the demobilization process.

The Texas brigade, commonly referred to as the 'Arrowhead Brigade,' began coordination with Arkansas in October 2007 while the 39th Brigade was conducting their pre-mobilization training at Fort Chaffee. The 39th commander—Col. Kendall Penn—invited his western neighbor to Chaffee to share ideas and thoughts on how the in-state pre-mobilization training was going. At the time, Arkansas was in the national spotlight as they were the first state to conduct training of this magnitude inside their borders in preparation for an overseas deployment. The 56th had just learned they would replace the 39th Brigade one year down the road in December 2008, so they wanted to benefit from Penn's success in preparing his troops for war.

"There can be no doubt that our footing as we take over and assume this mission is strong," said Col. Lee Henry, 56th IBCT commander. "Yet, that wouldn't have been as smooth a transition if it hadn't been for the great work that the 'Bowie Team' has done and for just reaching across the fence and sharing with a neighbor."

As part of the ceremony, Penn and Command Sgt. Maj. Steven Veazey marched in unison to the awaiting colors—American flag and the Bowie flag. The Bowie flag is lowered in order that Penn might roll it up and prepare it for the casing of the colors, which would be done by Veazey. Once rolled up, Veazey took his queue and placed the green covering over the flag indicating that Penn's brigade had just relinquished command to the 56th IBCT. Only 227 days ago, these two Soldiers were in this very spot taking command from Col. William Callahan and his 151st Regional Support Group—Task Force Lexington—from the Massachusetts Army National Guard.

With the 'Bowie' colors cased, Penn and Veazey presented a salute to the American flag and then stepped aside and waited for Henry and Command Sgt. Maj. John Morgan. And as if in rewind, Henry waits as Morgan pulls the covering off the flag before unfurling the colors. A quick salute of the flags, and it's now time to run the Task Force Arrowhead colors up the flag pole to get started on its' 220 or so days against the elements.

"These ceremonies are steeped in tradition, which is great for our younger Soldiers," said Penn. "And, it's also good for these Soldiers to know they've done an excellent job here in Iraq, and that there will be no let downs when we're gone. The 56th IBCT has great leadership and non-commissioned officers, and it's been my pleasure to work with Colonel Henry and his team."

As the 39th Brigade's top enlisted Soldier, Veazey was quick to point out the accomplishments of his Soldiers immediately following the ceremony. "This is yet another historic day within the ranks of the Bowie Brigade, and one that I'm proud to be associated just as much as I'm proud to be associated with these young Soldiers. Two deployments to Iraq in five years is quite an accomplishment, but I will never forget the sacrifices of our Soldiers—and those that we ultimately lost. We hold our heads high on this day, and we look forward to carrying this flag back to Arkansas where we might reunite with family and friends."

In addition to taking over the Base Defense Operation Center (BDOC) on Camp Victory Base Complex, the 56th will swop out with most of the remaining units within the 39th IBCT. The 1st Squadron, 124th Cavalry Squadron will replace Arkansas' 1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment—commanded by Lt. Col. Brad Cox in Baghdad. The 2nd Battalion, 142nd Infantry Regiment will replace the 2nd Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment—commanded by Lt. Col. Mickey Stewart in Al Asad. Going to Taji, the 3rd Battery, 133rd Field Artillery Regiment will replace the 1st battery, 206th Field Artillery—commanded by Lt. Col. Damon Cluck. And while the Arrowhead Brigade's troop numbers are about the same as the 39th Brigade, the 1st Squadron, 151st Cavalry—commanded by Lt. Col. Darrell Daniels in Tallil—will not be replaced by the incoming 56th IBCT.

As a result of not having a replacement, the 1st Squadron, 151st Cavalry Regiment will be true to their motto—"lead the way"—as they will be one of the first battalions to return to Arkansas to begin the five-day demobilization process.

"Just like there are a lot of moving parts in the training piece of mobilization, there is an equal amount of parts—many dangerous—related to handing over command here. Of course, I think Colonel Henry is doing an outstanding job motivating his troops to ensure a smooth transition. They've come in here eager to learn our exact jobs so they can determine how to apply their training over the last six months," said Penn.

"The end result is that the 39th Infantry Brigade is about to board planes for Arkansas, and the citizens of Iraq can feel comfortable that there won't be a transition to Soldiers not dedicated to the mission. The 'Bowie Team' is no different than that Bowie flag as we are known for our dedication and willingness to succeed in abnormal times," Penn said.

Speaking to the large crowd gathered for the mid-day ceremony, Henry said, "The 'Arrowhead Brigade' is absolutely on the ground and ready to follow through with this mission. Based on the cross talk between the battalion commanders and brigade commander it has really helped lay the foundation for a smooth transition to take over the mission of the VBC, Al Asad, Tallil and Taji."

The mission that Henry inherits from Penn is dynamic and has many moving parts and is a 24-hour operation focused on protecting the largest base camp in Iraq. It includes manning guard towers, entry control points as well as controlling the outside battle space in order to defend the Victory Base Complex. Additionally, the mission involves civil military operations in which Soldiers work with local Iraqi citizens to improve quality of life. This can range from providing micro-grants in order to start small businesses as well as other opportunities to improve the economy to providing veterinarian services.

Photo Cutlines

Present arms. Col. Kendall Penn (right), commander of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, and his senior enlisted advisor, Command Sgt. Maj. Steven Veazey (left), salute the flag just prior to casing the colors of the 'Bowie Brigade.' The brigade cased the colors during a ceremony to transition command of the Victory Base Complex in Baghdad to the 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the Texas Army National Guard.

One step closer. Col. Kendall Penn, commander of the 39th IBCT, accepts the Bowie Brigade colors from Master Sgt. John Doss which had flown over Victory Base Complex since the Brigade arrived in Iraq in April. "As [Staff Sgt. James] Howard starting bringing the 'Bowie' flag down, I could visualize home," said Doss. "Oh, and the closer it got to my hands, the closer I was to realizing we really are going home. We're not there yet, but I know it won't be long now before that flag is flying over Ricks Armory in Little Rock, Arkansas."

Casing the colors. Col. Kendall Penn (right), commander of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, holds the colors of the 39th Brigade as his senior enlisted advisor, Command Sgt. Maj. Steven Veazey rolls it up in preparation to case them for movement home. Casing the colors symbolizes the brigade's transition as the outgoing unit, with the Texas National Guard's 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team uncasing their colors as the incoming unit. "These ceremonies are steeped in tradition, which is great for our younger Soldiers," said Penn. "And, it's also good for these Soldiers to know they've done an excellent job here in Iraq, and that there will be no let downs when we're gone."

Second time around. Cpt. Jerod Burns salutes during the playing of the National Anthem while Sgt. 1st Class Jon Jeu presents the colors of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team during a Transfer of Authority Ceremony in Baghdad Iraq on 1 December. The ceremony marks the end of the 39th's second deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Transition of authority. Cpt. Jerod Burns salutes during the playing of the National Anthem while Sgt. 1st Class Jon Jeu presents the colors of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team during a Transfer of Authority Ceremony in Baghdad Iraq on 1 December. The ceremony marks the end of the 39th's second deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and symbolizes the brigade's transition of authority to the Texas Army National Guard's 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. "There can be no doubt that our footing as we take over and assume this mission is strong," said Col. Lee Henry, commander of the 56th. "Yet, that wouldn't have been as smooth a transition if it hadn't been for the great work that the 'Bowie Team' has done and for just reaching across the fence and sharing with a neighbor."



























