

**Thunder In Iraq**  
*By Joseph T. Witmer*



For those of you about to read it you will find that this is not the average bike build. Although the concept is the same as other custom builds it is the location that can be considered unique for this bike. As a National Guard Soldier, I was called up once again to serve my country in an overseas duty assignment. Last time it was Bosnia in 2002, this time I was called to serve within the Sunni Triangle of Ramadi, Iraq. Called the most dangerous place on the planet by President Bush, it is know for insurgent activities and a high rate of casualties. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division out of Pennsylvania was activated in January of 2005 and sent to Camp Shelby Mississippi for training to

complete our mission. The thought of building a custom motorcycle on the surface may seam absurd, but to me it was a great challenge with a real purpose.

To everyone that followed the construction of this project, know that it was a great sense of calm at the end of a mission day. For those of us that worked on the bike, it was an oasis in a very large and inhospitable desert. There are so many people that need to be thanked there is no way to cover them all. A few individuals who deserve to be mentioned are:

SFC Richard Scarcaciottoli (Scary)  
SSG Nikki Shivar  
SSG TJ Comptois  
SGT Brad Cormier  
Tony Franco  
CPL John Fleming  
CPT Chris Sedtal  
CPT Roger Churchwell  
SPC Jean Wood  
SFC David Hamilton  
CPT Andrew Inch  
MAJ Lonnie Miller  
SSG Juan Aguirre  
SSG David Sepesy  
PFC Richard Jeremiah

HHC 2 BCT  
HHC 2 BCT  
C 5/5 ADA (C-RAM)  
HHC 1-172 AR  
Naval Special Warfare  
HHC 1-172 AR  
HHC 2 BCT  
HHC 2 BCT  
HHC 876 EN  
B Troop 1-104<sup>th</sup> CAV  
HHC 1-109<sup>th</sup> IN  
HHC 228 FSB  
C 5/5 ADA (C-RAM)  
HHC 2 BCT  
HHC 1-172 AR

MAJ Matthew Hunn

HHC 2 BCT

Special thanks also to my wife, Frances Witmer, and to John Masters (PJ) owner of Team Cycle USA (You can also see the story by going to [www.teamcycle.com](http://www.teamcycle.com) and open the Thunder in Iraq tab), as well as Kevin Kemp and Andres (Andi) Klein with Fed-Ex. I know there are a ton of people not listed here and I apologize. But to the entire Fed-Ex Team in Iraq and in the States, I can only offer my most sincere thanks. I also want to make sure I thank the Command staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> BCT 28<sup>th</sup> ID who supported this project from day one. We spent a lot of effort to make sure we did everything by the book. Without the support of the commands, this project would have never gotten off the ground.

A lot of people have been insisting that I tell the story of the bike and why we did it. Let me take some time here and try to relay the story of what is being call the "Thunder in Iraq" bike. Like most stories, the best way to start from the beginning.

Back at Camp Shelby, AL SFC Richard Scaricaciottoli (Scary) and I were discussing what we could do to take a break from the war when the mission would allow. This was not our first deployment together so we knew we would need a distraction to get our minds off the daily operations. I spoke with Col (P) Gronski (now Brigadier General), the 2<sup>nd</sup> BCT Commander about the idea. After his initial reaction of "What are you nuts", we were given the thumbs up, providing we did not allow the project to interfere with the mission, which it has not. So the process of designing was started.

We made contact with John Masters (PJ) of **Team Cycle USA** out of Gorgia to help design the bike. As a former Nave Seal and Master Chief, PJ knew the challenges of trying to get projects done in a combat zone. Together we started to look at how to get this project completed knowing the restrictions. No local bike shop to run to if we missed anything. PJ came up with the idea of using a Kit as a base we could modify. The *Fat Bastard 250* was used as that base.



The concept look simple enough. After all we all watching those bikes building built on American Choppers so we figured we could get it done easily. Wow, were we wrong!

It is important to say here that when we started this project in March of 2005 the ultimate purpose of the project was to reduce stress after a mission. When we were back on base “supposedly” safe from enemy contact we needed something to think of other than the next days mission, if only for a while. That is how it started anyway. Soon after we arrived in Iraq the bike took on a whole new meaning for me. We lost our first soldier to combat operations. It became my way of remembering the guys we lost there and a way for everyone that saw the bike to think about the sacrifices made to keep them free.



The one thing I still had not figured out when we got in country was the paint job. My thought was I could send the tank and fenders out for painting, once we got in country we found out that one of the Special Operations guys Tony Franco “Tony” was a painter for custom bikes and cars in California as well as a tattoo artist. He had a few guys that wanted to help out and the painting team was formed.

We explained to Tony what we were doing, and without hesitation he was on board. The painting would be completed in a shed at Shark Base Iraq. We gave Tony a lot of artistic freedom when it came to the paint job. Our concept was to use a desert tan base color with the Desert Camouflage Uniform concept. Tony had a different idea. He used his talents to create a real work of art.



The concept of the rear fender was simple; recognize the soldiers and marines lost during the deployment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team. How we did that ended up in several debates and designs. Ultimately I said simple is better. The back drop of the country of Iraq and a Shadow image of the soldiers cross over it now represents our friends lost in this war. To me this stated the obvious, to all those that follow the bike, remember the people lost in the fight in Iraq.

The Tank was all SFC Scary's. The design of the Eagle Flying with the American Flag has symbolized the 2<sup>nd</sup> BCT for quite some time. Thanks Scary, great job.



Back to the design we still had not figured out basic stuff like the engine, frame, wheels, and the works. Several of us spent weeks coming up with the final design and of course Team Cycle was there at every step to advise and recommend. We ended up going with an S&S 131 Cubic Inch Engine.



Once we got the design figured out then we needed a place to build it. We called on Friends at the 228 FSB, our attached Support Battalion located at Camp Taqadum, Iraq to help out. They had several non-seaworthy connexes and let us use the one “temporarily”. Members of the 1071<sup>st</sup> Maintenance Company, like SPC Timothy Stafford, took their personal time and use scraps to build out the garage so we had a home for the bike. Within days a connex became the ***Junction City Combat Choper’s Garage.***





Soon after we started the process of getting the bike parts out of the USA and into the combat zone. Wow this was a much bigger deal than any of us thought. We figured it would be easy to have the parts mailed using the US Postal Service. That was OK except the weight limit was around 70 pounds. The engine alone weighed more than that. We found out the Fed-Ex has a contract with the US Military to deliver items all over Iraq. That is when I touched base with Kevin Kemp. A great guy and supporter of all the troops in Iraq and all over the world. He spent a lot of his personal time trying to figure out the best way to get the parts shipped at the lowest cost. It was such a pleasure to work with a person and company that just wanted to be apart of this project and help out the Troops. Kevin somehow made things happen on his end to keep the prices low and get the parts all shipped. It was amazing. Within days of Team Cycle stating "*the parts are ready*" they were in Kuwait. A couple days later the shipping base in Iraq was calling me saying the parts were ready for pick up. Thanks to MAJ Miller of the 228 FSB and all the guys at the shipping yard, the bike was safe and sound. It was time to get started.



Now we had one more challenge to contend with. None of us thought about tools. So here we were using Gerber's Tools to start building the bike. Being use to working in an environment were we needed to do more with less, guys would show up with their own tools to work. I recall CPL Fleming from the 1-172 AR telling us he had a motorcycle shop back home with over \$75,000.00 in tools and there he was using a Gerber to put a custom bike together. It still brings a smile to my face seeing him leaning over the frame working on the Inner Primary and trying to get the little screw driver to fit.



As we were mocking up the bike we found out how much we did not know about building a bike. To make things worse there was no instruction book with the parts. We ended up printing off pictures of similar bike to see if we could tell how it was all put together. Sufficed to say we ended up taking some pieces on and off more than 5 times. Of course this is when the call went out across the Brigade for help from people with experience working on motorcycles. Several soldiers volunteered, but SGT Brad Cormier showed up and things were cooking. Between him and SSG Comptois we were on a roll.



SSG Shivar continued to motivate us to keep working. I must say some of the best times were around the fire after we were done working and having the guitars strumming away while we discussed home and future plans. Thanks guys for all the great memories.







Once the mock up was mostly done we were comfortable we could do the rest after the paint was completed. We were starting to cut it close on the time and we all knew it. The Operational Tempo was picking up and we just did not have a lot of time to dedicate to the bike. We tore down the bike and sent the frame, fenders and tank to Tony over at Shark Base. While we were mocking up the bike, CPT Inch from the 1-109<sup>th</sup> IN up in Al Asad, Iraq was busy working to make sure Fed-Ex had the paints delivered. Thanks to CPT Inch with the 109<sup>th</sup>, MAJ Miller with the 228 FSB and of course Fed-Ex all the paints and special air brush guns made it over to Shark Base and the paint job was under way. Tony told me his guys spent more than 90 man hours of their own time doing up the paint. Little did I know it would involve so much sanding and touch-up. All the welds needed sanded, the small dents needed filled and smoothed. It was amazing how much care went into this bike form guys that were not part of the 2 BCT but worked side by side with us out in the combat zone. Truly brothers in arms.



Now that the paint job was done that last thing to do was actually assemble the bike. Of course as we started putting it together we found some parts still were not there, so just like we have done all along, we figure it out and made it happen. A bracket was made out of an old part from a destroyed vehicle for the coil mount. And C Company (C-Med) 228 FSB, our medical unit, did some welding on the frame to mount the seat. After 16 months of work we rolled out the bike.



Now the fun part came up, sending it home. I was told that the bike could not legally go in the connex for shipping by the Brigade Executive Officer and I had

to find a way to get it home commercially. Once again a call was put out to my new friends at Fed-Ex. And of course they stepped up. The bike was shipped out of Iraq and into the USA. The Fed-Ex Team of Rafael Valiente, Rento Mediana, Ali Malik, John Acosta, Jeffrey Hester, Adres Klien and of course Kenin Kemp took great pride in taking care of all the needed paperwork and shipping arrangements. Due to the combat environment, the bike took some damage during the delivery, but new friends like Tom Keefer, a part-time custom bike builder in Dillsburg, and Chris at Wicked Dreams custom painting in Harrisburg, the bike was patched up and ready to go.





This bike made a difference to a lot of us over there. It got us together when times were very rough. The 2 BCT lost 83 soldiers and marines in the year we were stationed in the Al Ambar Province of Iraq 24 from Pennsylvania. There were moments when we just NEEDED the distraction and this project took us far away from the war, even if it was only for a few hours a week. This bike has come to symbolize my personal memorial to the soldiers and marines lost there for Operation Iraqi Freedom during the 2 BCT 28th ID (M) tour. Quite honestly none of us really thought we could do it, as I'm sure did most of you. Who the hell builds a custom motorcycle in a war zone any way?

For all of you that were back home and with us in Iraq that supported this project I want to offer my sincere thanks. You encouraged me to keep going when the hours were long and at times when we were at the end of the rope, you kept us focused. We knew we had to get this done not just for us. You helped remind us who it was for, our friends that did not come home with us.

**A prayer to my comrades fallen in battle, protect those still fighting the fight for freedom all over the world.**

**With all my respect and admiration**

**CW4 Joseph T. Witmer**