

# STARS AND STRIPES.

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By **Rick Scavetta**, Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — With thousands of vehicles returning from Iraq, mechanics at the Army's General Support Center Europe have their work cut out for them.

About 2,000 of the roughly 6,000 vehicles coming back with Europe-based units need major repairs, said Helmut Haufe, the center's general manager. The work, which is to be done during the next nine months, will cost roughly \$100 million, he said.

"If we can't fix it, it's probably not fixable," Haufe said. "What makes it truly challenging is the timeline."

Gen. B.B. Bell, commander of U.S. Army Europe, issued orders that within 270 days after returning home, the soldiers' gear will be fixed and ready to fight.

"That gives us a real narrow window for our turnaround," Haufe said. "We're working overtime and will hire 150 workers to implement a second shift."

The Army's need to rapidly refit has changed in the past decade. After Operation Desert Storm, it took up to three years to fix broken vehicles, Haufe said.

Since November, teams of technicians have worked in Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, deciding what repairs can be done at the unit level and those that require major overhauls.

The vehicles that need the extra work are marked and sent to Kaiserslautern, rather than returning to the unit's home base.

Each week trains arrive with battered equipment from the port at Antwerp, Belgium. While a few 1st Armored Division vehicles were sent back early, most of the equipment is from V Corps units that recently returned from Iraq.

Currently about 700 vehicles are either in the shop or waiting to be fixed.

Construction vehicles from the 94th Engineer Battalion wait in a holding yard beside trucks from the 5th Battalion, 158th Aviation Regiment. Both units recently returned from a tour in Iraq.

The stenciled ranks and names on trucks and Humvees are poignant reminders of troops who sweated a year's worth of days behind the wheel. Often, troops modify vehicles to fit their situation, adding plates



*Rick Scavetta / &S*  
**German workers remove a war-torn trailer from a railcar at the U.S Army's General Support Center in Kaiserslautern, Germany.**



*Rick Scavetta / S&S*  
**Two German mechanics repair an M113 armored ambulance that was shot full of holes in Iraq.**



*Rick Scavetta / S&S*  
**Stefan Schoenborn, 21, a German mechanic from Kaiserslautern, wrenches away on a broken U.S. military M113 armored personnel carrier at the General Support Center.**

of steel for protection or slats of wood to hold personal gear. All will have to be removed as the vehicles are returned to Army standards.

In some cases, windshields were cracked and tires were flat. Some were leaking and starting to rust. There's not much battle damage, Haufe said, although a few were shot up. Mostly, Iraq itself has found its way inside the vehicles, damaging air intake systems on engines, he said.

Mechanics expected vehicles in bad condition. Troops worked them pretty hard during the past year in Iraq's often harsh environment. And during combat, troops had less time for maintenance, Haufe said.

Inside a large hangar at the center, rows of vehicles line the walls in various states of repair.

Mechanics fill bullet holes on an armored ambulance attacked in Iraq. Several armored personnel carriers are stripped to their hulls. Nearby, an M1 Abrams tank needs a new 120 mm main gun, a \$100,000 repair. Another Abrams needs a new fuel tank. At the end of the long row, armored Humvees that were in the Balkans are inspected before being transferred to Iraq.

Once repaired, the vehicles are painted, tested and returned to the soldiers — most of whom will know little of the overhaul process.

“We don't want to be a burden. We want to be as transparent as possible,” Haufe said.

The center, which traces its history back to the early 1950s, is Kaiserslautern's second-largest employer, next to Opel's car factory, Haufe said.

Repair depots are also in Mannheim and Vilseck. In Pirmasens, electronic and communication gear is repaired.

Haufe, 47, has spent 20 years working for the Army — the past six as general manager. For him, the work is a family tradition. His parents, Alexander and Emilie, both spent four decades as Army employees.

Of the center's nearly 1,600 workers, only a handful are U.S. soldiers or Army civilians. Sixteen nationalities are represented in the mostly blue-collar work force, local Germans being the largest contingent.

As early as last summer, planning began for the return of the V Corps and 1st Armored Division from Iraq. But first, the mechanics had to help the departing 1st Infantry Division, now in Iraq.

Next year, when the Big Red One returns to Germany, the center's work will continue at full throttle.