How to Deploy Like a Pro

Deployments are a very stressful time, and heading out the door can be a daunting task. What do you pack? What can you ship ahead? How do you make sure you have what you need downrange?

There are a million tips and tricks that can make your life better overseas. I’ve been to both Afghanistan and Iraq, so you’ll see a smattering of advice for each place. When I refer to “transition points,” I’m talking about the places where you gather to go into theater: Qatar, Kuwait, Manas (in the past), etc.

Here are some of my best secrets from a couple of trips to the sandbox.

- Get organized. There is a ton of paperwork that you will need to keep track of. I used Evernote to snap pictures of receipts and file them all together so I could find them at the right time. Dropbox is also a great place to put many of the documents you may need so you can access them any time.

- Ship everything you can ahead of time. Seriously, the more you ship ahead of time, the less you have to carry with you when you travel.  And there are no convenient luggage trolleys in the transition areas, and it's a LONG walk wherever you have to lug all of your crap.

- Keep your receipts when you ship stuff, because the military will usually reimburse the cost. Talk to your finance people to make sure. If you ship something priority mail, it's about 7-10 days to arrive.  If you ship it parcel post, it takes 2-3 weeks.

- You have to hand carry some stuff - your gas mask, your readiness folder.  Readiness will give you a list of that hand carry stuff, and make sure you follow it.

- You’ll probably want 2 uniforms (one you wear and one extra) and some PT gear/shoes.  Depending on where your transition point into theater is and when you come through, the weather can be extremely variable. If it’s cold, plan to pack some warm jammies/thermal underwear.  You can wear them and sleep in them.  You can pick up cold weather gear in transit, and they'll issue you some stuff as well.  I brought one set of civilian clothes with me, but never used it.  They do recommend you bring one set, in case you get stuck somewhere.

- Try for travel size of all your toiletries on your way over.  Get a microfiber towel, so you don't have to pack a full sized one.  They have them at the uniform stores or any sporting goods/camping store.  It rolls up about the size of a chipotle burrito, so it is perfect for traveling.

- Ambien is the only way to do the flights. I took one when we left Norfolk, and one when we left Germany.  Slept almost the entire time, woke up and felt somewhat functional.  You won't sleep at all in the transition points - people come and go out of the tents at all hours, and the lights are always on.  Ambien can help there, too.  I made myself a little travel pack of zofran, tylenol, ambien, zantac, imodium... you know, the essentials.

- Bring a few of the little laundry soap pods - they travel well, and can save you if you need to do laundry en route.

- Almost everyone transits through Norfolk to catch the rotators headed overseas. Plan to spend 1-2 days in Norfolk and 2-3 days in your jumping off point.  You can get your bags and keep them with you in Norfolk, or you can drop them off at the terminal when you get there so you don't have to keep them with you.  You'll land at Norfolk, then you'll have to take a taxi over to Norfolk Naval Airstation and check in at the PAX terminal there.  If the plane leaves that night, you just hang around the terminal.  If not, they'll get you a shuttle to billeting for the night.  The flights move a lot, so if you go to billeting, call back to the terminal and check when your show time is an hour or two before they told you to show up.  My show time changed 3 times, and if you don't call, you keep dragging your crap over there every few hours when you could be resting happily in your room.

- When you land in your transition point, you will have access to your bags when you first get there.  Easiest thing to do is pack a 72 hour bag in a big backpack, and just keep that with you, rather than carrying around everything with you.  There is very little place to lock things up, and theft is rampant, so bring a lock and plan to keep all of your important stuff with you in your backpack.  They give you bed linens there, but no towels, so just bring your own towel.

- Bring flipflops - you don't want your feet touching the floor of the showers in any of these places.  As one wit put it - "Showering is like playing the game Operation.  You do everything you can to not touch the walls or floor."

- For packing, what I did was one small backpack with all my stuff I wanted for the plane (laptop, nook, etc).   Bring a small flashlight with you on the plane. Then I packed a 72 hour bag in a big backpack, with skivvies and travel sized toiletries.  I stuck that inside my big rollie bag, that had my gas mask/etc - all the stuff they said I had to hand carry but didn't really need in transit.  Then, when we got to the transition point, I got into my bag, pulled out the backpack, left the rolling bag locked up in the baggage yard at the PAX terminal, and was ready to go.  When we were ready to leave the transition point, I stuck the backpack back inside the big bag that I had left at the terminal, and threw it all on the plane.  Easy, quick, painless.

- Make sure you have gloves available.  You'll probably be helping unload/move baggage, and it may get cold, so you'll want some protection for your hands.

- Take brightly colored duct tape and put strips on the sides of your bags and make "tags" on the handles.   Write your name in sharpie on the strips/tags. There are about 400 people all flying on the same flight and everyone's bags look the same (big camouflage or black rolling duffles).  The duct tape can save you HOURS of searching for your bags.

- Travel in uniform, even when you're headed to Norfolk.  Upgrades, people being nice - totally worth it.

That’s what/how I'd bring stuff with you.  What would I send ahead?  Here's my list:

* Second pair of boots (it'll get muddy and you might want a second pair)
* Second set of running shoes (or have someone send them later)
* The rest of your uniforms (OCPs and PT gear).  Make sure you bring your PT sweat pants/jacket, and I'd recommend a sweatshirt or two as well.
* Sheets/blankets for your bed - twin XL.  Two sets, just in case. If you can, find someone in your unit and send one set of sheets and a blanket ahead of time to them. If you can convince them to make your bed for you before you get there, it’s totally worth whatever you have to give them. After you’ve traveled 5000 miles over one week and had 3 hours total of sleep, climbing into your pre-made bed is just about the greatest feeling in the world.
* Pillow - there are none here.
* Favorite spices/salad dressing.  Food is mediocre, but you can make anything taste good with enough tabasco, garlic salt, and ranch dressing.
* Toiletries - shaving cream is like a mythical unicorn in Afghanistan.  Bring your own, and have someone send you more.  Deodorant/soap/shampoo in normal sizes - travel sizes suck for real life.   The BX carries almost nothing - it's like a 7-11 back home, and everything is 4x as expensive as back home.  Amazon and [drugstore.com](http://drugstore.com/) are good about shipping over here, too.
* Laundry detergent - if you don't like Tide, send your own.  The all in one sheets/packs are nice because they're easy to transport.
* Stuff to do - there are a million books/dvds over here, but if you have projects you want to do, send them over.
* I have my husband send me some backup emergency food, in case the stuff at the DFAC is just intolerable.  Tortillas, canned chicken chunks from Costco, salad toppings/croutons, and granola bars have saved my life on occasion.
* Fluffy towel and bathrobe for going to shower.  Some people just wander around in their underwear, but I'm not that bold.  I like the microfiber towel for traveling, but not for every day.
* Shower caddy, for taking all of your stuff to the bathroom.  I have one that drains that I bring into the shower with me with my shampoo/etc, and one that is actually a handyman's tool bag that has all of my makeup/hair stuff/tooth brush/etc that doesn't get wet.
* Stuff to write home with - not a lot of stationary or pens here, but sending letters home is free.  Go nuts!  I did all of my Christmas cards from Iraq, and never spent a penny on postage.
* Pictures/stuff to decorate your wall locker with.  I made a custom calendar with my kids' pictures, then took it apart and taped it up on my locker.  When we finished a month, I'd flip it over and get to enjoy the pictures on the other side.  Months in the future still show the calendar side. It's a fun way to mark the passing time.
* Take pictures of your children’s favorite books, and you can read them to your kids over Skype when you’re down range. I read to my kids every night, and they loved it.
* Afghanistan smells like a combo between B.O., sewage, curry, and goat.  Iraq was slightly less stinky, but still not great. If smells bug you, bring little smelly-good things like febreeze or other room fresheners.
* Coffee cup - there are a million Keurig machines here, and pods for them everywhere.  There are very few coffee cups.  Send a good one over, because all the ones you can buy here are no good.  I sent my camelbak water bottle as well - I get ice from the hospital DFAC and it's nice to have something cold.  Water for drinking is bottled here, and comes in 500 ml bottles, so about 4 swallows worth.
* MIO or other types of water flavoring - you get really tired of water. Flavors can make it less monotonous. They’re small and they ship well.
* I had real metal silverware and a few plastic plates, bowls, and a drinking glass sent over.  You will eat off plastic silverware and paper plates for 6 months. It got really old for me really fast.
* Laundry bag - something like this <http://www.amazon.com/Heavy-Laundry-Bag-Color-Vary/dp/B003BWEGYU/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1376847325&sr=8-2&keywords=laundry+backpack> is totally worth it.  Makes lugging your stinky gym clothes much easier.  No laundry bags for sale over here.
* Memory foam mattress pad - these mattresses are horrible.  The mattress pad makes them a little less horrible.
* Holster - no need for it in transit.  Just send it here. Get one you like, because you wear it all day, every day.
* Little round sticky LED lights - the kind that run on batteries and are about the size of a hockey puck. They are very useful for finding things in your wall locker when the rest of your roommates are asleep.  Which is every day.
* Leatherman, knife... little tools can make life better.
* Power strip with ~6 outlets.  Gotta charge all of your little gadgets.
* I got a little bunk bed organizer like this <http://www.amazon.com/Pocket-Bedside-Storage-Mattress-Remote/dp/B0019S3MCU/ref=sr_1_1?s=home-garden&ie=UTF8&qid=1376847859&sr=1-1&keywords=bunk+bed+organizer> so I'd stop dropping my phone off the top bunk in the middle of the night.  You'll probably be on the top bunk at least for a while - I was there almost 2 months.  Plan for it.
* Noise canceling head phones.  I bought some of the Bose ones before I came over here - best investment I made.  They have a microphone, so I use them to skype with the family.  They have saved my sanity - I would put those babies on, hit the noise canceling switch, and listen to whatever (sometimes just nothing but with the noise canceling on) and I get a break from other people's chatter/Deadwood/Spartacus/football/baseball/hockey/zombie killing/call of duty/tiger woods golf/whatever else is on the TV.  Expensive, totally worth it.
* Good eye protection - you'll want sunglasses and clear glasses for the trauma bay.  Both sets of lenses should be ballistic - check out the APEL list for good ones.  Trust me - eye injuries suck, but that’s a story for another day.

There you have it! One woman’s experience on heading out the door. Please know that I do not endorse any of the items I recommended above, nor do I have any affiliation with the companies. They were simply the things that I found worked well and that I liked.

Good luck, stay safe, and hurry home!