

A Little Bit of Heaven in Afghanistan

Tuesday, October 3, 2006



There's hot chow, a bed, showers and a PX. Relatively speaking, for a deployed servicemember, it's not too bad of a place to be stationed. It could be a lot worse.

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist awards a Purple Heart medal to 42-year-old Capt. Jacqueline E. King of Tinton Falls, New Jersey during his visit to Qalat, the provincial capital of Zabul province of Afghanistan on Monday, Oct. 2, 2006. King suffered burns and other injuries when her Humvee was struck by a suicide bomber's vehicle in Qalat, southern Afghanistan, June 28. "I got blown out of the vehicle and burned and beat up," King said. "But I'm tough. I got back up. It's rough. They're not exactly thrilled to see us here."

There are additional amenities here: a barbershop, laundry facilities, and contracted vendors that bring a taste of home to Bagram: Burger King, a Green Bean Coffee shop and Popeye's Fried Chicken. You can call home using an AT&T call center or converse to someone back in the States via the Internet.

If you've been to some of the other military installations or Forward-Operating Bases (FOBs) in Afghanistan, Bagram seems like a little bit of heaven.

It's relatively safe and has been pretty well insulated from the recent salvos of rocket attacks that have been hitting places like Kandahar and Salerno and FOBs.

Bagram is a place you soon learn to appreciate if you've been up at an FOB where it's "lights out" at night because the light provides the enemy an aiming point, a target for their weaponry.

Like I said, the difference between this place and some of the other AOs here is like the difference between night and day. And that holds true for the troops serving east along the Pakistan/Afghani border.

There aren't any goodies to be had for those patrolling these mountains: no phone, Internet hook-up or fast food. The troops up there don't have the luxury of running water or flush toilets. They don't sleep on mattresses - they rack-out on improvised beds made of sheets of plywood. And they don't have a PX. Instead, they rely on AAFES's "rodeos" to bring them items like soap, razors and cigarettes by helicopter.

They serve in a primitive, dangerous and forbidding environment, filled with high mountains and steep valleys. Traveling the rugged terrain takes stamina: humping the steep trails and roads of the countryside is physically draining; combined with the stifling heat, the sharp, angular paths suck the energy out of you in a heartbeat. Muscles scream and rivulets of sweat turn to a torrent that cascade from your brow downward until your entire body is bathed in perspiration.

This is a place the Taliban calls home. It's an area that the enemy wants to take back and has made a concerted effort to do so. The problem the Taliban is having - and it's a big problem for them - is the "Joes" who run the patrols and interdiction missions in the eastern portion of the country.

Like the terrain they operate in, our Joes are tough. They endure the harshest of environments, while slogging the near impenetrable mountains and passes along the border. At night, much-needed rest is interrupted by incoming rocket or mortar attacks and by day it can be an IED, sniper, or small-arms fire.

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All the while they are taking the fight to the Taliban, a tough and determined enemy that doesn't hesitate to kill innocent civilians - men, women, or children, U.S. or coalition forces. They don't discriminate in their killing. This is an enemy who can fire on a patrol or an FOB and when pursued by our guys, run eight "kicks" in 45 minutes through the mountains - in sandals.

The Taliban just doesn't quite understand that our guys are tougher and more determined than they are, and thus will continue to die as a result of their miscalculations.

Our troops along the border are more than warriors. They have helped to construct roads, provide medical care, and build clinics and schools - and therein lies the biggest mistake the enemy has made. The Afghani people have had a taste of something better than the terror tactics, murder, torture and intimidation they experienced when the Taliban held power, and that's a hard thing to defeat.

So it's been pretty good being at Bagram, but it will be better to head back east. It'll be good to be back with some pretty remarkable Joe's.

- Jerry