IT'S AUSTERE HERE

The Remote Bases of Southern Iraq

Part one: JSS Al Wahab offers tents, cots, no running water

By Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence
MND-S

If you're looking for a getaway featuring the glitz and glamour of the rich and famous, then the Royal Villa at Grand Resort Lagonissi in Athens, Greece may be for you.

The three-bedroom Royal Villa, priced at $34,088 per night, has an indoor pool, an outdoor pool, a massage room, a gym, a fully equipped kitchen (with private chef upon request), a piano (with pianist upon request), private marina and a private beach.

Joint Service Station Al Wahab is no Royal Villa.

But if you're looking for an austere base with tents, cots and camels, but no running water then perhaps JSS Al Sheeb is for you.

As part one of our series "It's Austere Here", here are five reasons why the Soldiers of JSS Al Wahab have it tough.

Photos by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

(Above) Because there is no indoor plumbing at Joint Service Station Al Wahab, Soldiers use gravity showers.

(Right) Capt. Harold Huff, a Dallas native, shaves in the outdoor shaving area at Joint Service Station Al Wahab.

1 It's Hot

From the air, JSS Al Wahab looks tiny. If you get lost in JSS Al Wahab, there's something wrong; the entire base is a square about the size of a Little League baseball park and there are probably more fun things to do on a baseball field than in JSS Al Wahab.

Located next to the Iran-Iraq border, the Soldiers of Al Wahab have two things to do: advise the Iraqi Army and watch the border for hours on end.

"We got guys up 24 hours a day," said Staff Sgt. Rudy Alvarado, a Fresno, Calif. native with 2nd Squadron, 13th Cavalry Regiment. "It gets pretty hot. Right now, it's cool. But usually around (2 p.m.) it gets pretty hot."

Of course, cool is a relative term in the desert. One of the desert's most devious tricks is its ability to skew all normal standards of temperature. Ninety degrees becomes normal, 100 degrees becomes acceptable and anything higher becomes expected, especially in August. By cool, Alvarado meant around 80 or 90 degrees which is cool compared to the average temperatures in August that hover around 105. The heat sometimes conspires with an ironic form of desert humidity to weigh down upon Soldiers like a soggy wool blanket.

2 You sleep on cots inside marshmallows

In order to combat the heat, Soldiers live in tents covered in two inches of polyurethane foam.

"A lot of these tents have been here a while, but these just recently got foamed, like a month ago," said Alvarado. "Before that, it was hot, hot in the tents!"

While the foam insulates the tents and blocks heat, dust and even wind from entering, it also has the unfortunate effect of making each tent look like a dirty melted marshmallow. However, the foam can drastically improve conditions inside the tents, which is all Soldiers really care about.

"If it wasn't for that foam we would probably be cussing you out right now," said Staff Sgt. Swinston Siba, a native of Kosrae, Micronesia and a scout with 2nd Squadron, 13th Cav. Regt.

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Photos by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

Soldiers at Joint Service Station Al Wahab live within walking distance of the Iran-Iraq border. However, no one actually walks to the border because it is riddled with mines and barriers from previous wars.

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When you enter the tents, you'll find each of the eight to 10 Soldiers has partitioned off his area with a system of towels and blankets in a bid to gain some privacy. It is not the only example of makeshift engineering.

"Some guys have actually made beds," said Alvarado. "They'll get a piece of wood and they'll a get a bed frame and they'll buy a mattress from an Iraqi store and sleep on that."

"The majority of us are on cots," said Alvarado. "I sleep on a cot still. I just got a cot and an air bag. I like to keep it where I can just pick up and move."

3 There are mines, camels and dogs

In addition to sleeping on a cot, Soldiers also have to get used to sleeping with the sounds of a nearby minefield.

"Did you hear that mine go off last night?" said Siba.

"There was one this morning too," said Staff Sgt. Enrique Torres, a Wimauma, Fla. native and a scout with 2nd Squadron, 13th Cav. Regt. "You could see it; we saw the little cloud of smoke."

"Dang, those things are going off left and right," said Staff Sgt. Joseph Melanson, a Bryson City, N.C. native and a scout with 2nd Squadron, 13th Cav. Regt.

Wildlife is another issue for JSS Al Wahab.

"The dogs, they're a pretty big nuisance," said Alvarado. "They run around here and try to scavenge. I think one of them hit a land mine the other day because we heard a huge explosion so we came outside and we saw that something tripped a land mine out in the back."

"Camels … we'll see them running around. There's donkeys that have actually gotten into the base," said Alvarado. "And we actually caught them one night in the trash and we had to run them out. Every now and then, the guys in the towers will see the same two donkeys floating around here. I think they hang out in this area."

4 There are Crickets in the showers

In addition to the larger wild animals, Al Wahab also has colonies of mice and bugs. Since there is not much to do, the colonies of mice and bugs can sometimes be a welcome distraction.

"We had this huge trap, like a rat trap and we didn't think that we'd actually catch anything," said Alvarado. "But the next day, there one was."

"It's our entertainment," said Torres

"That and camel spiders," said Melanson. "We caught two of them once."

"There's probably one in the showers right now," said Siba, referring to camel spiders.

"The showers are kind of rough right now with all the bugs," said Torres.

"There's like eight million crickets in there," said Siba.

"They swarm all over you," said Melanson. "It's like, oh, I have dirt all over me. No, wait. I don't even know how the crickets get in some of the places they're in."

"They're like best friends with the sand fleas," Melanson added. "They, like, high five and stuff underneath the floorboards."

Because there is no indoor plumbing in Al Wahab, Soldiers use gravity showers, which are big green baskets that hang from the ceiling.

"You fill it up with water," said Alvarado. "Pull it up. You turn the bottom of it and it will work like a regular showerhead."

Soldiers are given five gallons to 30 gallons a day depending on how many Soldiers are living on the base.

Soldiers at Joint Service Station Al Sheeb sleep on cots or homemade beds in eight- to 10-person tents, which are insulated with two inches of polyurethane foam.

For comparison, an average American taking a five-minute shower can expect to use 15 to 25 gallons.

5 The best PT is going to the bathroom and running in the LZ

Outside the showers, you can see a long, thin wooden board and a mud-spattered mirror.

"This is where we shave," said Alvarado. "We use these little shaving pans; it kind of looks like an old hospital bedpan. Basically what we'll do is we'll fill up a five gallon jug, fill up the little bedpan and shave."

Bathrooms in Al Wahab

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Soldiers at Joint Service Station Al Wahab have access to washing machines but air-dry their clothes in the desert air. This is prudent, especially in the month of August, when average temperatures hover around 105 degrees.

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consist of a system of portable latrines emptied by an Iraqi contractor every day. Because of the concentrated heat trapped inside each one, Soldiers time their bathroom breaks to avoid the hottest parts of the day.

"If you go in there, you're just asking to get dehydrated," said Torres.

"You better walk in there with two cold water bottles," said Siba

"It's intense," said Torres

Taking a bathroom break might actually be the most intense thing to do on base. Most of the Soldiers work at night and during the day you'll see most Soldiers either sleeping or contacting their friends and family from the five computers and three phones on base. If you want to do physical training, the only options are going to the gym for some strength training or going to the helicopter landing zone for some light jogging.

That's right. You run where the helicopters land.

"It is more than just a landing zone for us," Alvarado explains. "We use it as a PT field because we don't have that many helicopters coming in and out of here."

"Yeah, we actually had one guy running and then all of a sudden birds started landing," said Alvarado. "So he turned around and ran back after getting dusted."

The Experience

JSS Al Wahab is no Royal Villa. There's no pool, no massage room and no pianist. If you want food, there are plenty of Meals Ready to Eat in the dining facility. But for the Soldiers of JSS Al Wahab, what they've got is good enough.

"Yeah, we don't actually have it that tough here," said Torres. "Have you seen the DFAC? We got the best cook in the division."

"In Iraq!" interjected Siba.

"This is the place to be," said Torres.

At this point, I spoke up. I told them the base voters choose as the most austere base gets free gym equipment from the commanding general of Multi-National Division – South.

There was a pause as Melanson, Siba and Torres looked at each other.

"What?" said Melanson.

"Whoa!" bellowed Siba.

"Aww man! Why didn't you tell us that beforehand?" Torres said. "We got it rough!"

Editors note: *This is the first in a series of three stories featuring austere bases in MND-S.*

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