IT'S AUSTERE HERE

The Remote Bases of Southern Iraq

Part three: Patrol Base Mahawil offers the unflushable toilet

By Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence
MND-S

There are places in the world that astound you with their beauty: the soaring and ragged vistas of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, the silkily elegant minarets and dome of the Taj Mahal of India, the teeming cobalt zoo that is the Great Barrier Reef of Australia.

Patrol Base Mahawil is not one of them. PB Mahawil is what realtors would call a "handyman special." It is rustic, in the middle of nowhere and free of luxuries. It is also a fitting home for Soldiers of 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 172nd Infantry Brigade, "Spartans."

As part three of our series "It's Austere Here," we give you five reasons the Soldiers at PB Mahawil have it tough.

Photo by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

Soldiers at Patrol Base Mahawil sleep in either the bombed-out headquarters building or "tent city," a compound of 12-person tents. While headquarters personnel sleep in beds, most Soldiers live in the tents. "Tent city's the place to be," says Spc. Gerry Denardi, a native of Branford, Conn., and an infantryman with 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 172nd Infantry Brigade. "That's where us hooligans live."

1 You're in the middle of the desert

The first thing you'll notice about PB Mahawil is how isolated it is from civilization. Swaths of arid wasteland encircle the base like a moat, leaving the base an island in a sea of dust.

As you get off the helicopter, you'll be greeted by a view of the wire, beyond which you leave the safety of the base and enter the desert. And yes, in the desert it's hot and dry and the sun seems angry sometimes.

"The sun is like lemon juice on a wound," said Spc. Gerry Denardi, an infantryman with 2nd Bn. 28th Inf. Regt.

As you exit the helipad, you'll see the one tree on the base to your right and a firing range to your left, where you can often hear the echoes of gunfire. This is an infantry base, after all.

2 Tents covered in cheese

As a guest, you can stay in the recently constructed plywood guest quarters or in the bombed-out company headquarters. However, if you really want to experience everything Mahawil has to offer, be sure to book a room in one of the tents where the Spartans live.

"Tent city's the place to be," said Denardi, a native of Branford, Conn. "That's where us hooligans live."

The tents come in two flavors: foamed and unfoamed. The foamed tents have insulation and, because of this, their walls are the color and shape of coagulated nacho cheese left out in the sun and then forgotten. The foam helps keep the room cool, while the non-foamed tents sit in the heat with nothing to protect them but a lustrous golden patina of silt-like dust.

While the unfoamed tents are more aesthetically pleasing, you want the foam tents; it's better to live in a comfortable room with cheese on the walls than to sleep in an oven covered in gold dust.

"Before, when it was just the tents, there was nothing keeping the air conditioning in there," Denardi said. "It would be hot as hell all day long, but since we got that foam stuff there, it's relatively cool."

3 The gym makes you do math

If you've had enough relaxation in the cool tents, you can go to the so-called prison-yard gym, where there are always Soldiers huffing and puffing while lifting or pushing or pulling exercise equipment. Much of the equipment was either inherited or scavenged, which is commendable, but creates situations requiring much more math than one is accustomed to at a gym.

"We have some of those European weights, but we'll have one of them, and then we'll try to add on, like five

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of these (non-metric) plates," said Denardi.

The total amount of these weights, combined with the sheer number of times they are used, means the lifespan of a bar is fleeting and Soldiers often have to rebuild or replace them.

"Our mechanics welded some, but we're bar killers. We use them three or four times and the thing will break," said Denardi. "And even our one good bar, as you can see, is bent."

Soldiers at Patrol Base Mahawil once had to burn their bathroom waste in bins, but with the introduction of "indoor" plumbing they also make use of pee tubes, which are four plastic pipes sticking out of the ground. The tubes go to a tank in the ground and the tubes are stained and of varying heights.

Photos by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

A Soldier walks through the construction area of a new shoot house in Patrol Base Mahawil. The shoot house, which will allow Soldiers to practice their close quarters combat skills, is a project by a group of so-called "redneck carpenters" who have built, among other things, air conditioning stands, light stands, fighting positions, a guesthouse and a dojo.

4 Latrine Duty

If, after your workout, you need to use the bathroom, you can continue your workout in the recently installed indoor bathrooms.

"They're amazing if you want exercise," Denardi said. "You use the bathroom; if it doesn't go down (and it probably won't), fill the bucket up and then you pour it down the toilet."

When you walk in the bathroom, you'll notice it smells like any other public bathroom, only more so. If you look to your left, you'll see an unlucky Soldier sitting in the stink and reading a book.

"His amazing job here is, when he's not pulling tower guard, to sign a person into a toilet and to make sure that the toilet flushes," Denardi explained.

"It's a long six hours," said the Soldier on toilet duty, Spc. Jason Surovcik, an infantryman with 2nd Bn. 28th Inf. Regt., and a native of Long Pond, Pa.

All in all, according to Denardi, making sure people flush is a better job than burning what people flush, which is what Soldiers did before they received indoor plumbing. In fact, as you leave the bathroom, you can see the burning bins where Soldiers would place the bathroom's contents before burning.

5 Pee tubes & combat showers

Next to the burn bins, you can see four plastic pipes sticking out of the ground. This is where Soldiers pee. The tubes go to a tank in the ground and the tubes are stained and of varying heights.

"Some guys in the company are relatively short, and for a while there was this one kid, Pvt. Cox, he was very short, and we actually had a stool for him so he could stand on it and reach inside the pee tube," Denardi said. "But someone stole his little stool and he couldn't pee. So we cut some of the tubes so he could reach up there."

You can take a normal

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shower at the headquarters area, but you need to take a combat shower in tent city to get the true Mahawil experience. Be dirty, be prepared and be quick, because all you get is a wooden box with a hose, a shower curtain and 30 seconds of water.

"We have to take combat showers," Denardi said. "We only get so much water."

Aside from the 30-second rule, Soldiers have had to learn other tricks to maximize their shower.

"You don't use the nozzles or else you're going to break it," Denardi said. "You see those emergency valves down there? Those are actually your nozzles. The trick is, don't use the one on the left or you'll burn yourself to death. The one on the right's cold, but it's usually hot anyway. So you just turn it on, get a little bit wet, cover yourself in soap real quick, turn back on, let it rinse off real quick, and if you don't get it in 30 seconds you're stuck with soap on your body."

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The Experience

Photo by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

A Soldier pulls guard duty in one of the towers on Patrol Base Mahawil. Soldiers pull long shifts watching entry points in the intense Iraqi heat, which one Soldier likens to "lemon juice on a wound."

PB Mahawil is not going on anyone's "most beautiful places to visit" list. But for the Soldiers of the 2nd Bn. 28th Inf. Regt. it is a fitting home for a bunch of Spartans. The Spartans, many of whom lived in nearby Forward Operating Base Kalsu, prefer PB Mahawil, despite the luxuries of the bigger base.

"Kalsu is the Ritz," Denardi said. "You got your rooms with air conditioning, internet, TV in the rooms; you've got four meals a day, gym, Pizza Hut and all that stuff. All we have is breakfast and dinner and half the time you're not going to like it. We live out of tents. We live out of our duffel bags. Thank God we just put this foam stuff on our tents; our tents were above a hundred degrees the whole day, and that was with the air conditioner running."

"But we would choose this place over Kalsu any day," Denardi added. "It's a little Soldier thing that we all have inside of us. We like living in the bad areas."

"It's a sense of mission," said Mitchell. "Every Soldier wants to have a mission and they want to have a sense of purpose. People say our patrol base is bare or it has minimum necessities or it's austere. We like it here, you know."

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

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