IT'S AUSTERE HERE

The Remote Bases of Southern Iraq

Part two: Thar Allah Naval Base offers rats of legend

By Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence
MND-S

Are you sick and tired of the relative comfort of your containerized housing unit? Do you feel sanitation is overrated? Is air-conditioning just not your "thing"?

Well, then perhaps a trip to Thar Allah Naval Base is just what you need.

Let's take a little voyage to Thar Allah, located right in the middle of downtown Basra and a short drive from both the port of Umm Qasar and the amusement park, City of Fun.

As part two of our series "It's Austere Here", here are five reasons why the Soldiers of Thar Allah have it tough.

Photo by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

Soldiers at Thar Allah Naval Base leave out mousetraps for the rodents infesting the base. Soldiers often speak of the "Rat of Legend," a rarely seen but apparently monstrous creature known to frequent Thar Allah.

1 It's Hot

The first thing you'll see when you enter Thar Allah is a two-story headquarters building with broken windows and columns with blue paint chipping off. From this base Soldiers of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment provide security for a military team that trains the Iraqi Army in strict accordance with the security agreement. This building constitutes most of the compound; in fact, the base could probably fit inside a Wal-Mart.

You wouldn't, however, live in the headquarters building. You would be living snuggly in tents with the warm companionship of eight to ten other Soldiers, so bring a fan if you can. "The generator goes out at least four, five times every day, and that causes all our ACs to go out, so the tents usually stay around 80, 90 degrees," said 1st Lt. Robert Munoz, a Los Cruces, N.M. native and infantry officer with 2nd Bn., 8th Inf. Regt.

2 There's trash everywhere

As you walk the grounds of the compound, you'll find all the sights and smells of a third-world country: two thrown-out beds lounging like stray dogs in the shade, a dumpster with trash all around it and a sulfurous crater festering with some sort of primordial ooze.

"It's black water that has been seeping out of the ground," explained Munoz. "It's not too bad. You get used to the smell. But I wouldn't recommend going to the back of the compound if you've got a weak stomach."

If you ask him what it smells like, Munoz will reply, "Like feces and rotting meat and spoiled vegetables."

And when you turn the corner, you will instantly agree. The smell is just one of many reminders that you are on a small American base that certainly is not a division headquarters.

3 The Rat of Legend

For animal lovers, Thar Allah offers a veritable menagerie of feral beasts. For example, you will see stray mutts everywhere. They look harmless enough and you will want to take them home, teach them tricks and give them names like Paco and Rocky and Doug.

Don't.

"They're the ones that will attack you if you get too close," Munoz explained as he pointed to a dog underneath the truck. "They sleep everywhere."

"There's another one underneath the truck over there," he added.

For cat lovers, Thar Allah is home to a roving gang of stray cats, including one the Soldiers call Mr. Whiskers. And for you rat lovers, Thar Allah just may be your promised land.

"There's rats too," Munoz said. "There's a family of rats living in my rucksack."

"The rats are about the size of a small rhinoceros sometimes," Spc. James Culver joked … maybe.

"Besides Soldiers, I think their main diet consists of dogs and feces," said Culver, a Swartz Creek, Mich. native and infantryman with Co. A, 2nd Bn., 8th Inf. Regt. "If you snuggle with them at night they tend to leave you

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alone during the day."

Notable among the wildlife is the "Rat of Legend," a rarely seen but apparently monstrous creature known to frequent Thar Allah. A first sighting of the Rat of Legend in its natural surroundings is sure to be a memorable experience.

"It's kind of like Big Foot sightings," said Munoz. "We see it. It's about the size of a small dog. Nobody's taken any pictures of it, but everybody knows it's running around here. It's only a matter of time."

"If you see it, it won't get scared of you. It will stare you down," said Pvt. Matthew Neel, an infantryman and resident wildlife expert of Co. A, 2nd Bn., 8th Inf. Regt.

"We're thinking of setting up a fire watch," said Munoz, who has killed five rats in the past week. "A guy with night vision goggles and a pistol to protect us in the middle of the night."

"You think we're joking," said Neel, a Stanward, Wash. native. "But we're not."

Photos by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

(Above) As you walk around Thar Allah Naval Base, you'll find many reminders that you are on a small American base in the middle of a large Iraqi city — beds thrown outside the kitchen, trash and tires everywhere and the smell of raw sewage.

(Top Right) Another experience you'll have at Thar Allah Naval Base is seeing a dumpster with trash all around it and a sulfurous crater festering with some sort of primordial ooze. "It's black water that has been seeping out of the ground," explained 1st Lt. Robert Munoz, a Los Cruces, N.M. native and infantryman with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment. "It's not too bad. You get used to the smell. But I wouldn't recommend going to the back of the compound if you've got a weak stomach."

4 There's a definite lack of things to do

A Soldier's life at Thar Allah runs the gamut from physical training to sleeping to working to sleeping. "We get up around 4 a.m. to check on the generators, then around 10 a.m. I work, and then usually it gets too hot at that time to do much of anything, so most of our guys try to sleep during the hottest part of the day," said Munoz. "Come sundown we start working out again, because there's not much to do except PT."

When American operations transitioned to an advise and assist role June 30, the Soldiers at Thar Allah found they had time to kill - time often filled with hours in the gym. Thar Allah does have a gym, in the loosest of terms; half of the equipment was built from old bunk parts and the other half is falling apart.

"We're missing like half the dumbbells and the barbell just broke the other day," Munoz said.

The good news, if you like basketball, is Thar Allah boasts a basketball hoop. The hoop presides over a sandy, rocky court and on the plywood backboard, "NBA" is written, sloppily, in felt pen.

The bad news, if you don't like basketball, is basketball is pretty much the only game in town if you want cardiovascular exercise.

It's tough to run in the cramped compound, Munoz said, and running at the nearby Iraqi Army track is discouraged due to sniper concerns.

"We tried running around the compound, but when they start cooking, the smell is so bad; plus, the stray dogs chase you," Munoz said. "We're limited in the amount of PT you can do."

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Photo by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

Before the advent of running water, Soldiers at Thar Allah Naval Base were allowed to take two bottles of water a day for showering and one bottle of water for hygiene. "You kind of rinse your whole body up and soap up and then dump the rest on and hope you washed the suds off," said Spc. James Culver, a Swartz Creek, Mich. native and infantryman with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment.

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5 Portable latrines & birdbath showers

If you desire to use the bathroom in Thar Allah, be advised running water for toilets has not yet been installed. Instead, Thar Allah offers Soldiers the finest in outhouse technology.

"We just got the porta-johns out back," said Culver. "If you go, you got to let the sentry know in case you pass out in the porta-johns because it's ridiculously hot."

"I usually wait until night," Culver added.

If you need to wash up after using the bathroom, Soldiers are allowed two bottles of water a day for showering and one bottle of water for hygiene. To conserve water, Soldiers have come up with tricks, namely, filthiness.

"You kind of rinse your whole body up and soap up and then dump the rest on and hope you washed the suds off," Culver said.

However, if you don't want to use water bottles, most Soldiers use the showers recently installed at Thar Allah. The showers allow Soldiers to wash like human beings, but like most things in Thar Allah, they come with a catch.

"The only problem right now is that the showers don't really drain out at all," said Culver. "So it's kind of like taking a bird bath after a while, but it's better than water bottles."

The Experience

So come visit Thar Allah, "God's revenge." While living conditions are somewhat austere, the Soldiers there seem to like it. "We don't really have it rough," Culver said. "We got an Xbox, computers and we can Facebook our honeys and what-not."

"Being the colorful group of people that I get to live with here, we probably could have lived in a hole in the ground and made it entertaining," Neel said. "We got a good group of guys out here, so it doesn't matter how stupid things get."

"This is my number two vacation spot," said Culver, "next to a Somalian pirate ship."

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

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