

Life on the "KOP"
Wednesday, October 11, 2006



So it's about 0700 and the sun is just coming up over the 8,000 ft. ridge to the east of the Korengal Outpost, better known as the "KOP".

U.S. and Afghan soldiers stand on an observation post overlooking Korengal valley in eastern Afghanistan, Wednesday Sept. 6, 2006.

My t-shirt is still drenched with sweat from the exertion of climbing the steep ridgelines to the south of here, hair plastered flat to my head from wearing a Kevlar helmet during the all-night patrol.

It feels good to sit down, drink some water and Gatorade... it's good to be back. It's good to be alive.

I've got a minimum of 30 years on the Joes of 3rd platoon--and I'll admit it ain't easy humping these mountains, keeping up with 'em. They've been at it for about 6 mos., almost on a daily (or nightly) basis, so they've grown accustomed to it.

But the old guy kept up, and I wasn't the last man in the column as we returned to the outpost when the night-long patrol finally ended.

So I guess that's something.

The troops out here don't have it easy. It isn't much different than the conditions many of us who served in Vietnam lived in.

The "KOP" is a remote outpost located in about the middle of the Korengal Valley. Just a few ridgelines away is Pakistan, where al-Qaeda, Taliban and foreign fighters re-supply, refit, and train for their almost constant operations in this valley--and against this outpost and the troops who patrol the surrounding mountains as well as the valley.

It's dangerous here. This company has taken more casualties than any other in the battalion, and the battalion has taken more than any other in Afghanistan. Ratio and percentage-wise, this unit has probably seen and sustained more action and taken more casualties than any other military unit serving in the Middle East.

The troops live in tents. They have managed to run some electrical outlets so that in the very little downtime they have, they are able to plug in their laptops to watch DVD's. The tents don't have any lights, so filtered lensed flashlights are used extensively... to dress, read, wash, eat.

Bottled water is used for drinking, and a 'water buffalo' provides water that is used to wash clothes (by hand, in a bucket) or for showering.

Removed from the immediate company area are the latrines and "showers." Both are rough structures constructed of 2x4's and plywood. In order to take a shower, you need to fill a 5-gallon jug from the water buffalo and then haul it down a steep, rocky path to one of two showers. You heft the jug and fill the canvas-field shower and wash as fast as you can, before the water bag empties.

The latrines are a la Vietnam... yes, they still have the barrels, and yes, someone has to be the "burner."

U.S. and Afghan soldiers stand on an observation post overlooking Korengal valley in eastern Afghanistan, Wednesday Sept. 6, 2006.

The KOP is pretty much unreachable by road. There is a road, but it is narrow, rough, windy and prone to be mined with IED's or ambushed with RPG, PKU and AK47 fire by the bad guys. So most supplies are air-dropped by C-130 aircraft. Not all the drops go according to plan however; sometimes supplies go wide of the DZ ("drop zone") by several hundred meters, falling between the deep fingers of the mountain valley, where the combination of distance, terrain and risk of enemy ambush renders them "unrecoverable."

The food is predictable, unchanging. The cook makes do with the supplies that have been provided. One "hot" meal consists of 2 dishes, prepared in a MKT (Mobile Kitchen Trailer) - an egg concoction and diced potatoes with shredded turkey-bacon as well as turkey-link sausages. MRE's are favored over the "hot" -- at least there is some variety offered in a case of the MRE's.

Battalion and Division HQ's are concerned, and are working hard to improve conditions for the troops. To be fair to the higher-ups, this IS a remote potpost in every sense of the word.

So the troops go with little sleep, constantly patrolling with almost daily contact with the enemy. "Short patrols" inadvertently stretch for hours because of this, so the troops get what shut-eye they can, when they can.

The KOP is hot, dirty and dangerous. The troops live in extremely Spartan conditions, in continuous contact with the enemy... and it's amazing how they conduct themselves in the face of all the difficulties they face daily.

They could use some support: entertainment to help relieve the stress and boredom between missions, such as portable DVD players and MP3 players; as well as something to supplement their rations, such as boxed prepared meals (macaroni and cheese, etc.), tuna fish, chili, peanut butter, jelly... just about anything that is non-perishable.

Believe me, your help and generosity would go a long way in helping these great Americans. They deserve it more than you will possibly know.

- Jerry