

Shaving In a Paper Cup

Travel to our little Combat Outposts in the Districts of Logar Province, Afghanistan makes for more little adventures that you may think. This time of year, the snow storms and cold temperatures have put the fighting on the back burner, and counter-insurgency tasks along the lines of community development, improving defenses, and boosting Afghan living standards employ our energies.

This month, thinking about our own standard of living brings to mind the Super Bowl. Our big priority was to beam the Armed Forces Network to the COPs so the troops didn't miss out on the Saints' first-time-victory. As luck would have it, the worst winter storm of the season kept the satellite signal hidden from our monitors. We'll catch the next Super Bowl after we return to Germany, I guess. Of course, we have other 'standard of living' issues, such as how to relocate from beneath the leaking ceilings of "the U-shape," the school we temporarily occupy for our command post and some living quarters. The brick walls are secure, but the snow-melt has soaked through the mud roof with a steady soaking drip-drop through the brick ceiling tiles, maintaining a soggy atmosphere within those brick walls.

Yet I find a more basic daily concern at our Outposts: do I really want to shave with cold bottled water? Surely not. Having only Port-a-Jon latrines and lacking running water, my options are limited. Making the best of this situation means drawing hot water in paper coffee cups from the green CAMBRO on the table in the snow, the one maintained as a wash station by our cooks. Before you offer advice on using paper for cold drinks and styro for hot, I refer you again to our limitations. So with these two steaming paper cups I make my way through the snow to my tent, heated and dry so far, and "conduct personal hygiene," as we say.

How are these paratroopers making it, you ask? Leadership with forward vision and buddies to the left and to the right sharing the hardship keep things in perspective. For the new guys in the Troop, it's one day at a time, coached by experienced leaders, encouraged by Facebook access to family and friends, and the Super Bowl play-by-play on the internet. They pull guard duty on a snow covered mud roof, sleep under rain ponchos in their rooms to the echoing drips from the ceiling, and cuss when it drips into their coffee. Hold the paper cup with a hand over the top, I've learned.

These troopers understand their mission, having raised their hand and volunteered to serve their country, and although the recruiter failed to mention paper plates and indoor rain, these young men strengthen each other and press ahead knowing that from the bottom here, everything is an improvement. Those of us who have been down this road before know the value of continuous improvement. I take photos now because I know they won't recognize this place at the end of our year when we turn over the keys to the next army unit.

They ask me, "Chaplain, how do you like being stuck out here with us?" with a sly grin. For me, anyplace I have troops is home; "stuck" is being in Afghanistan away from my wife and our boys. But I'm a volunteer, just like my troops. My mission is to make it around to each of their COPs every couple of weeks to conduct worship services, offer an attentive ear and some counsel, and make sure that the care packages from our supporters back home are making it out here to the troopers at the districts. Sure, I look forward to getting out of the transient tent and back to my room; a hot shower once a week does wonders for your perspective. Yet my three-day bag has proven to support a good week on the go, and I have a home with each Troop at their district base.

I think this new shaving technique is going to pay off this year.