

## Southtown Article # 9 “The Food”

Some days you ponder the meaning of life and death. Other days you ponder the how good the food tastes.

As far as I’m concerned, there are three things a soldier needs to get through the day, a comfortable place to sleep, a shower, and decent food. Some days you get all three, other days you’re lucky to grab one.

Army bases are informally rated by the quality of their food. In Kuwait, the best food is reported to be at Camp Navistar. The worst food is at Ali Al Salem Air Force base. In Iraq, collective wisdom has it that the best food is located in Baghdad and Mosul. Last week I had an odd conversation. I was talking to a young soldier who was stationed in Mosul. I asked him what it was like. He told me, “You get mortared every day and there’s always car bombs and roadside bombs but the food is great. It’s like, totally worth it.” Back in the States, I’m not sure I’d risk going to a nice restaurant if it meant possibly getting blown up on the way. In Iraq, good food is like, “totally worth it.” Soldiers have the most peculiar perspectives on things.

You eat in chow halls along with a few thousand of your best friends. You stand in line to wash your hands, to enter the building, and to have food dropped on your plate. Your plate and eating utensils are plastic. It’s been months since I’ve eaten with a metal knife and fork. One of the definitive signs that I’ve returned to Chicago will be when I hold a real knife and fork.

Generally, I’d have to say the food is OK. I try to keep in mind that they are cooking for 10,000. For the most part, I’ve decided to avoid beef and sea food. The chaplains at my camp have dubbed the beef, Mad Cow Meat. It tends to be stringy, fatty and gray.

Freshly cooked food is almost unheard of. Most of it has been sitting in warming trays for an hour or two. But there are some exceptions. When you line up for lunch on Wednesdays you can smell the enticing aroma of the beef they are grilling. The problem is that it’s being cooked for dinner, some 5-7 hours later. My advice, stay away from the Mad Cow Meat.

I was once positively surprised. I was at Camp Bucca in Iraq. It was morning and I was going to stop by the chow hall just for coffee because I wasn’t hungry. I saw they were cooking eggs to order. I couldn’t believe it. You could walk up to the counter, ask for eggs and they would cook it for you right there. I thought I was in some fancy hotel. I couldn’t resist so I ordered fried eggs. I hadn’t had fried eggs in over 3 months. I wasn’t in the least bit hungry but there was no way I was going to miss out on this. I wolfed them down and felt sick to my stomach. But it was like, “totally worth it.”

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