

Southtown Article #18 You Can't Beat the Heat

Today it is 145 degrees outside, but a chilly 122 degrees in the shade. Of course, we're in the desert in Iraq. There is no shade. I don't care what anybody says, it's not natural for human beings to be exposed to these kinds of temperatures for extended periods of time.

I've been looking at different weather maps. As best as I can tell, the desert of northern Kuwait and southern Iraq is just about the hottest place on the face of the earth.

I remember about a decade ago in Chicago when the temperatures shot up to 107 degrees for three days. More than 700 people died from heat related illnesses. It was news both nationally and internationally. Here in the desert of Iraq it's business as usual.

It is a challenge to describe living in these temperatures. Picture yourself standing in front of your oven while you are cooking dinner. Open the oven, lean in towards the oven door and stay there for the next twelve hours.

Your dog tags become so hot they almost burn you when they press against your chest.

You take your showers very early in the morning if your schedule allows. Since there is no under ground piping, all of our water is stored in huge water tanks which get super heated during the day. No one wants to stand under 120 degree water for too long.

After being outside only a minute or two your uniform feels as if you just took it out of the clothes dryer.

You drink water constantly. Hopefully it is chilled. It's no fun drinking hot water.

Don't even think about exercising outside after 7:00 a.m.

Do as much of your work either late at night or early in the morning. I make my pastoral visits to the guards in the towers from between 4:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m.

You wear gloves to keep from burning your hands if you need to handle materials that have been outside. And me being from Chicago, I thought one wore gloves during cold weather!

I realize most guys have it worse than I. If soldiers are providing security for convoys they must wear their body armor and helmet. Those items were designed to stop bullets, not comfort. If military personnel are providing security at the detainment facility or by the main gate, they are outside all day, everyday.

Not only is summer a time for intense heat but it is sandstorm season as well. The wind blows fiercely for hours at a time. It picks up tiny grains of sand and hurls it at your

face with such force it feels as if you are being bitten by hundreds of mosquitoes. The strength of the gusts is such that they can almost prevent you from walking. Of course the sand gets everywhere, eyes, nose and mouth included. No matter what you do, you can never wash off all the grit..

Unfortunately, the worst is yet to come. During August the wind is supposed to shift directions. When that happens it brings with it humidity in the 90% plus range. 140 degree heat is one thing but when you add the humidity it truly becomes unbearable. We've had two days like this so far. I'm not looking forward to the rest.

Despite the cruel weather conditions, being in the Army means life goes on regardless of the environment. The mission has to be accomplished. That means day after day you suit up and do your work. Most soldiers will tell you, you eventually get used to it. In fact rarely do you even here them complain. You'll hear an occasional, "Man, it's hot out there today" type of comment but that's about it. There's a saying that common in the Army, "Suck it up and drive on," translated as stop whining and do your work. Maybe that's the key to beating the wind, heat and humidity.

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