

## At isolated outpost, the relative luxury of Kandahar is a world away

KATHERINE O'NEILL

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PANJWAI DISTRICT, AFGHANISTAN — Warrant Officer Devin Ramos had flashbacks to Vietnam movies the first time he was dropped off by a helicopter at one of the tiny outposts the Canadian military has scattered throughout the Panjwai district.

"It reminded me of a little fort bristling with machine guns and wire," he said.

The 34-year-old Edmonton-based soldier with the 3rd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry has spent the bulk of his tour since he arrived in February stationed at outposts, and recently headed up the one in Zangabad.

The station, which is officially named Platoon House Boyes, opened late last year in an effort to hold ground in the hotly contested and turbulent Panjwai district and help train Afghan police. It is named in honour of Sergeant Jason Boyes who was killed in March after stepping on an explosive device a few hundred metres from the station.

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While the outpost at Zangabad, a tiny farming community located deep in Taliban territory, is only about 40 kilometres southwest of Kandahar Airfield, the two are entirely different worlds.

At Kandahar Airfield, Canadian soldiers can buy almost anything, including lattes, burgers and massages. There's air-conditioning and a seemingly endless supply of hot water.

At the outposts, there is no plumbing or mess halls or air conditioning, and daytime temperatures now top 40 C. Soldiers use a urinal and outhouse, complete with honey bags - plastic bags filled with waste.

WO Ramos said the isolation is hard for many soldiers. "There are not a lot of visitors. This place isn't really on the tour," he joked.

Some people stationed at these outposts feel like a "pin on a map" for Canada's war effort in Afghanistan because of the lack of contact with KAF and other soldiers.

Concerns about isolation have increased in recent weeks because road convoys to resupply the soldiers have become extremely rare as a result of

concerns about improvised explosive devices, or roadside bombs. Soldiers are left to hike in and out of the volatile area with all their belongings. Supplies, including military rations, water and fuel, are delivered by helicopter drops.

Everything has become a luxury, including mail.

Private Mark Day, who was posted to Zangabad earlier this month, brought a stack of letters for some soldiers when he arrived by foot.

"It was the least I could do," he said. "I know how cut off you can feel." Before Zangabad, the 25-year-old Edmonton-based soldier, who is with 3PPCLI, had been stationed at another outpost further south.

Soldiers also have access, usually two to four times a week, to the outpost's satellite phones and Internet connection. Pte. Day said the key to fighting boredom is keeping busy.

When not out patrolling or meeting with locals, soldiers often work around the outpost, including building common areas. Nothing is wasted.

Zangabad's soldiers - most of them have been men - also work out at the makeshift gym or trade movies or video games to play on their personal computers. A lot of time is spent talking, with many conversations starting with the phrase: "When I get back ..."

During the day, most sleep, read or listen to music - anything to stay out of the sun.

"The life of a soldier is 95 per cent the daily, mundane routine stuff and five per cent high-adrenalin excitement," WO Ramos said.

He said building morale is always a challenge and that depression is an ongoing concern, especially when soldiers return from their leave. "It usually takes them a week to get back in the groove."

It doesn't help that one of the only places to get any privacy is the outhouse.

One major morale booster was the arrival of Wiley in March. The puppy was about to be killed by two Afghan boys near a neighbouring outpost earlier this year because one of its hind legs was broken.

However, some Canadian soldiers stepped in and saved the animal by trading a bottle of water and a granola bar for the injured dog. Wiley often accompanies the soldiers when they leave the outpost on patrols, despite having the use of only three legs.

Zangabad used to have two donkeys, Rebecca and Jackass, to help with chores, but one went missing and the other was sold for \$45 because it was too much trouble.

Soldiers also have started buying produce and meat from local bazaars to freshen up their diets. At Zangabad earlier this year, soldiers saved the fruit from their rations and made fruit turnovers. At the outpost in nearby Talukan, soldiers are buying flour to make their own bread.

Despite the hardships, WO Ramos said the majority of soldiers who are stationed at the isolated stations are happy with their assignment.

"This is an adventure. It's something you'll remember. It's why you are in the army," he said.

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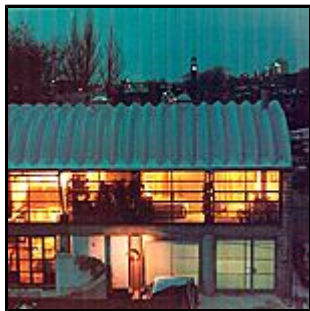
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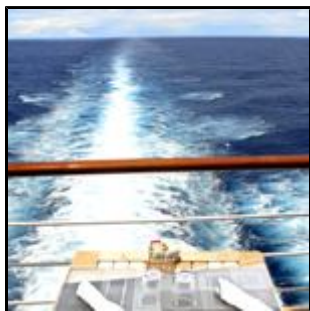
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