

Grease, Freezies and the Pistol Leash

JESSICA LEEDER, OCTOBER 21, 2008 AT 7:56 AM EDT

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The more time I spend wandering around this paradoxical military base - the largest one currently in Afghanistan - I feel more certain that it's fair to say it shares elements with some of the best and worst places I have been on this earth.

In one respect, it reminds me constantly of the many resort vacations I've been on in Cuba, a beautiful, sunny place which always feels initially pleasant to me, but eventually turns me claustrophobic. At first, I find myself (as I have here) buoyed by the notion of having several "restaurants" to choose from, and access to a simple spa (even at KAF, you can get massages!). But the shininess of those options tarnish after a few days, when the monotony of routine sets in.

Then lineups at the resort restaurant become so frustratingly and unavoidable I can't help but think of the guests queuing up as cattle jostling at the trough. After several days at these resorts, all of the food begins to taste the same to me. It's always palatable, but never crave-able. And by the end of my stay, the sheer scent of the food cooking is enough to turn my stomach.

There are lineups, too, at Kandahar Air Field, and it took only a few days before the greasy scent emanating from the base mess halls began triggering my stomach to do unhappy flip-flops. Like in Cuba, the scent has a way of embedding itself in clothing worn inside the hall. Combined with the staleness of the dirt, cigarette smoke and heavy exhaust that choke the air here, it makes for a nauseating perfume.

The endless dust and dirt that is a constant source of complaints on base (some of my colleagues here attribute it as the source of a nasty, phlegmy cough they've developed and dubbed the 'Afghan hack') is reminiscent, to me, of life on one of Canada's most beleaguered native reserves. Kashechewan, a remote James Bay reserve accessible only by plane for most of the year, attracted media attention several years ago when e.coli and water problems prompted a mass evacuation of the place. I was part of a media contingent that descended on the reserve via its dirt and gravel runway. It took very little time there for me to realize it is one of the most inhuman places I will ever visit.

Damp conditions made the place a virtual breeding ground for mould (a scourge that my colleagues complain has long grown here, too) and a coating of dust and dirt was the norm. That was due partly to the lack of paved roads (most started out gravel-covered, but had worn down to dirt tracks). Everything, from the furniture we sat on right down to our skin, clothes and bed sheets, had the texture of grunge.

The same is true here, where freshly showered skin or hair becomes coated with an instant layer of filth as soon as soldiers in one of the many SUVs used to traverse the base roads drives by. And as in Kashechewan, by day's end my voice is hoarse from breathing in the filth.

And so, in my mind, this base is one part developing country resort and one part hellish native reserve. But it has a third element, one that I would liken to a steroidal summer camp.

Over the weekend, at the centre of the base, the Brits held a strongman competition (a good-sized crowd gathered to watch sweaty, shirtless soldiers grunt over dead-lifts and lop tractor tires end over end), while more shirtless soldiers played beach volleyball in the sand nearby, their weapons set aside.

On most days, soldiers drive around in armored tanks, Toyota SUVs and camouflaged Humvees (although the speed limit posted on base roads is a conservative 16 km/h). They think nothing wrong with slowing their vehicle to gawk at rare passing women -- one soldier guarding the gate, who apparently checked his manners there, had no qualms about offering me an extra thorough search (I managed to decline the little git, who seemed barely old enough to shave, without using expletives, which is a personal advancement for me).

They let off steam at the shooting range or pump iron in the well-stocked gyms and when they're ready to treat themselves, they can hit the PXs. These are stores that at first pass seem similar to camp canteens - they sell 50 cent freezies and a good assortment of candy and comic books. But they sell other things: fierce looking pocket knives, movies with suggestive titles like 'The Babysitter' (the package of which shows the half naked torso of a teenaged girl in the midst of pulling off her shirt), Trojan condoms, and a wide assortment of devices with names like 'Pistol Leash'. Yikes.

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