

## YourCorps

# Welcome to the 'Soak'

## Squatter village adds wrinkle to slow security duty

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**CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan** — Base security was not what the members of 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines, had in mind as they trained for battle.

But the Reserve unit that preceded them had done it, so the mission to monitor Leatherneck's 1,500 acres now fell to the Houston-based Marines.

Surrounded by desert as far as the eye can see and a sparse number of remote villages, the Corps' chief support and operations base in Helmand province is far from the combat action.

On this job, no news is good news, which can make for slow days outside the wire.

"The challenge is keeping morale up when success means no action," said Weapons Company commander Capt. Christopher Wagner, acknowledging his Marines "would trade this

mission in a heartbeat."

"I tell them, Marines have been guarding fixed positions since 1775, and that's not going to change," Wagner said.

Still, days spent patrolling the base perimeter are not without their own unique set of circumstances — for instance, the squatters who live north of the base in a shantytown the Marines call "Soak City," named after the "soak lot" at the Helmand Regional Distribution Center.

Located about a half-mile outside the north gate, it's something akin to a Kmart distribution center that sorts supplies for the base.

Cargo trucks from Kabul, Karachi and beyond are required to park for 24 hours in the soak lot to give security inspectors the time needed to detect explosives. The trucks are checked again before rumbling through the main entry point.

The squatters are a scrappy,



mostly friendly bunch of migrant merchants and scavengers, men and boys, living in hovels patched together with junk from a smoky dump. They are lured to the outer perimeter of the main gate by the promise of selling goods and ser-

vices to the hundreds of truck drivers who come through each day.

They've grown their own poppies, dug their own wells and they are selling their wares to the truckers. But as squatters, they don't qualify for government



assistance programs that might render medical assistance and other services.

"It's sort of like Mad Max out there," said battalion commander Lt. Col. Todd Zink, in reference to the post-apocalyptic scenes depicted in the Mel Gibson movies.

Wagner's Marines walk through the dusty encampment pulling security and chatting with groups of shop owners, keeping the lines of communication open, but also keeping an eye on changes in activity.

"These people are super-resourceful," said Cpl. Randy

## Lts. command grunts instead of waiting in the wings

**CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan** — They could have been drinking beer on the beach in Pensacola.

Instead, 13 active-duty lieutenants commissioned with aviation contracts are on the ground in Afghanistan, leading infantry platoons with 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines, a Houston-based Reserve unit in need of platoon commanders.

The lieutenants volunteered for the job while still in The Basic

School at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., because there was still a one-year wait for a seat in flight school.

Their May 2010 graduating class had 80 lieutenants with aviation contracts. The junior officers were given about an hour to decide among several options. Sixteen went to the 12-week Infantry Officer Course, and 13 made it through and shipped out to Houston to link up with 1/23 for its

annual training and pre-deployment workup.

For the battalion, it was a solution to a manning shortage. For the lieutenants, it was a surprise chance of a lifetime.

First Lt. Jeremy Wood said that as a kid, he'd always wanted to be a pilot. After deciding he wanted to be a Marine, the next step was choosing between aviation and infantry.

"When I heard ... volunteers

were needed for a yearlong endeavor, I said, 'Sign me up, put me in. I want to do this,'" said Wood, who commands 1st Platoon in the battalion's Weapons Company and hopes to one day fly an F-18.

The long wait for flight school was an anomaly created when the Corps surged above 202,000 Marines faster than expected, said 1st Lt. Brian Villiard, a Quantico spokesman. Four Basic

School companies have had flight school students — the last of whom graduated in December — redirected to other assignments. By October, the wait time for flight school is only expected to be up to a month, Villiard said, so the initiative will no longer be necessary.

While some lieutenants enrolled in the IOC — where they were nicknamed "sky grunts" — others have participated in language training and logistics officer training, or have been temporarily assigned to billets across the Corps to "enhance



PHOTOS BY THOMAS BROWN/STAFF

**Cpl. Chris Perez, right, with Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines, questions a man through an interpreter during a June 7 patrol of a squatter village nicknamed "Soak City," north of Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan. The nickname comes from the nearby "soak lot," where delivery trucks are inspected for explosives before entering the base. Left, Perez questions two men digging a hole to build a car wash near the camp.**

Palos, the assistant patrol leader on this day. "They make something out of anything."

Palos added that some things are hard to fathom. Like seeing young children being put to work on the hovels.

"You gotta get that whole American mentality out of your mind when you come here," he said.

During the patrol, one scavenger was seen snapping a picture

of one of the Marines, Sgt. Jason Primus, on his cell phone. Primus, who said he likes the guy and sometimes buys tea from him, exploded.

"Hey! Come here, bro. Come here, dog," Primus yelled before confiscating the phone. "You have pictures of us on your phone. Why are you taking pictures of us?"

It was the only tense moment on the patrol, but a significant one.

The merchant's motives for taking the picture were unknown.

"They're either doing reconnaissance on us, or they're just taking a picture like we would when we go to Japan or something," said patrol leader Cpl. Chris Perez.

Up the road a couple more miles, an entrepreneurial businessman with relatively deep pockets is building a truck-stop complex with a hotel, truck yards for

repairs, an entertainment center and restaurants.

The squatters are important to the future of the base, Zink said, because Leatherneck is continually expanding. Eventually those merchants may become the workforce inside the wire. They are also vulnerable to exploitation by the Taliban.

"We're probably their best advocates because we have an interest in security," Zink said. "And people who are content are more likely to help us."

Located 350 miles southwest of Kabul, the camp is divided into three sections — the British military's Camp Bastion, Leatherneck and Camp Shorabak, which belongs to the Afghan National Army. Known collectively as BLS, it is a huge regional support base and home to some 25,000 civilians and uniformed troops, about 18,000 on Leatherneck.

The area around Leatherneck is not known for attacks, but allowing chaos to reign outside the gate would make the base vulnerable to attack. This makes 1/23's mission critical, especially given that the Taliban are desperate to regain ground lost in last year's spring offensive.

When the unit first arrived in March, the line of trucks waiting to enter the gate was more like marbles fighting to pass through a

funnel. There were no lanes to direct the flow of traffic, and the squatters were choking the edges of the funnel.

"The Taliban is shifting its focus to what we call soft targets. They're looking for newsworthy events, not anything of tactical significance, but to capitalize on the publicity," said Zink, who noted that the enemy often has journalists lined up in advance of an attack so they can report the event as quickly as possible.

At least one car bomb has been stopped. A good-size truck bomb would make the news.

Until recently, each of the camps had its own security. But an agreement was signed in the first week of June to help sync communications and close some of the gaps in the outer edges of the huge base. The concern was the potential for complex attacks by the Taliban, with the use of multiple trucks.

Security is better, and the somewhat-slow mission of keeping it safe on the outside will remain.

Perez keeps his Marines' morale up by switching up their roles and reminding them to be careful what they wish for.

"We tell them, 'Hey, you might not be in a dangerous area, but you have all your arms and legs,'" Perez said. "You can do this and you can say you contributed. You did your part." □

their professional development as Marine officers," Villiard said.

The lieutenants serving as platoon commanders have been fully trained as infantry officers and even have the 0302 infantry officer military occupational specialty. When they get to flight school later this year, they will be given the 7599 MOS that all student naval aviators get. Their infantry officer role will become a secondary MOS, Villiard said.

The lieutenants should be commended for stepping up for deployment, said Lt. Col. Todd Zink, commander of 1/23.

"They're putting their service in the Marine Corps ahead of being a pilot," Zink said.

When he first arrived at the unit, Wood said his Marines would play the soundtrack from the movie "Top Gun" whenever he walked into a room. But on patrol, it's all business.

"Being an infantry officer gives me the opportunity to lead Marines in a capacity I won't have as an aviator," he said.

At least one of the lieutenants is enjoying being in the dirt with the grunts so much that he might stick with it.

"I'd lie if I said it hadn't crossed my mind," said 2nd Lt. Chris Norgren, who also said he would fly "anything the Marine Corps will let me."

Right now, he said he's focused on the deployment but will be looking more closely at his options when he returns home.

"At some levels, the coolest parts of being an infantry officer will go away," he said, predicting he'd be in line for a staff job if he stayed with the infantry.

While he's looking forward to going to flight school, he said he could still reconsider. □



THOMAS BROWN/STAFF

**First Lt. Jeremy Wood is serving in Afghanistan as a platoon commander with Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines. Wood decided to head downrange during his one-year countdown to attend flight school.**