



A LETTER FROM IRAQ

A 21-year-old infantry soldier currently deployed in Iraq as part of the Building Partner Capacity mission, recently shared with *Army News* what a typical day is like in Camp Taji.





Our days begin the night before with “battle prep”. This involves making sure we are properly prepared for the following day with our dress, equipment, ammo, rations, water (lots of it) and anything else we may need, all ready to go. Battle prep achieves two things: it shaves off valuable minutes from our morning routine which could be better spent sleeping, and allows us to avoid a telling-off from our Section Commander whose job, among other things, is to make sure that we’re all ready on time.

The early start is meant to help us and the “Jundi” (Iraqi soldiers) avoid the intense heat of the afternoon. That’s the theory anyway. Reveille is at 0500 hours but the day is already heating up so the benefit of the early start seems to vanish in the dust and haze. A cold shower would be a good way to start the day but the heat being what it is means the water in the compound’s reservoir tanks is always hot. Next is breakfast, which sees us at the mess forming a chow-line and busily procuring takeaway trays to sustain us through the day. Shortly after this, the convoy is “geared up” and ready to depart. We await the final confirmatory orders and the arrival of the interpreters before stepping out the gate.

We leave our compound and enter into the main part of Camp Taji, and before long we’re already at our destination. This is when our work begins. Training activities are conducted at several rifle ranges or one of the many small training areas. As Force Protection, my fellow infantrymen and I are first out of the vehicles so we can check the site for any possible dangers and then

secure it in order to hand over to the Kiwi training team we’ve been assigned to protect. The training areas are varied, but all require the same slow methodical approach to ensure the safety of the trainers and any other Coalition Force personnel who might be present. Once security is established, the training team starts to set up the training site. This may involve the odd standoff with packs of wild dogs or jackals that also call Camp Taji home.

It’s not long after that the Jundi arrive. It generally takes another half hour or so to conduct the morning parade before the training activities get underway. A few hours of decent training is generally all that can be accomplished until the temperature, which is hitting the low 40s by mid-morning, takes its toll on the Jundi. All this occurs whilst we, the guardian angels and sentinels, provide both close protection and overwatch for the New Zealand and Australian trainers operating at our site. This means long hot days in the sun, wearing body armour and uniform, observing and understanding the atmosphere of each training environment and maintaining constant vigilance, regardless of our levels of discomfort. If a threat presents itself we might only have an instant in which to either respond or diffuse it in order to ensure that our trainers are kept safe. At the end of the day, the Jundi do a mad sprint to get the much coveted seat on top of the transport truck. In that respect and many others, they are not unlike New Zealand soldiers. Around midday, we return to our secure compound within Taji Camp for a much needed shower and some lunch. The day is not over until we have completed our post-patrol debriefs, refuelled vehicles,

checked and re-stocked the wagons, and completed orders for the next day’s training.

Life in our compound, which our Task Group shares with American troops and various civilian contractors, is fairly bland with not much available in the way of entertainment. Like most Kiwis, we adapt and find other ways to stay occupied and social in our downtime. With the unforgiving heat, the early starts, and the long days, doing absolutely nothing is a luxury we don’t pass up when the opportunity presents itself. Watching movies, hitting the gym and talking with loved ones back home are some of the ways the boys unwind. Some people have taken to writing journals, to record their experiences or to aid in the future when spinning a war story to the lads over a beer back home. Luckily enough, both gyms here have decent air conditioning because if the boys couldn’t hit the weights as a release from the working day, life would be harder. Skype and Facebook work well enough on the supplied Internet to have an intermittent conversation but failing that, mail day is always the most anticipated day. Words from loved ones, Kiwi snacks or anything that reminds us of home is always welcome. After the sun sets and it cools down, the preparations for the next day begin and the cycle resumes. The next morning we are out the door again to do our part in protecting both our trainers and the Jundi by deterring those who may seek to do us harm and always being ready to act should the need arise. This is how my fellow soldiers and I contribute to the New Zealand and Australian training mission in Iraq.



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