

Confined to Afghan outpost by rocket attacks, unit finds ways to pass the time

By [Kent Harris](#), Stars and Stripes
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Spc. Corey McRae looks out a telescope to try to pinpoint a spot where he thought there might be some insurgent activity. Soldiers from 3rd Platoon man the towers around their small outpost around the clock.

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Spc. Jason Leehan, the platoon medic, improvises for his morning shave.

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ZEROK, Afghanistan — Zerok Combat Outpost, at the edge of a plateau about 7,700 feet above sea level, is surrounded by mountain ridges rising several hundred feet higher.

Enemies love to climb on the far side of those ridges and lob rockets and missiles toward the soldiers below.

It happened Saturday morning. And Saturday afternoon. And Sunday morning. And more than 100 times since 3rd Platoon, Company D, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment arrived in this area, in eastern Afghanistan, in May 2007. Most of the time, the projectiles don't come very close to hitting their targets. Soldiers hunker down in bunkers, while those in the watchtowers make sure no one attacks the perimeter.

Spcs. Russell Chappell and William Judd were wounded by shrapnel when a rocket hit their tower last August. They were eventually evacuated to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, but they're now back with their unit.

First Lt. Justin Thornburg, who has led the platoon for three months, says their assailants know they only have a few minutes to get off their shots before the Americans either return fire or call for air support. Their aim isn't accurate because they have to run for cover. If they stayed with the launchers, they could be bombed from above, but the soldiers aren't about to go chasing them up the mountains.

The platoon was supposed to rotate into the compound for about a month at a time with another platoon, but those soldiers have largely been needed elsewhere. So there was an 87-day stint in the winter and another 67-day stint. They've currently been on post for about 33 days.

Soldiers admit that the days can run together.

"I don't know what date it is," Spc. Corey McRae admits. "I don't know what day of the week it is."

Attacks serve to break up the monotony, according to Thornburg. "It's about 95, 96 percent boredom with about 5 percent excitement," he said.

He and Sgt. 1st Class Paul Makwakwa have to make sure the soldiers are combat ready. And that they don't dwell on the fact that they're essentially target practice for insurgents. Makwakwa, with 16 years in the Army, has 10 years on everyone else. Most are either noncommissioned officers or getting ready to join those ranks. All but a few have been promoted during the deployment.

Spc. John Martorella spots Spc. Duane Spencer while he lifts weights in the workout area. Weight-lifting is the main form of exercise for soldiers of 3rd Platoon, Company D, from the 173rd Airborne Brigade's 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment.

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Up for four soldiers can play video games at a time on a TV set in the platoon's MWR building.

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Several were members of the battalion when it last deployed to eastern Afghanistan in 2005-2006.

Spc. Robert Hool says he remembers driving up the mountainous road to Zerok from Orgun-E routinely. There wasn't a compound then, but soldiers stayed overnight in Zerok or in the village of Naka even further up into the mountains.

"A lot has changed," he said. "There's been a lot more contacts. Direct and indirect. It seems like this is where they all fled to in the time we left and came back."

A new school the battalion had opened at the end of its last rotation sits abandoned just outside the compound. The locals don't want to use it because it's too close to the constant attacks.

Much of the troops' leisure time is spent lifting weights in a workout area they built themselves. Sgt. Richard Donofrio, a 21-year-old from New Jersey, is probably the strongest guy on the compound. He is close to achieving a 500-pound dead lift.

Soldiers spend hours playing assorted shooter games on an Xbox in the Morale, Welfare and Recreation room, attached to the weight room. As many as four can play at one time. Most of the time, the person starting the game has to bang on it to get rid of the dust before it works.

"You've got to think of other things" besides the next attack, says Spc. Jason Leehan, the platoon medic, adding that if you don't, "it would drive you nuts."

Another morale booster comes in the form of Pfc. Jordan Davis, a cook rotated into the compound who puts together breakfast and dinner every day. Lunch comes in the form of MREs.

The latest morale booster is the feeling that it won't be long until they're back in Vicenza, Italy — and away from the rockets, the dust and the football field-sized complex they've called home for much of the last 13 months.

"It's been a long deployment," Hool says.