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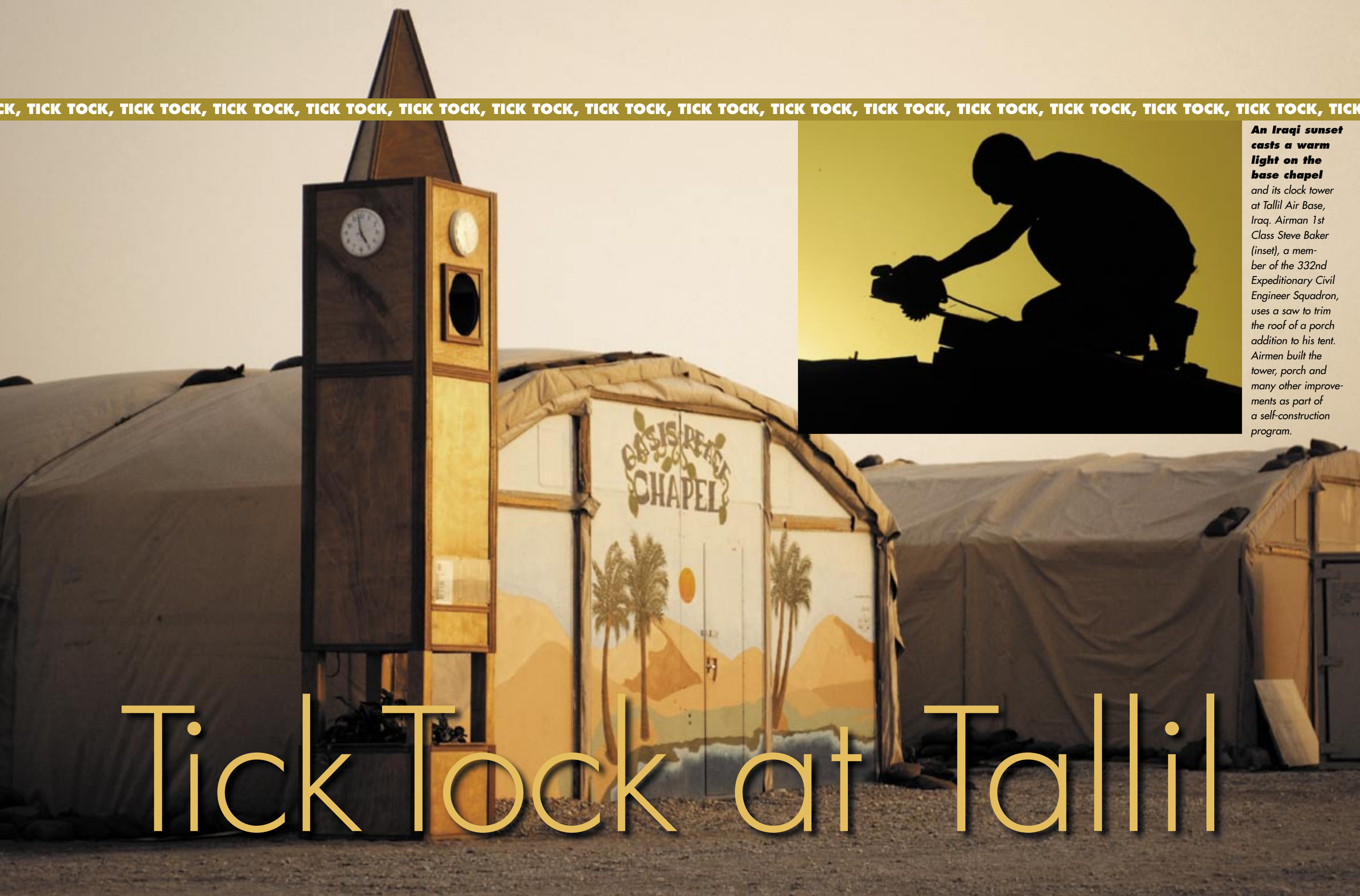

Tick Tock at Tallil

An Iraqi sunset casts a warm light on the base chapel *and its clock tower at Tallil Air Base, Iraq. Airman 1st Class Steve Baker (inset), a member of the 332nd Expeditionary Civil Engineer Squadron, uses a saw to trim the roof of a porch addition to his tent. Airmen built the tower, porch and many other improvements as part of a self-construction program.*

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Maj. Maurizio Mazza (from left), commander of the 332nd Expeditionary Communications Squadron, *starts each day leading his unit's physical training.* ■ *To avoid the heat of the day, local Iraqis pour cement at night. The cement pads were used as tent floors, eliminating flooded tents and underground mouse burrows.* ■ *A mobile crane lowers the first portable lavatory/shower facility, a long-awaited luxury for deployed folks.* ■ *Ryan Brown adjusts the multi-spectoral and multimillion dollar target gimble, the "eyes" and laser-pointing equipment of the Predator, a remotely piloted aircraft.* ■ *Fine sand and wind obscure the afternoon sun, creating long "golden" sunsets.*

As the first forward-deployed air base established in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, day-to-day life changes at Tallil Air Base, Iraq, like the shifting sands. Located 180 miles south of Baghdad, there's adrenaline-pumping excitement sandwiched between days of boredom. The war, although not as intense as it once was, brings with it a sense of purpose and pride.

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
photos by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

Pre-dawn: Before the desert sun generates heat levels capable of exploding an aerosol can inside a car where internal temperatures can skyrocket to 150 degrees, members of the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing are busier than a desert cobra at a mongoose convention.

Communications squadron members pump out push-ups, crank out crunches and rev up for a run, while getting in shape to meet the Air Force's new fitness requirements.

The keepers of the Predator, one of the Air Force's remotely piloted aircraft, once called an unmanned aerial vehicle, prep the aircraft for an early morning takeoff.

And Air Force food services workers — not contract employees — dole out scrambled eggs, bacon and hash browns to the more than 1,300 airmen deployed to Tallil Air Base, Iraq, plus an additional 100 soldiers and more than 500 coalition troops representing seven nations — most from England, the Netherlands and Italy. In early October, the services squadron hired the base's first contractors to wash dishes, bus tables and clean the facility. By hiring local national employees, the Air Force is helping the local Iraqi community recover from the ravages of war and Saddam Hussein's oppression.

Early morning activity: Tent city begins teeming with activity. Wearing flip-flops and with towels draped over their shoulders, Tallilians, as the troops are sometimes called, kick up fine, baby powder-like dust as they visit their state-of-the-art Harvest Falcon showers and restrooms designed specifically for deployed environments. Tent flaps whip open with the wind and provide scant privacy. On this day, the base populace also tries out its first "Cadillac," not a car, but a restroom with individual showers and privacy stalls with porcelain — not wood — toilets. It proves to be the biggest news of the day. Within months, the Cadillacs replaced all the remaining Harvest Falcon toilets.

Conditions have steadily improved since the base's inception shortly after Army tanks rolled through on their way to Baghdad. There wasn't much here then — eight miles of bombed buildings and an eroded runway. Meals, ready-to-eat, were standard fare until Tallil's security forces squadron, the first Air Force security forces unit in Iraq after the war, provided protection to convoys bringing fresh food. Since the fall of the Iraqi regime, supplies have been either flown in by a C-130 Hercules or driven in by convoys. Every day security forces members fear their convoys will be ambushed. Army Private 1st Class Jessica Lynch's convoy was attacked in the nearby city of Nasiriyah, less than 20 miles away.

Start of the duty day: Like the geckos that scurry around the desert, flight line activity picks up as the air grows warmer. C-130s are the aircraft of choice here. But many transient aircraft also find it a useful stop, as witnessed during the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Tallil's main objective during the war was to provide lethal combat air power and combat search and rescue support. The base surged to as many as 50 sorties daily during the height of the war.

Mid-morning: All supplies not flown in or driven to the base are purchased locally by the base's contracting office. With armed security in tow, Senior Airman Thad Ramsey, deployed from Andrews Air Force Base, Md., takes a fistfull of $100 bills and heads downtown to shop. Shop owners prefer $100 bills because they say they're easier to convert into their local currency.

"If they don't have it for sale, they'll offer to make it for a 'humble' price," Airman Ramsey said. "We want to stimulate the economy, so we really try to find local contractors."

Since his arrival two months earlier, he has spent $1.4 million, to include the Cadillacs. His office of six spends $1.5 million a month.

By now, security forces have changed shifts and prowl around in dusty Humvees. They look for the enemy and try to avoid "zwabas," the local name for dust devils. Dutch and Italian airmen work with Americans to provide internal airfield security at Tallil. Twenty-eight countries have forces committed to Iraq.

Lunchtime: With air conditioners straining to cool the desert heat, very few people dare to go outside. Around this time each day winds pick up and deposit fine sand into every nook and cranny available. Contact lenses get tucked away inside their cases, and goggles come out. The sand storms are like Rocky Mountain blizzards, cutting visibility to only a few feet in every direction. Only those on urgent business venture outside.

Lunch is also a good time to work out in the gym. The Tallil fitness center rivals many stateside fitness centers in terms of the number and quality of equipment. When Al Jaber Air Base in Kuwait closed in early 2003, Tallil received a lot of its exercise equipment.

Afternoon: Iraq experiences some of the highest temperatures in the world. According to Air Force weather experts, the Hussein regime built several dams that starved the local area of water. Add that to the fact that Tallil lies in a low river valley only a few feet above sea level and you've got a dust bowl that rivals the Oklahoma of old.

Just seeing a cloud is cause for excitement. However, when it rains, the ground floods easily, soaking everything left on tent floors.

Early evening: This is the time when most heat-stroke victims are brought into the emergency room. Maj. (Dr.) Kip Robinson, from Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, an intensive care unit doctor, remembers treating a soldier brought in on a stretcher. He had spent most of the day in a convoy wearing a flak vest underneath his Kevlar jacket.

"By the time he came into the emergency room, his internal temperature was 105.9 degrees. We iced him down, sprayed him with a fine mist and put him on a ventilator. Fortunately, he lived," Major Robinson said.

The most memorable patients, regrettably, are the children, according to Capt. Jim Smith, an intensive care nurse also from Wright Patterson.

Salah Raheem-Saed, a 7-year-old Iraqi boy, and his 17-year-old brother had picked up a land mine in a nearby village when it detonated. It killed his older brother instantly.

"This poor little guy lost his right hand, part of his left eye and damaged his stomach so much that he had no abdominal wall," Captain Smith said. "It was one of the worst cases I've seen."

Gauze and a plastic-like material were laid over the boy's stomach to keep the moisture in and infection out. Tonight, like most nights, the lights went out throughout the hospital, providing a challenge doctors constantly must overcome. Generators crank on, after about a minute, and life and death operations continue.

Evening: Now that the day's heat has passed, an Iraqi contractor puts his construction crews to work. They pour cement floors for tent city. Gone are the days of ground water flooding tents and rodents tunneling under the tents' floors. Again, more money is being pumped into the economy by using local contractors.

With the cooler air comes mosquitoes and sand flies, but not just any old sand fly. Some flies transmit a potentially deadly disease known as Leishmaniais. It's Tech. Sgt. Christopher Sekula's job to set traps at night and capture the nocturnal pests for testing. Working out of an improvised clinic, Sergeant Sekula, normally stationed at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, separates mosquitoes from sand flies, then takes DNA samples from the flies to see if they're infected. Before turning in for the night, Tallilians drape nets over their beds and treat the nets with insect repellant.

Capt. Keith Blout (from left), entomologist with the 332nd Expeditionary Medical Group, *separates sand flies from mosquitoes collected at Tallil. Samples are analyzed to identify the DNA of the parasite in sand flies that cause cutaneous Leishmaniais.* ■ *A Predator's day-long flight is over and it's marshaled to rest for the night.* ■ *On the flight deck of a C-17 Globemaster III, Majs. Colin Carr and Gregg Pointon from the 313th Airlift Squadron at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., fly through the night sky as lights streak by below.* ■ *Staff Sgt. Michael Roth, 332nd Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron, launches the Desert Hawk aircraft, a remotely piloted aircraft used to look over the horizon for terrorist activities.*

Just as pesky to the enemy is the Predator, which may or may not return at night. Since it can fly for 20 hours nonstop, it's difficult to determine when it will land. Like mosquitoes caught in a tent at night, the MQ/RQ-1 Predator buzzes quietly over the heads of the enemy or suspected terrorists as an aerial observer. Its stinger is its Hellfire missiles that enable it to strike with deadly force.

Predator pilot Maj. Phil Kase from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., said his primary job is to launch and land the aircraft. That's it. The rest of the mission is flown by 15th Reconnaissance Squadron pilots stationed at Nellis, halfway around the world. Local maintainers and communications experts take care of the aircraft's daily needs at Tallil.

Midnight: Like Las Vegas, Tallil is a base that never sleeps — 24/7/365. Except this desert landscape is hotter, windier and much more dangerous. Even though life gets better by the day, it's still a struggle. After all, they live and work in a war zone. ✪

The 'Zig' is a must see

If it's ancient ruins you want to see, 'U' 'R' in the right place. Ur, Iraq's most well-known archeological site, is said to be the place of the world's earliest city.

In the early decades of the 20th century, excavations uncovered a royal cemetery in which members of the ruling elite were buried with their servants and beautifully-made possessions.

Although it was deserted long ago, experts say Ur was built between 3500 and 4000 B.C. Identified as the birthplace of the biblical patriarch Abraham, Ur's also known for the best-preserved ziggurat, or temple tower, in Iraq.

Airmen call the temple the "Zig." It's located within the base's perimeter and is a must see for those deployed to Tallil Air Base, Iraq.

There are many tours to the Zig, so it's quite easy to visit. Once there, airmen can purchase merchandise from local vendors to remember their visit.

—Tech. Sgt. Orville Desjarais Jr.