



Snowflakes *in the* Desert

*Two bases,
as different as
night and day,
work toward
the same goal*

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

It's been a year since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom on March 19, 2003 [See "The First Shot," July 2003]. The men and women who played a part in the war to liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein's regime are still going strong, and in that time have flown more than 82,000 sorties and dropped more than 33,600 munitions.

Even though major combat operations are over, the mission isn't yet complete. Coalition forces continue to help Iraqis regain and rebuild their nation. And the Air Force and its people are still deployed to the region to help accomplish that goal.

An Air National Guard F-16C Fighting Falcon from the 192nd Fighter Wing, Richmond International Airport, Va., refuels over the Tigris River, near Baghdad, Iraq. The multi-role fighter patrols the skies, ready to provide close air support and eyes from above. The aircraft, mounted with missiles and bombs, uses external fuel tanks to lengthen the time pilots can provide support for ground troops.

The 379th and 380th Air Expeditionary Wings are like most other desert bases. Their locations are not releasable, man and machine battle 120-degree heat, and the lines between off duty and on duty oftentimes blur.

What differs are the ways people deployed to these bases perform their duties, solve problems and accomplish the mission. A mission that has evolved from Operation Southern Watch to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. While there aren't as many aircraft or people at these locations when compared to others in the region, the tempo remains high.

Although fighter aircraft aren't raining bombs on the enemy as they did during the height of Operation Iraqi Freedom, they still have their work cut out for them. In fact, the mission has become more fluid, fighting an unseen enemy hiding among the civilian population.

On the go

In his first desert deployment, Airman 1st Class Jessie Holladay, from Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, said he volunteered for desert duty at the 379th because of a sense of commitment.

"I feel good about helping out with what we know is right," he said. "My parents are proud of me, especially my grandfather, who spent 20 years in the Air Force."

Airman Holladay, a member of the munitions squadron, knew he'd be living in a tent and roughing it in the barely-tolerable desert climate. At least he'd get a break from England's gloomy weather. What he didn't expect to see was a Baskin Robbins and Pizza Hut in the center of tent city. "It was a nice surprise," he said.

But those are just two establishments at the Wagon



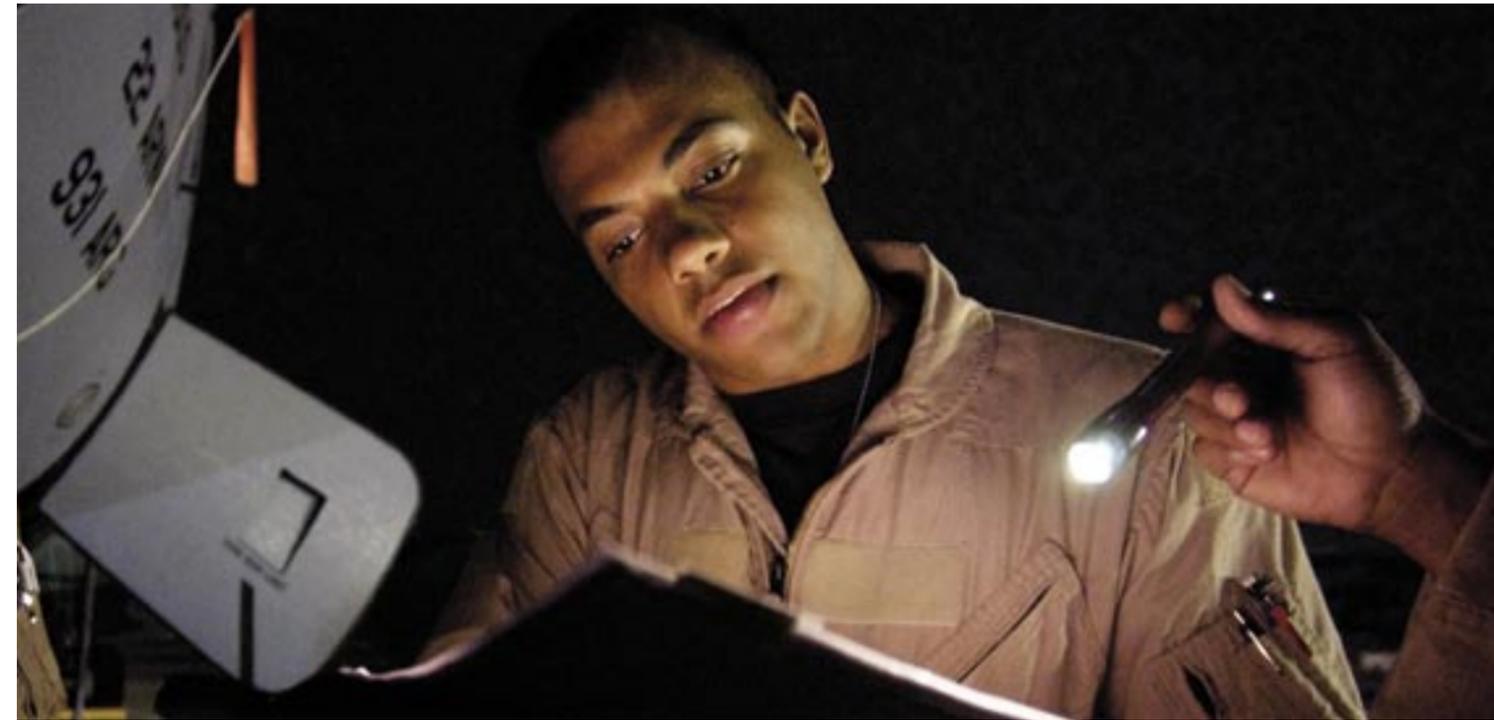
Wheel, where people meet to visit, eat ice cream and enjoy a few slices of pizza. Centrally located, the Wagon Wheel encompasses a Baskin Robbins, Pizza Hut Express, fitness center, game tents and media center. There's always something happening there, whether it's karaoke contests, football games projected on a big screen, bingo, movie nights or disc jockey entertainment.

But the main reason people are at the 379th is the mission. Since Airman Holladay's "office" is the wide open desert, he and the other 100 members of his unit must endure desert heat. Outside their shelter, knee-high weedy bushes provide the only shade.

Airman Holladay is part of the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, a unit in transition. Born a dominant fighter base during Operation Iraqi Freedom, it has grown into a multi-purpose wing with a collection of fighter, airlift, refueling, and command and control aircraft.

Home to the largest concentration of coalition airpower in history, the wing's 5,000 residents not only help run the base, but are home to the Combined Air Operations Center, the nerve center for aerial missions for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom and Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, and the Regional Air Movement Control Center headquarters that controls air traffic in Afghanistan and Iraq.

When one thinks of the desert, the mind conjures



up thermometer-bursting heat. Rarely does one think of humidity, but that's not the case at the 379th. Heat and humidity combine to make it a truly challenging climate. Stored in tanks beneath the baking desert sun, even the toilet water emanates heat. Sweat combines with dust to create a sort of mud, so people are urged to bring plenty of workout clothes if they plan to visit the gym regularly.

The desert here has a distinct odor, like a sandy beach without a lake. Sniff a dust bunny. It smells like that. A hint of canvas can also be detected because nearly everyone, like the nomads of the desert thousands of years before them, lives in tents. Wooden floors keep the sand fleas off tent residents, but sand still finds its way onto floors, in the bedding and all over clothes.

Since water is as good as gold, washing off that sand has to be done quickly. By regulation, people are only allowed combat showers: 30 seconds to wet down; no lather-up limit; and 2 minutes, 30 seconds to rinse.

But improvement is always part of the equation, and people deployed to the 379th will soon live

Munitions specialists deployed to the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing

(left) load 20 mm rounds for F-15 and F-16 aircraft. Clockwise from bottom left are Airman 1st Class Brian Schorr, Master Sgt. Sidney Cooper, Tech. Sgt. David Phillips, Airman 1st Class Jessica Wellington, Senior Airman James Sparks and Senior Airman Jamie Kendall. Capt. Otis Hooper (above), a pilot deployed to the 908th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron from McConnell Air Force Base, Kan., reviews a KC-135R Stratotanker maintenance log book before a pre-dawn mission over Baghdad. Airman 1st Class Joshua Reed (below), also from McConnell, uses a squirt gun to spray water onto an air conditioning unit's radiator to keep it from overheating. At times, temperatures can reach 120 degrees, and the unique tactic keeps the unit from getting too hot while sitting on the ramp.



379th Air Expeditionary Wing stats

■ **Personnel:** About 5,000 active duty military members, Reserve and Air National Guard

■ **Aircraft assigned:** F-15E Strike Eagles, F-16C/CJ Fighting Falcons, KC-135R Stratotankers, C-17 Globemaster IIIs, C-130H and C-130E Hercules, C-21s, RC-135V/W Rivet Joints, E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar Systems, British GR-4 Tornados and Australian C-130s.

■ **Mission:** Provide combat air power through the area of responsibility. The wing also works closely with other coalition forces and aircraft to accomplish its mission. The base is also home to the combined air operations center.

380th Air Expeditionary Wing stats

■ **Personnel:** About 1,200 active duty military members, Reserve and Air National Guard

■ **Aircraft assigned:** KC-135R Stratotankers, KC-10A Extenders and U-2 Dragon Ladies

■ **Mission:** Air refueling and reconnaissance

and work in nicer facilities when “Coalition City” is completed. The upgrade will see tents replaced with air conditioned trailers.

What the 379th isn't stingy with is its food. A full salad bar and fresh bread greets diners daily, and what members can't find on base, they may buy outside the gates. People are allowed one morale trip a week, which gives them a chance to visit a westernized nation, complete with malls, American restaurant chains and tourist sites.

Time to say hello

Airmen at the 380th are focused on tackling many challenges that they didn't have time to solve during the peak of combat operations.

Trying to figure out how to stop air conditioning units on the tarmac from overheating, members of the 380th aerospace ground equipment flight use squirt

guns to spray water onto radiators to keep the units cool, which in turn keeps the aircraft cool while parked on a 120-degree ramp.

While the 379th and 380th have the same challenges when it comes to beating the heat, they're as different as Mayberry and Boston, with the 380th being Mayberry.

At the 379th, people are friendly, but the base is so large there are lots of strangers among them. At the 380th, population about 1,200, everybody says hello to one another. They know when there are strangers in their midst, and they aren't afraid to play hard and work even harder. It's a small base, which allows conveniences not found at most desert locations, like using as much water as they want and eating off porcelain plates using real silverware.

The 380th has been in existence for many years, as evidenced by its established facilities, including three swimming pools, a gym and mini-base exchange. But unlike the 379th, there are far fewer people competing to use these facilities.

While the 379th's mission is expansive, the 380th's is simple — perform reconnaissance and refueling support for Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

For Lt. Col. Mike Winters, the 908th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron commander, the 380th is a second home. He's been deployed there five times. The base has a KC-10 history that changed to KC-135s in late 2003. What's unique is that KC-135 Stratotankers and KC-10 Extenders combined forces, which means Winters commands two types of air refuelers.

During a mission brief in October 2003, he told his crews to think about the troops and the Iraqi people. He said air refuelers allow fighter aircraft to linger over targets longer.

“Be flexible,” he told his aircrews. “That may mean providing more air refueling while fighters look for targets, which sometimes takes more time.”

Winters said their mission is extremely focused on close air support. “Take as much gas as you can carry,” he advised pilots.



Airman 1st Class Yvonne Tijerina (left), from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., and Airman 1st Class Georgia Brown, from Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, prepare for an onslaught of water in one of the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing's pools. Since the 380th is a relatively small base, there are fewer people vying for poolside space.



To reduce the potential for heat stress while aircrews sit in aircraft parked on the tarmac in 120-degree heat, the 380th aircraft ground equipment section provides air to cool the aircraft.

“I'm from Tucson, Ariz., and it's hot in the hangar,” said Master Sgt. Brett Francis, from Davis Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz. “It gets to around 150 degrees inside our hangar. The air conditioning carts get so hot we have to spray radiators with water guns to drop the temperature.”

Their equipment generated so much heat their gear cases were burning up, causing hot oil to boil out. Their fix was a preventive maintenance plan that had them routinely changing gear cases. This allowed them to help meet their most important mission requirement — getting the U-2 Dragon Lady in the air.

For the maintenance troops, the U-2 is a showstopper. It takes five air conditioning units to get the U-2 launched. It's a tough job, but a challenge Senior Airman Joseph Binaco loves to conquer every day. He, too, volunteered to serve in the desert, his third such assignment during the six and a half years he's been in the Air Force.

Staff Sgt. Anthony Anderson (right), from Travis Air Force Base, Calif., checks the gages of an oxygen servicing cart, while Tech. Sgt. William McLeod, from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., monitors vented liquid oxygen. Oxygen remains in a liquid form at temperatures more than 297 degrees below zero. At ambient temperatures the oxygen boils and releases breathable oxygen, normally used in pressurized aircraft.

Airman Binaco, an aerospace ground equipment journeyman from McGuire Air Force Base, N.J., said the deployment means a lot to him and his family.

“I volunteered to do my duty to help serve. We were sent here for a reason. It was urgent and important. My family and friends are extremely proud of me,” he said.

Two bases, one feeling

Like snowflakes, the 379th and 380th are two very different bases with two distinct missions, but they have one thing in common — their people. Their residents are quick to point out their hardships, but will immediately follow up by saying how proud they are to be there, serving their country. ☪