

The “Suck” Factor – Creature Comforts at the Pointy End of the Stick

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I was a willing participant in both the war in Vietnam and in Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Having served my 27-year long, Army career in units at the pointy end of the stick, I have arrived at the conclusion that in both of these wars there were the “haves” and the “have nots...this is where the “Suck” factor comes into the equation,” specifically as it applies to creature comforts for American soldiers at the pointy end of the stick!

This chronicle is in response to a request by our esteemed web host, Earl Powers. Earl requested I write this after he discovered I had stayed on active duty for another 25+ years after Vietnam, and had the distinct opportunity to participate in Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm. His request of me was to compare the “Suck” factor (my words) of life at the pointy end of the stick during Vietnam, and in the desert, which was the environment for Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm.

Most Charlie Tigers in Vietnam had very little creature comfort, except whatever we humped in our rucks, or what arrived by helicopter during our “Big Resupply.” Most of us were exposed to the full force of the elements, diseases, leeches, sun, monsoon rains, heat, and cold on a 24/7 basis and felt extremely fortunate if we had an air mattress that held air all night, even if you only got to sleep on it for an abbreviated part of the night.

Conversely, most REMFs in Vietnam were living pretty well; noshing on barbecued steaks and drinking cold beer, with a brand name most of us would recognize. REMFs did not cloud their thoughts about who should get a “Chuckles candy,” the Marlboros, or the writing stationery, from the next Sundry Pack (SP).

....that said, most of you who are taking the time to read this, already knew all about that....so on to the Gulf War.....

With my experiences as a Charlie Tiger in Vietnam as a backdrop, I found myself, and a few hundred thousand of my closest friends, unceremoniously deposited in the desert in Saudi Arabia in late 1990. We were deployed in a line of combat outposts running generally parallel to the Kuwaiti-Saudi Arabian border preparing to face off with Saddam Hussein, with what was then the fourth largest Army in the world, and his totally B... S... "Line of Death" and what Saddam had advertised as "The Mother of all Battles"....*not sure what would motivate Saddam to want to talk about his Mother....What's up with that?*

We trained long and hard in the desert, getting acclimated to the arid environment, task organizing for combat, receiving equipment being rushed to us to add additional protection and/or capabilities to our weapons platforms, performing maintenance on everything that didn't breathe (*no one wanted to miss being a part of the attack because their equipment was inoperative*), and conducted training....and training....and even more training....followed by an exhausting series of complex rehearsals....and....well, you get the picture.

The orders directing us to deploy to the Central Command (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR) (encompasses most of Southwest Asia (SWA) read "**for the duration**," so we knew intuitively that the road home to our families and loved ones, home cooking, cold beer, and other creature comforts that involve exchanging body fluids with members of the opposite sex, ran directly through Kuwait, through Iraq, (if so ordered), and unequivocally, through Saddam's military, arrayed in a defensive posture to our front.

By January 1991, mental fatigue was beginning to set in after almost four months of extensive training exercises and highly-orchestrated rehearsals that had been ongoing nonstop since the division began its deployment, as diplomats from several nations tried to negotiate an agreement with Iraqi politicians that would preclude the need to close with, kill, capture, or destroy Saddam's forces by means of close combat, fire, and maneuver. After those words, I can't resist.....Hooah!

Those of us on the pointy end of the stick were collectively very anxious to get on with it. That said, it is written somewhere that one should be careful what they ask for. When the Brigade Commander called me on the secure net the night of 17 January 1991 (this is the night the air campaign was initiated against Iraq), and said "Go to MOPP-4 (which is donning chemical protective over garments, rubber boots, protective mask and hood, rubber gloves and liners), and have your unit begin taking the PB (pyridostigmine bromide) pills" (these pills were intended to blunt and/or counter the effects of exposure to nerve agents).....it would be accurate to say the collective pucker factor went way up. At this juncture, I was operating on the assumption the Division, Corps, and Theater Chemical staffs knew what they were talking about, and that the chain of command understood the implications this order may have on the soldier's psyche.

Between 17 Jan and 24 Feb., when we ultimately launched the ground attack through the breeches in the earthen berm that separates Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the unequivocal, highly coveted, #1 best seller was any publication about chemical defense, using and caring for MOPP gear, and other related topics. Soldiers, who might not be inclined to give their full and undivided attention to training back in the US, suddenly became apt/rabid scholars about the art and science of chemical defense. If you are familiar with the effects of nerve agents on the human body, this was scary stuff to be contemplated by soldiers about to engage in battle with a desperate, yet outwardly resolute, enemy.

Okay, okay, back to the "Suck" factor.....very early in this deployment I reached the conclusion that the situation regarding creature comforts for soldiers at the pointy end of the stick had not really changed since Vietnam, and that technological advances had little, or no affect, on the truism that in every war there are the "*haves*" and the "*have nots*." Desert Shield/Desert Storm were certainly not exceptions. If you found yourself on the pointy end of the stick in the way the Charlie Tigers were in Vietnam, and as many of us were in the Gulf War, you had very little in the way of creature comfort. Did I mention that most Gulf War REMFs were living well...back in REMF-town they were living in buildings, had access to showers, were enjoying air conditioning, had a means to get uniforms washed, enjoyed cooked food, and on, and on....go figure!

It was very disquieting whenever any REMFs came into my area, or if any of my soldiers were required to travel to REMF-town for whatever reason. Inevitably departure of REMFs from my area, or the return of a soldier from a visit to REMF-town, would be the catalyst for a litany of queries and venting from soldiers that usually started with "*Why can't we get (fill in the blank), the REMFs have it?*"...after which, these dedicated, motivated, highly skilled, ballsy, and highly deserving soldiers would trudge back to their positions to sit/sleep/eat/train in the dirt.....a dirt that produced an almost talcum-like dust when tread upon, or driven upon, that worked its' way into every (emphasis intended) orifice of your body, and into

every place, on every piece of equipment....and these extraordinary Warriors would again embrace the "Suck," like so many extraordinary soldiers in the Charlie Tigers in Vietnam had done before them.

The ensuing matrix is intended to provide a catalyst for comparing and contrasting the "Suck" factor (some with tongue firmly in cheek) between the Charlie Tiger paradigm in Vietnam, and life at the pointy end of the stick during Desert Shield/ Desert Storm. The factors, and associated information addressed in this matrix are just my random thoughts, opinions, and some light-hearted attempts at humor, and are presented in no particular order. The factors I selected are by no means a panacea, but hopefully address the ones most near and dear to the hearts of Charlie Tigers. A priori I offer my apologies to any REMFs who read this. As I look in retrospect at the factors I chose, the choice of some seems more than a little weird, that said.... hope you enjoy the musings of this old Grunt!

Factor	Charlie Tiger- VN	REMF-VN	Field Soldier- SWA	REMF - SWA	Remarks
Uniforms	Matched the jungle, made by lowest bidder, only the set you had on that time.	Tailored, starched, freshly pressed, embroidered nametags, all patches, probably perfumed	Matched the dirt, made by lowest bidder. Not enough desert camo to wear everyday, so the Division would specify the uniform of the day, either a "green" day, or "brown" day	Tailored, starched, freshly pressed, embroidered nametags, all patches, probably perfumed	Many of us wore our green camo uniforms for most of the war, only the REMFs got lots of the desert camo uniforms. We did receive a set to wear home, including the new desert boots. WTF?
Vermin	Leeches, assorted insects, and snakes	Lived in REMF-Town, but had to deal with other REMFs	Sand Fleas, REMFs	Lived in REMF-Town, but had to deal with other REMFs and take crap from guys like me.	...or was it really just the politicians and those Americans unwilling to support the troops, who vented their anger over unpopular political decisions on soldiers returning from Vietnam?
Alcohol	2 beers, off brand, at "Big Resupply"	All they wanted	None, zilch, zero	None...I guess	Drank my first beer (a Guinness Stout) after 8 1/2 months of zero alcohol in Shannon, Ireland. On a MAC flight back to the US at 5 AM...hit me like a ball peen hammer.
Food	C-Rations, LRRP rations, "Hot As" with the "Big Resupply".... sometimes....and Pound Cake and Peaches....Yeah Baby!	Kitchen cooked, 3 hots...they lived in REMF-Town	MREs = Meals Ready to Excrete, later we had Tray-Rations (or T-Rats), and occasionally Wolf Burgers - 1/4 inch thick meat, 4 inch thick bun, but you never complain about the only burgers in town	Kitchen cooked, 3 hots...yeah Baby, life is good in REMF-Town!	We also had MOREs (Meals Operational Ready to Eat) in SWA, consisting of a warm soda, bubble-pack type pudding, microwaveable bowl of red s... and macaroni (labeled "Lunch Bucket" (might have been good if we had microwaves) No matter what the label read, it was Red S... and Macaroni.

Women (does not include the "touching" kind, so stop with the flashbacks)	Peasants in black PJs with a mouth full of Betelnut	In the Vill....?	Covered head to toe in black....some glimpses of face, hands, and feet indicate covering up was a good thing	Covered head to toe in black, female soldiers	Spoken to me by one of my soldiers in SWA about a Saudi woman we observed..."Damn, Sir, did you see the eyes on that one?"
Sundry Packs	Candy, Cigs, Cigars, toiletries, writing stationary, etc.	Whatever they wanted...PX nearby, virtually awash in anything they wanted in REMF-Town	Sun screen, cheap sunglasses, and Red Hots....yes, Red Hots...WTF?	Whatever they wanted...PX nearby, virtually awash in anything they wanted in REMF-Town	Red Hots in SWA...are you serious? What were they thinking?
Laundry	Clean, ill-fitting, nondescript clothes exchanged during the "Big Resupply"	Mamasan in the Vill, or through an Army Laundry and Bath Unit...after all, they were in REMF-Town	Washed clothes in a plastic bucket with bar soap, exchange sweat and grime for dust, no service available....this really sucked	Civilian laundry...I guess, after all they lived in REMF-Town	They deposited 550,000 of us in the desert and said "Now you figure out how to get your clothes washed." WTF?
Water	Too much during Monsoon, not enough up in the mountains	All they wanted, including for showers	Desalinated from the Persian Gulf, mostly in plastic bottles - made bottle babies out of us!	All they wanted. Preordained to be bottle babies!	As sang by the 1980s rock band, Cinderella, "You don't know what you got till it's gone!"
Diseases	Malaria, Immersion foot, Agent Orange and all the ugly things many of our brothers are still suffering from.	They lived in REMF-Town...are you kidding, maybe VD from trips to the Vill	Gulf War Syndrome and all that entails, Kidney stones, Rhinitis	They lived in REMF-Town....that says it all	Lots of our Brothers, from all conflicts, are hurting, and not always getting the support and care they need...reach out and help somebody!
Indirect Fire	Mortars, Rockets, and some artillery, if near the DMZ	Mortars, Rockets, and Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!	SCUDs, the Iraqis were too scared to shoot much else... shoot anything and the coalition air forces will turn you into cinders	SCUDs, the Iraqis were too scared to shoot much else... shoot anything and the coalition air forces will turn you into cinders	The SOF, Coalition Air Forces, and Patriot Batteries kept lots of this off of us...hats off to those guys

Chemicals	CS gas if you inadvertently popped one of our own, on those rare occasions we actually carried CS	They lived in REMF-Town...are you kidding	Threat of Germ, Chemical and Biological agents... we poisoned many of ourselves by torching the munitions dump at Kamisiyah, and by using Depleted Uranium (DU) tank rounds	Threat of Germ, Chemical and Biological agents	Maybe the DU rounds weren't all that good for our health, but they were devastating on the health of any Iraqis Tankers who had not abandoned their Tanks. Quote from Republican Guard Brigade Commander "I never knew the Americans were in the area until my Tank blew up" Pretty much says it all.
Combat Gear	M-16A1, M79, 100 pounds of lightweight gear weighs 100 pounds	Are you kidding... they're REMFs, portable AM/FM radio, 45 cal pistol in plastic bag (never fired in anger or self defense), "Killer" knife (never used)	M-16A2, M203, 100 pounds of lightweight gear still weighs 100 pounds	Are you kidding... they're REMFs...Sony Discman, 9 MM pistol in plastic bag (never fired), credit cards, sandals, breath mints, fanny pack, make-up kit	You just gotta show those REMFs some love!!!...in the rear, with the gear!
Telephone Access	MARS station... infrequent opportunity to use, typically a long wait, requirement to teach your loved one to say "Over" after they finished speaking. Conversation not private so no pillow talk.	All they wanted...I guess...life is good in REMF-Town	Phone banks provided by entrepreneurs buying satellite time and reselling to soldiers, located all over...so pretty much all you wanted until we went through the breeches in the berm. Pricey but definitely worth it!	Phone banks provided by entrepreneurs buying satellite time and reselling to soldiers, located all over... so all you wanted. Pricey, but worth it!	Ready access to phones in SWA meant that bad news traveled very quickly back to the US, and not always accurate info. Often embellished, as soldiers began prepping the home front for their triumphant return and the great fantasy f... that is due all Warriors returning from War.
Calls to Prayer, Religious Affairs	Periodic visits by Chaplain...good for the soul and you could get a mirror, or a cross to wear, non-demonitional services	Routine access to the Chaplains, and a chapel.	Call to prayer from the Mosques, 5 times a day, from loud speakers, all over SWA. Chaplains did not wear religious symbols so as to not offend Islam.	5 times a day, from loud speakers, all over SWA. Female soldiers, especially truck drivers, created quite a stir.	A female driving and not covered in black from head to toe...a "twofer"...the Saudi religious police (Mutaween) were having mega-heart palpitations. <i>You go girls!!!</i>
Local Indigent Attire	Black PJs, conical hats, flip flops	Black PJs, conical hats, flip flops	Black Abayas, covered head to toe for the females, white Thobes, Gutras, and open-toed sandals for the males	Black Abayas, covered head to toe for the females, white Thobes, Gutras, and open-toed sandals for the males	what's with all the black clothing?...and in the words of Forrest Gump "That's all I have to say about that."

Third Country National (TCNs)	Performers in cheesy floor shows during unit stand downs, worked in the PX in REMF-Town.	Performers in cheesy floor shows during unit stand downs, worked the PX in REMF-Town.	Performed the menial work throughout SWA. Much of the logistics for the war effort carried on their backs. Kudos to the Philippines	Performed the menial work throughout SWA. Much of the logistics for the war effort carried on their backs. Kudos to the Philippines	A group of unsung heroes were the many TCNs who drove the trucks, who did the heavy lifting, who brought the supplies, and so on, during the Gulf War.
Mail	Letter mail with "Small Resupply," letter and package mail with "Big Resupply."	Got mail whenever it arrived...I guess	Mail almost everyday until we went through the breach, then almost never, until fighting over	Got mail whenever it arrived...I guess, life is good in REMF-Town	Did almost every mail delivery in Vietnam contain at least one "Dear John" or did it just seem that way?
Media Coverage	Spotty, generally unfavorable, preordained to seek out the worst examples, played to the vocal dissenters in the USA. First war to bring live television coverage of the war to the dinner table of Mr. and Mrs. America	Spotty, generally unfavorable, preordained to seek out the worst examples, played to the vocal dissenters in the USA. First war to bring live television coverage of the war to the dinner table of Mr. and Mrs. America	Embedded reporters (whiny as hell), America glued to the TV for days on end. Coverage was generally favorable	Embedded news reporters (some whiny as hell), America (and the REMFs) glued to the TV for days on end. Coverage was generally favorable.	The bad guys in Iraq validated they used CNN as a key source of military intelligence....two thoughts...1) don't believe everything you see and hear on TV, and 2) "Loose lips sink ships."
Local Food	Rice, bananas, pineapples, water buffalo, Nuc mam...yeah Baby!	REMF-Town has a Mess hall...kitchen cooking, BBQ steaks, Pablum and Jell-O	Kabsa, (primarily Saffron rice and either Goat, Camel, or Mutton, eaten from communal trays with hands only) Pepsi appears to be the national drink, and Shawarma (pita bread, yogurt, dill pickle, shredded chicken or goat)	REMF-Towns have Mess halls... kitchen cooking Baby!, mystery meat, canned veggies, also Pablum and Jell-O	Never saw any food preparers or servers in SWA bother to wash their hands. Ugggh!

Adversaries	Clever, gutsy, well-trained, motivated. Masters of improvisation and at using the terrain and everything else that existed in nature.	Other REMFs, cooked food not hot enough, out of "smell good" at the PX, AC not working, room mate farted, etc.	Generally poorly trained (except the Republican Guards), forced conscripts, unprepared for the onslaught that was originally intended to be unleashed against the Warsaw Pact nations, they were preordained/ anxious to surrender, and they did so in droves.	Other REMFs, cooked food not hot enough, out of "smell good" at the PX, AC not working, room mate farted, etc.	Sir Charles still remains the prototype adversary for insurgent warfare, and they didn't throw their shoes at our President!
Allies	South Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines	Other REMFs, Hooch girls	Global coalition of the willing, including strange bedfellows like Syria, Egypt, Argentina, and Niger	Other REMFs	Watching Egyptian trucks hauling US M-1 tanks, and Syrian T-72 Russian-made tanks being transported on US trucks was most interesting
Candy	Chuckles, Juji fruits, Wrigley's Chiclets, tropical Hershey bars	Whatever they wanted...PX was nearby in REMF-Town	Red Hots in the SP, Skittles and Tootsie Rolls in the rations...are you kidding me!	Whatever they wanted...PX was nearby in REMF-Town	Real men don't eat Skittles! Ever!
Dogs	Announced the arrival of Charlie Tigers at Hooch areas, and signaled the departure of the bad guys from the same Hooch area	Pets, well fed, pampered pets	Abandoned, mongrels, all over the place, kept at combat outposts to detect chemical agents in the air (they drop dead, put on your mask), over fed, well loved	Pets, well fed, pampered... REMF quote "I wanna take my doggie home with me!"	Coincidence - Miners (the foundation of the 196th), carried Canaries into the mines to monitor for poisonous gas in the mine. Dogs were used in a similar manner in SWA...they were well fed, very loved, and well cared for...none died.
Towels and Rags	Sweat towel, essential to a Grunt	They lived in REMF-Town...Duh!	Doo Rags...keeps the big pieces out of your hair, probably adopted from bikers and/or the NFL	They lived in REMF-Town...'nuf said!	...and on the heads of the indigent population.
Climate	Hot, humid, lots of rain, potential Hypothermic conditions after sun went behind mountains	Are you kidding... they lived in REMF-Town	Extreme heat, very dusty, mega-rain in the month of Jan 1991 = mega mess, mega sludge	Not an issue... REMFs lived in REMF-Town	Why can't we ever have a war somewhere with a pleasant climate, how about the French Riviera? I'm pretty sure Pierre' wouldn't mind.

Taking a dump	Anywhere outside of the perimeter, clearly marked by wads of used TP	Not an issue... REMFs lived in REMF-Town...but someone had to light the Diesel on fire to burn the s... (can you say TCNs?)	In plywood enclosures (Islamic culture) spray painted by someone afflicted with St. Vidas Dance with the words "S..." or "P..." (P... means the toilet seats had been removed). Once the ground attack began, all bets were off	In plywood enclosures (Islamic culture) carefully stenciled with the words "Male" or "Female."and of course, REMF-Town had actual toilets.	Charlie could probably triangulate the exact location of our perimeter using the s... piles as reference points. I hope he at least stepped in it! In SWA, happiness was a SST (S... Sucking Truck) to clean out the toilets), and of course, driven by a TCN
Air Quality	Lots of fresh air, plant photosynthesis process working overtime, smell of animal feces, burning C4, and decaying vegetation in the air	Not really an issue...REMFs lived in REMF-Town, but smell of burning human s... mixed with Diesel fuel permeated the air, maybe roommate farted	Plant photosynthesis process not working so well....lack of vegetation. Smell of diesel exhaust permeated the air, very dusty.	Maybe too smoky in REMF-Town from smoking candied-tobacco in Shisha pipes (similar to a Hookah), maybe their roommate farted...again!	There is nothing quite like the wonderful aromas of home sweet home!!
Returning Home	Returned as individuals instead of by unit, welcomed primarily by family and close friends, no public displays of thanks by the masses, civic organizations, etc. generally not honored	Returned as individuals instead of by unit, welcomed primarily by family and close friends, no public displays of thanks by the masses, civic organizations, etc. generally not honored. Told everybody they were field soldiers, not REMFs	Returned as units, or in large parts of units. US population showed overwhelming support of the war and the soldiers. Parades, public speaking engagements, celebrations, incredible pride for the nation	Returned as units, or in large parts of units. US population showed overwhelming support of the war and the soldiers. Parades, public speaking engagements, celebrations, incredible pride for the nation. Told everybody they were field soldiers, not REMFs	The reaction by the citizens of the US upon our return from SWA was a total overreaction, driven by the feelings of guilt of how soldiers returning from Vietnam were generally treated. I wish it could have been more balanced, so all could have enjoyed that incredible experience of having our great nation say "Thank you."