

For troops in Kandahar, comfort is an Outback meal delivered on a C-17. But for those traveling to prepare the meal, it's a nerve-wracking mission. The rumor started about a month ago. It spread through the 101st Airborne Division in Afghanistan like a dust storm in Kandahar. Nobody really believed it, because it sounded too good to be true. The Outback Steakhouse people were coming. And they were bringing food.

Members of the 101st Airborne, like all of the troops in Afghanistan, have been eating meals such as T-rations, food that is sealed in large tin containers. The entire container has to be boiled to heat the food. Powdered eggs the color of sand are a common T-ration breakfast entrée. The possibility of ribeye steaks, grilled shrimp and, best of all, a deep-fried Bloomin' Onion, had them understandably excited.

About 3 a.m. on June 18, a C-17 landed at the Kandahar Airport. On board were 15 men and women in white Outback T-shirts. And a giant cooler. It contained 6,700 steaks, 30,000 shrimp and 3,000 giant onions. "Enough to feed 6,700 troops," said Dave Ellis, Outback's director of research and development. They also unloaded 13,400 cans of O'Douls, a nonalcoholic beer. Ellis wanted to bring Budweiser, but alcohol is forbidden on the base.



The idea of feeding the troops was born a few months ago, when Outback CEO Chris Sullivan was at a social event with U.S. Army Gen. Tommy Franks. Sullivan "thought it would be neat to serve the troops a steak dinner and a Bloomin' Onion," Ellis said. Franks thought so, too. Ellis worked with Central Command at Mac Dill Air Force Base to figure out how to transport the enormous dinner and get military clearance for 15 people and cook in a war zone in the middle of the desert. The employees came from Outbacks around the country; Ellis is based in the company's headquarters in Tampa. Most of the food was donated to Outback by the restaurant's vendors, the rest was paid for by Outback.

It took nearly three days to fly to Kandahar. The group stopped in Germany, then flew the eight

hours to Kandahar for only three days. They were preparing food almost the entire time. That posed some special challenges in the 115-degree heat. Ellis and the other employees wore water-filled backpacks called "camelbacks" so they could constantly rehydrate. In between their tent and the kitchen, they were told not to stray off the gravel path or risk being killed by a land mine. And they were informed of the closest bunker to the kitchen, in case they were bombed.

Base officials also pointed out the area's infamous sights: Where American Taliban member John Walker Lindh was held. Where a fire-fight happened a few weeks ago. Where Osama Bin Laden's troops had trained nearby. "You could sense the evil," Ellis said. Watching the troops in action and seeing their Spartan lifestyle made Ellis realize the sacrifices they had made for the United States. "It gave me a sense of pride," he said. The sightseeing was limited.

Almost immediately, the employees set to work preparing the meal. They used the military's industrial-sized appliances. They served the thousands of troops in 70 minutes, Ellis said. After eating the ribeye steak, broccoli, grilled shrimp, rolls and Bloomin' Onions, they ended the meal with cheesecake for dessert.

"They were so appreciative," Ellis said. "Comfort is very hard to come by over there." Since he has been back in the United States, Ellis has received dozens of e-mails from soldiers and their families thanking them for the meal. "I just wanted to say thank you for supporting the soldiers. It means everything to get anything from the states, but to have someone ship both great food and great people to prepare the food is awesome." One woman, a master corporal in the Canadian Forces who is serving in Operation Enduring Freedom, said it was the best meal she had all year.

——Editor's Note: After reading this story and gaining an insight to the generosity of the Outback Corporation, we hope that you TAC Tankers out there will let those staff members in your local Outback Restaurants know how YOU as an ex-service man appreciate their contribution to our current men in uniform.



### Addendum to the Sonoma Trip: Another Mini-Mini Picnic

On Wednesday, August 28, another mini-mini picnic took place in the Sonoma Depot Park for those in the local area. Invitations went out prior to our departure for California on the 15th with the hopes that some of our TAC Tankers could join us while we were "in their territory." Fortunately we had several takers and the afternoon was filled with chit chat, eating a variety of food items, consuming a beverage or two and waving off the local bees, who wanted to be included in the fun. Journeying south from El Dorado Hills were Joyce and Vince McDonald, plus Barb and Dan Weber from Rancho Cordova and Floyd Krey of Citrus Heights. Those from the closer region were Clarence Veino (Suisun City), Eleanore and Bill Dekker (Fairfield), Merrill Brunson (Novato), as well as June Ackermann, Joyce and Tom Grey all of Sonoma.

(Photos: left: Joyce Grey and Dekkers; top right: Floyd Krey; bottom right: the Hills and McDonalds).

