

## CCMS Student offers First Hand Account of a Soldier's Life

By Denise Pfahler

*Denise Pfahler is a 23-year-old Staff Sergeant in the Air National Guard based in Columbus, OH, and a student at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. Her studies were interrupted recently when she was deployed to the Middle East. At the time, she didn't realize that she would carry the knowledge from her CCMS labs and coursework halfway around the world and use her mortuary skills for the good of the country.*

*Following is part one in a series reflecting her firsthand account of a soldier's life in a war zone.*

The first part of my military experience in the Middle East was the most frustrating – getting there. Our journey was marked by delays, flight cancellations, mechanical problems and roundabout routes, all causing our trip to be a five-day “adventure.” In the end, we had to take military aircraft all the way, including a C-17 from Canada.

The good thing about these aircraft is that there's room to spread out. But there are none of the creature comforts of passenger jets – like seats. With no heat in the cargo area and only a few thin blankets to share, our feet inside our steel-toed boots turned ice cold. During the last few hours of the flight I really did think that I might lose my feet to frostbite. The bitter cold was quite a contrast to the off-the-chart temperatures that were awaiting us at our destination. While the cold conditions of our long flight are clear in my mind, other details are lost to the Dramamine, which was practically mandatory and which knocked me out for a few days.

The next phase of our journey began when we piled off the plane in the desert at 0300. In the morning we in-processed into Qatar, and had to stay there a few days until we could hitch a ride to our duty base. I remember that morning like it has been burnt into my memory. And I wouldn't be surprised if it literally has. It was so hot. And since we were located next to the Persian Gulf, it felt as if you could swim through the air faster than you could walk. The incredible humidity meant that we were instantly wet as soon as we stepped outside. It was almost hard to breathe. And remember, this was at 0300. What would it be like when the sun came up? The temperatures and humidity here are as brutal as the sun. On a typical day the temperature rises to 116 degrees, but the “feels-like” temperature can be close to 190 degrees.

The next step was our briefing, which consisted of warning and threats about what we could and could not have in this country of strict moral standards. For example, no magazines with either women or men in bathing suits or

underwear. No alcohol. No photos on our camera that might be interpreted as inappropriate.

We soon learned the classified nature of war. Our destination was shrouded in mystery. We were told that we would reside in a base, but that no one in the country knew it was there. That our passports would not be stamped. And that if we were captured outside our own walls and if we broke one of the country's laws we could be arrested. And there was no contractual agreement that would save us. Scary stuff.

By 0600 on the day of our arrival the sun was already up – and as bright and sunny as if it were 0900 back in the states. We were exhausted, so we headed to our tents and bunked up for a few hours. I woke up lying in a puddle of sweat. Although our tents were air conditioned, I checked the temperature and saw that it was 92 degrees inside our tent. Wow, that's when I realized that this is going to be the experience of my lifetime. I looked at my watch. It was approximately 1400. My girlfriend SSgt. BriAnne Smith and I opened the door to our tent and were blinded. The rocks, the buildings and the sky – everything was all white. We shut the door and laughed to ourselves. We weren't in Ohio any more, that's for sure!

Each of us got our work assignments. I deployed into Off-Base Travel Primary Coordinator which involved ensuring 100 percent accountability for people incoming and leaving the base. I was told that in addition to my job I would be on the base Search and Recovery team, should anything happen. The team assignment was strictly a coincidence as no one knew that I was a student at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. So I read up on all the protocol just to freshen up a bit. Our meeting at the morgue brought me to a familiar setting, even though I was half a world from CCMS and I went through all of the Mortuary Search and Recovery Management Training.

It became apparent rather quickly that I knew my way around this environment that was so foreign to others on my team. When word got out that I was going to school to get a Bachelor of Mortuary Science degree, the “highers” asked if I would be interested in rebuilding the base mortuary and modifying and creating a mortuary continuity binder for use by future rotations. Thus began my job as the Mortuary Affairs Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge.



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### *A Day in the Life*

- My typical shift is 13 hours.
- It is not unusual to work 14 days without a day off. Mission comes first.
- Mandatory Physical Training is three times each week.
- Many of the things we take for granted at home are challenges here, like finding time to take a shower or do laundry.
- I planned on studying my National Boards practice book, but when I get off of work, I just don't have the energy.

### *The Population at the Base*

**In addition to the Air National Guard (of which I am a member) we have on base Air Force Academy cadets, Army and Air Force members as well as British and Australian forces. In addition to military personnel we also have people labeled Third Country Nationals (TCNs) from all over the world working as our custodians. Most are from India, Tibet and Pakistan and live throughout the year in a camp outside of our base. Despite their slight stature they are the hardest-working men I've ever seen. You might find them grilling meat – outside in the steaming temperatures – without even breaking a sweat. It's incredible to see how hard they work for meager wages – all to support their families back home.**