

AAFES worker returns from Afghanistan

By Melody Joy Fields
414th Base Support Battalion
Public Affairs Office

"It was rough," said Ralph Henderson. He recently returned from Afghanistan where he set up and ran the AAFES store in Khandahar.

"The dirt, the dust, living in a tent ... eating MREs and T-rats for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Just things I wasn't at all used to — only being able to shower every two to three days, and then just the heat. In our store the temperature was 130 degrees by 8:30 in the morning."

Henderson volunteered to join a two-person team along with Bill Hullender from AAFES Italy to establish the PX tent for soldiers deployed on Operation Enduring Freedom. They arrived in Afghanistan Nov. 23 of last year.

"First we had to get with command and acquire a tent for the store. Then, we had to get shelves built, light fixtures hung and some type of flooring put in so we didn't have everything sitting on the ground," said Henderson.

"Once we got everything acquired, it took about a day and a half to get everything put in. We stocked the shelves with the assistance of some soldiers in the camp so we could open the store on day three of being on the ground in country."



Ralph Henderson stands in front of an Afghan mosque.

Henderson spent six months in Afghanistan. "The reaction we got from the troops made the hardships of being down there, worth it," he said. "It gave me a whole new respect for the military. This was my first time being in a field deployed situation and seeing what the soldiers had to go through.

"When we first opened up, the soldiers would line up two to three hours before we opened and there would be a constant line until an hour and a half after we closed. We would stay open longer than the hours actually set up so we could accommodate the soldiers still in line.

"I heard people say, while they were shopping, that they stayed in line four hours before actually getting inside the store," he said.

What drew the soldiers to wait so long in line? "In the beginning, we started out with the basic necessities: toiletries, baby wipes, non-perishable food items, drinks and powdered drink mixes. And, once we had a good base with that, so all the troops had what they needed, we started bringing in luxury items, such as portable stereos, portable DVD players, stereo systems and boom boxes. We started bringing the niceties of home to them.

"By the time I left in May, you could say the PX there had almost

the same amenities as one back home," he said.

Since the soldiers were on duty seven days a week, the PX was open seven days a week. "When it heated up so bad during the day, we ended up opening night shifts. It was just too risky with the soldiers standing in line and then coming into the store where it was about 20 degrees hotter. We were worried there would be heat casualties, so we changed to nighttime hours when it was cooler and more comfortable." Shopping hours for soldiers in Afghanistan are 4 p.m. to midnight.

Henderson himself was a victim of the desert climate. He suffered dehydration from not drinking enough water and ended up in the medical tent. "It took them at least six IVs to get me re-hydrated. After that I learned my lesson — drink lots of water."

The desert wasn't the only hazard associated with life in Afghanistan. "When we first went into Khandahar, there were fire-fights and all that kinds of stuff going on almost on a nightly basis," said Henderson.

"That only lasted about three weeks. It got quiet then. That's when it got really scary because you never knew when something was going to happen," he said.

Henderson's experience gave him a new appreciation for the soldier's life. He was "proud that they were out there. I mean that's what they're trained to do, but it takes a big person to go out there and actually do it.

"The best part about being down there was the reaction from the troops, the appreciation they had for us being there and making sure they had what they needed to keep going. Everybody was just so appreciative."

When asked if he would do it again, Henderson said yes. "Right now I think I'll stay home for a few months and then I think I'll go back out and do it again."

Honoring our retirees

I buried my father in Arlington last week. He was not only my hero, but a hero for our nation. He served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. He gave 33 years of his life to protecting freedom and liberty. The Army honored him as a true hero.

Arlington is burying veterans at the rate of 13 per day everyday and more than 1,000 WWII veterans leave us everyday. This made me stop and think about that special customer we serve and the respect they deserve from all of us.

When you have that older customer complaining about prices, take care of him, he may have hit the beaches of Normandy or struggled through the hell that was Okinawa in 1945. When that customer fumbles for his change, be patient, he may have froze at the Chosin Reservoir or sweated through the horrible night at Ia Drang.

When that lady complains about the way people dress, listen, she may have spent many a lonely night waiting for that telegram or she may have gotten it, one cold and cloudy day.

The retiree has been our most loyal customer, honor them, and take the time to thank them. They may not be here tomorrow.

By William Fair
Main Store Manager,
Schinnen, The Netherlands

DID YOU KNOW?

- Associates who volunteer for Operation Enduring Freedom for **one full year** now receive a Deployment Bonus of 25 percent!

- Associates who are currently deployed and are staying **one full year** will also receive the 25 percent Deployment Bonus.

- Any differences on bonuses already paid, will be adjusted. Also, don't forget, all associates who return from any deployment area will receive seven calendar days of administrative leave.