



# *On the Borderline*

Located just 39 miles from Iraq, "The Rock" is at the forefront of Operation Southern Watch

by Tech. Sgt. George Hayward    ♣    photos by Senior Master Sgt. Rose Reynolds



**T**he "Rock" rises above the surrounding desert plains, a hill offering a dun-colored vista of the distant, arid horizon. In the summer, that gray-brown horizon shimmers in the 120-degree heat. But still one can feel the eerie crawl of goosebumps. Like a desert mirage, it's easy to imagine tanks emerging from that shimmer. Iraqi tanks.

Saddam Hussein's homeland lies just over that shimmering horizon.

The Rock is Ali Al Salem Air Base, deployed home to 1,500 people and the 9th Air Expeditionary Group, a unit literally at the forefront of Operation Southern Watch, just 39 miles from the Iraqi border.

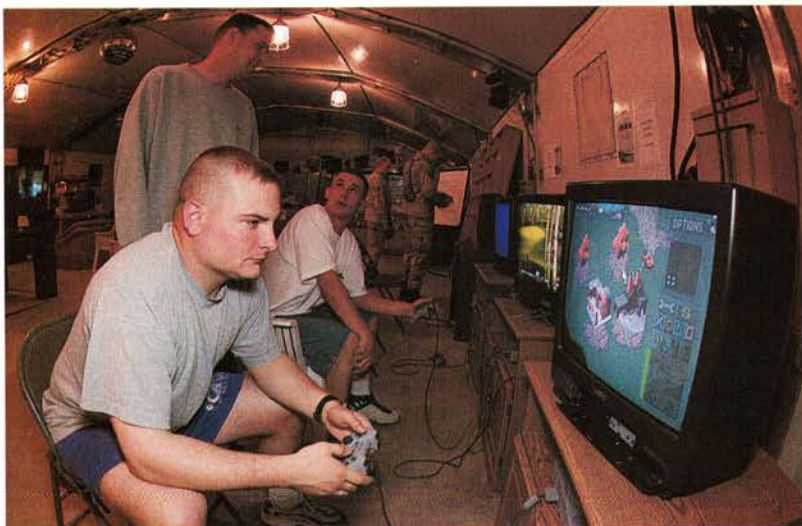
Lt. Col. Bob Gerhart was deployed earlier this year to The Rock as the group's director of operations. He is not an alarmist, but he conceded it's hard to ignore the fact that his temporary home was less than an hour's drive via car, or tank, from Iraq.

"It's close," he said. "There's nothing between here and the border. We're out here in the middle of nowhere. So we take life pretty seriously."

For several years following the Persian Gulf War, Al Salem was a sleepy radar site, manned by just a handful of Air Force people monitoring air traffic in the southern no-fly zone. But after tensions in the region flared in late 1997, coalition forces started massing at the base. When the buildup renewed in November 1998, prior to Operation Desert Fox, the base doubled in size to its current population of 1,500.

"When the base first started, it was just [the radar] up on The Rock," said Capt. Mike Marvich, who deployed from Beale Air Force Base, Calif., for 120 days as the services flight commander. "As the contingency buildup began, it grew into Commando Village and Fox Ridge [the tent cities at the foot of the hill]. It's been kind of piece-mealed together over time."

**Inside a bunker at the top of The Rock,** Airman 1st Class Tony Lee (top), 9th Expeditionary Air Control Squadron, monitors air traffic for Operation Southern Watch. Viewed from atop that bunker, the Iraqi border looms in the distance behind Senior Airman Larry Six (middle). Conditions at Al Salem are austere, but the services flight runs a busy recreation center that includes video games for Airmen Richard Kelly (bottom, foreground) and Jeremy Townsend (seated in background).



Today, the 9th Air Expeditionary Group provides air surveillance and control through that same radar site, while a fleet of C-130 Hercules provide theater airlift and, if necessary, combat search and rescue and aeromedical evacuation for Operation Southern Watch forces. "The 9th AEG has brought all those functions under one umbrella," Gerhart said.

### **Desert austerity**

Life on The Rock is austere, even by the standards of Southwest Asia's deployed locations. Many Air Force people at other Southern Watch bases live and work in permanent buildings. But The Rock is almost entirely a tent city, with very few actual buildings. And most "buildings" are quonset-shaped, foldable general purpose structures. The environment makes The Rock a butt of some Southern Watch humor. Many people deployed to nearby Ahmed Al Jaber Air Base — a base with amenities like an in-ground pool, paved roads and permanent dormitories — call a trip to The Rock "Jaber Appreciation Day." It's hard to feel "deployed" at Al Jaber, once you see how The Rock people live. But Gerhart preferred to call it a "wilderness experience."

"It's sort of like camping," he said. "It's not easy living, but you get used to it. We've tried to make tent life as comfortable as possible."

Marvich's 45-person services flight shoulders much of that comfort burden — housing, feeding and entertaining nearly every person on The Rock. They do so in a high-security environment where the deployment tempo keeps the rotating base population in constant flux.

"It can be overwhelming at times," Marvich admitted. "We're trying to go in several different directions at once. But the biggest challenge we have is space. We're not a big, spread-out

base, so we're really limited on what we can do."

That space may be limited to tents and general purpose structures, but it includes three dining facilities, a small base exchange, a rec center and a gym, as well as other amenities like an above-ground pool. And the flight runs games, tournaments, intramural sports and other recreational activities almost daily.

"It's nice to know you can help that many people, but at the same time, it makes you nervous," said Senior Airman Travis Carpenter, a services specialist on his first desert deployment. "If they're not having a good time, you didn't do your job right."

Though it may be hard to have a good time in a dusty compound thousands of miles away from home, one doesn't hear too many complaints.

"For what services has to work with in this austere, forward-deployed location, they're doing pretty well," Gerhart said. "The services folks run a lot of events to keep us entertained and busy ... that keeps people going."

## Serious mission

Though vital to Operation Southern Watch, the mission at The Rock does not receive the high-visibility and front-page coverage like other Southwest Asia bases. Watching radar screens is exciting only perhaps to the people watching them for the 9th Expeditionary Air Control Squadron. And many of The Rock's other missions, like search and rescue, are also quiet unless things go wrong across the border (See "The Rescuers" on Page 24). Still, the life of The Rock people is not idle, and there's a pervasive intensity in their attitudes.

"At home, you train to deploy to do what you do here," said Airman 1st Class Sebastian Maik, a satellite communications maintainer from Moody AFB, Ga. "So you are a lot busier here than you are at home. Even on your

days off here, you're into work, helping out."

And even with no aircrews to save, the search and rescue crews stay busy. "It's a very good training environment for us because there is ample time," said Airman 1st Class Justin Shook, one of the pararescue-men who would help save a downed aircrew member. Shook spoke as he readied communications gear for an afternoon airdrop from a 9th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron HC-130, training for the real thing just four days after his four-person team arrived at the base.

## Common bond

Tech. Sgt. Joseph Hatcher, assistant manager of one of The Rock's dining facilities, was on his fifth desert deployment this spring, but it was his first time at The Rock. He said he'd never seen such high teamwork and morale among deployed units and people. "Everybody works closely," he said. "You can see the units come together like pieces of a puzzle."

A tour at The Rock is a bonding experience. More than just a deployment, it's a common thread, a shared understanding between airmen of any rank or any career field.

"I would think most people would agree that it's an experience they wouldn't trade for anything," Gerhart said. "They're glad to have been here. They may not necessarily want to come back, but they're glad to have been here."



**A tour at Al Salem is a bonding experience, and nearly everyone who deploys comes home with a picture of the base's namesake trademark, "The Rock."**

As an example, Hatcher cited the lack of complaints he heard in the dining facility. Complaints about the food are standard fare in any dining facility — at any base. But not at The Rock, where every meal, every day, is decidedly un-gourmet and gets served on cardboard plates.

"Granted, these aren't the best meals in the world," Hatcher said. "But everyone seems happy that they're getting them. Most of the time, they seem really satisfied and appreciative. And in the five times I've been to the desert, I'd never seen that before."

Gerhart feels that comes from a sense of job satisfaction from the level of responsibility people carry, living on The Rock a stone's throw from Iraq.

"The stuff you're doing here is important," he said. "It makes a difference. This is real. It isn't an exercise."

And as long as they're there, it's not likely any real tanks will ever shimmer on that dusty horizon. ☼