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SOLDIERS OF V CORPS INFANTRY TASK FORCE EAT IN COMFORT AFTER FOUR-MONTH DINING FACILITY RENOVATION

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE BRASSFIELD-MORA, Iraq — The dining facility here is in the same place as it was in July, but that's about the only thing that's the same about it.

Soldiers here welcomed the re-opening of a chow hall that was renovated after its location, in a hangar, proved problematic.

"We had a lot of sanitation problems," said Spc. Antonio Clifton, a cook with V Corps' Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry.

"Sand would blow in, and we had a lot of trouble with flies and keeping it cool. The food could only get to a certain temperature before it went bad."

So a makeshift dining facility went up in a row of tents while Soldiers refurbished the hangar into more of a real chow hall. The many changes included adding doors, air conditioning, lights, and a tile floor while lowering the ceiling.

It took four months, but the hard work paid off when the cooks proudly opened the doors to the improved facility.

"It'll help keep the flies out," Clifton said. "Soldiers can eat in a more pleasant environment and it will be more cool. They don't have to worry about heat and dust. Being inside is always an advantage."

The cooks have it better, too, with exhaust fans and the lowered ceilings helping keep the temperature down. As they prepare dinner this day, Staff Sgt. Lavo Smith, the senior first cook with HHC 1/26th, glances at his Soldiers.

"Normally they would be drenched in sweat," said Smith. "But now they're not. The cooks love it. They like coming here now."

Instead of the conditions, cooks can now concentrate on cranking out the most popular dishes, which Clifton identifies as "pizza, calzone, spaghetti, lasagna, hamburgers, chicken, steak and lobster."

Four months of meals in the tents proved to be more than long enough, according to Spc. Jonathan Adams, a cook who is assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry.

"The remodeling was done and the (facility) was ready to move back into ... and everybody was wondering when we were going to serve dinner again," he said.

Getting that dinner ready takes about three hours, according to Adams, and staying focused is the key to doing it right.

"Teamwork is important, plus cleaning and sanitation and taking pride in your food," he said.

Adams admits that he likes to eat, and he also enjoys the feedback from customers. “When they give compliments, it’s always a morale boost,” he said. “When someone takes the time to let you know it was good, it’s nice to hear.”

Adams’ fellow cook, Pfc. Michael Thompson from HHC 1/26th, looks around and remembers what the facility was like in its first incarnation. The change is dramatic.

“The roof was higher and we’ve added tiles and have exhaust fans now,” he said. “We have hot water in here instead of water buffaloes. The lighting before -- there wasn’t much; just at the top of the ceiling. We have more electricity and air conditioning. We had none at all before.”

“It’s a lot better,” Thompson said. “We feel like we can do more and we have a better environment for the Soldiers to eat in. They’re talking about putting a TV back in, to give Soldiers a place to hang out.”

“Everybody loves it,” Smith said. “They like knowing they have a comfortable place to come eat.”

The hangar also houses the Morale Welfare and Recreation facility, but it is separated from the dining facility.

“Before, when you came in here to eat, you were also looking at someone lifting weights. Now it’s been made to look more like a (dining facility),” Smith explained.

The renovation required a lot of hard work, and the cooks still have a tough job even with the new amenities. But in Thompson’s opinion it’s all worth it in the end.

“When you do a good job, people leave with a smile on their face,” he said.

