

## U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

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### FORCE PROTECTION EXERCISE ENSURES U.S. ARMY EUROPE SOLDIERS IN IRAQ KEEP BASE SAFE

By Sgt. 1st Class Chris Seaton

12th Combat Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

**CAMP TAJI, Iraq** -- Spc. David Leopold sat in the break room of the brigade air defense operations center. A fuel handler for U.S. Army Europe's Company E, 3rd Battalion, 158th Aviation, Leopold is used to working hard. For the past few days, he'd been doing just that while manning a guard tower on his forward operating base just outside Baghdad.



SGT 1ST CLASS CHRIS SEATON

Spc. David Leopold, a fuel handler from U.S. Army Europe's Company E, 3rd Battalion 158th Aviation, stands guard outside a tactical operations center on Camp Taji, Iraq during a base force protection exercise Dec. 4.

No matter what their normal day-to-day jobs are, at some point every Soldier who comes to Iraq leaves his flight line, motor pool or office, gears up and watches a fence line.

On the inside of the fence is the Iraq they know: sand bag-covered container housing units, dining facilities, rocks and mud. On the other side an Iraqi city bustles with street vendors, children playing soccer and an ever-increasing flurry of activity signaling new life in a war-torn country.

For Leopold, like many, watching the city from a tower is as close as he's likely to get to life outside this forward operating base he calls home here.

Between shifts he and other guards were watching a movie in the break room. Suddenly a voice broke over the radio with a single code word that instantly told the Soldiers, "We are under attack!"

Leopold sprang to life. His body reacted before his mind could process the next steps, and before

he knew it he was standing in full body armor, waiting for instructions. He was sent to guard a tactical operations center.

“When an attack happens, everybody (on tower guard duty) not manning the tower is sent to areas on base to guard sensitive property,” said Leopold. “There’s no set time limit for how fast we have to be in place, we just move as quickly as we can to secure the area.”

This time the call and reaction was an exercise. The base was still secure. But training such as this is a vital part of what keeps it that way, say Leopold and others who participated.

“It’s a good reminder that we’re still in a combat zone,” said Leopold. “The war doesn’t stop on an FOB just because we put up a fence. Anything can happen.”

“The attack exercise simulates what would happen if the base were overrun,” said Sgt. 1st Class Shon Skinner, force protection NCO for Task Force XII. The task force, led by USAREUR's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, is the parent to Leopold's battalion. “In an aviation unit, we’ve got a pretty important task of protecting this airfield.”

During the exercise, organizers watch to see how people react. They have goals for what should happen if the base is attacked. The exercise lets them see what actually happens.

“We put a lot of emphasis on getting it right, and I put a lot of stress on Soldiers,” said Skinner.

“We have to see what happens, and what their attitudes are when we start inducing stress.”

While statistics in the global war on terrorism show the chances of a forward operating base being attacked by anything beyond the occasional mortar or indirect fire are low, and Soldiers who regularly patrol the streets of Baghdad bring back stories and photos of reconciliation and improved security, insurgents have tried the coordinated attacks on other bases. So far, none have succeeded. The idea of practicing the attack drill is to keep it that way.

“Personally, I don’t see (an attack on Taji) happening, but it’s comforting to know we have a plan,” said Spc. Bryan Coffey, a Task Force XII network systems operator. “It could definitely save lives by getting us into place if something did happen.”

“We are ready (for something to happen), and we’ll always be ready,” said Skinner. “If not, we’ll continue to train until we are.”

For Leopold, the message was clear. Whether he’s seen it in his six months of pumping fuel here or not, the war outside the fence is very real.

“I guess anything can happen, inside or outside,” he said. “We’re going to be ready for either one.”



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