

Luxury of a wash after hardship and loss on the front line



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They call it Slipper City but the camp we have retired to is far more basic than you might imagine.

After 13 days on the front line, the Household Cavalry is spending 48 hours in the grounds of an old engineering works with three foul-smelling thunderbox toilets, "comfy bum" toilet paper, and two Formica cubicles where you can hang up a shower bag and marvel at the wonder of a proper wash in a solar shower.

We have crossed back over the Rumaila bridge, down in the southern oilfields, which is now secure after D squadron, the Household Cavalry's armed reconnaissance unit, led 16 Air Assault Brigade through the area.

After days of living in the thick desert dust, sleeping on the sand (more rough, hard-packed grit than the beach variety), and of being careful with water — allowed only a flannel wash and rarely doing a dobie (clothes wash) — this rough place seems like luxury.

We had spent days running around in the small, overheated confines of the Scimitar, Spartan, Striker, Sultan and Samaritan armoured reconnaissance vehicles, scraping up gravel hills and over Iraqi front lines.

We had spent days watching outgoing artillery and realising, with a shock, that the whistling sound means the wrong stuff is actually coming your way.

Just two nights ago, we had to "bug out", grabbing our sleeping bags and kit in a split second and moving in a hurry out of the area we had occupied for a few days after some "arty" landed 50 metres away. The squaddie with me said his ear had popped it was so close.

Slipper City is so called because it is where the soldiers can kick off their boots, air their trench feet, and relax a little.

Some have even made ersatz flip-flops by cutting soles from the sponge used to pack ammunition and threading them with string.

The squadron quartermaster, Reg Carney, is trying to obtain fresh rations rather than the usual boil-in-the-bags, but so far his forages around the various camps have failed.

Despite such indulgences as being allowed to read their blueys (mail from back home), these 48 hours mark a difficult time for the squadron as it is the first chance they have had to reflect on the events of the past week, when they lost two men in separate incidents: a friendly fire attack which killed one and injured four others, and an accident which left a Scimitar upturned in a canal, killing one and seriously injuring another.

Yesterday, two crosses were constructed from metal and mounted on pieces of track taken from their vehicle supply.

Each is to be taken to the separate scenes and laid as a mark of permanent remembrance.

With makeshift altars, constructed from pieces of army equipment, a service was conducted by the squadron commander, Richard Taylor, and the padre, Mark Christian.

With heads bowed, the soldiers were told that the sacrifice of close friends was something they should deal with in their own individual way. They have been encouraged to talk about their grief, to come to terms with it and to draw a line under it.

One trooper, Kev Tomlinson, explained the emotion felt by all. "We feel safe again. We have been so busy we have not had the time to reflect. But we will take this time, sit down and have a moment."

Lights out comes as soon as the sun goes down, leaving little time for chatting or even thought. Tonight in Slipper City the men are gathered in a lighted tent, some talking quietly, others wisecracking as usual.

They know that tomorrow they have to go back into the field.