

I have served my country for 18 years in the United States Air Force. I am proud to serve, but sometimes I can only laugh at the situations I find myself in.



It was a crazy year for me in 2019. I was minding my own business when the Iranians decided to play with their drones and set fire to some oil refineries in Saudi Arabia. That was not cool, because it messed up the world's oil supply. Uncle Sam was not happy about that, so he sent me and some other guys to Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. He said we had to protect the oil and keep an eye on the Iranians. I said OK, but I was secretly hoping for some camel rides and desert adventures.



So, in 2019, the Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, called and said he needed me to go to the Middle East for 60 days. He said it was urgent and

important. I said sure, why not? I had already been there 3 times before, so I was an expert. I knew all about the joys of deployments: the long-distance calls with family, the cozy bunk beds, the communal showers, and the fun-filled work weeks. I was ready for another round of that. I packed my bags, kissed my wife goodbye, and hopped on a plane. It was going to be a blast.



Also, 60 days sounded like a piece of cake, compared to my other deployments that lasted for 4 months or more. But boy, was I wrong. This was going to be a whole different ball game. You see, Prince Sultan Air Base was not exactly a five-star resort in 2019. Actually, it was more like a sandbox. Literally. The funny thing is that it used to be a nice place. Twice. In the 1990s and after 9-11, the US military made it into a fancy air base and command center. And then we gave it back to the Saudis. And then we came back again. And then we found out that the Saudis had erased everything we had built and left us with nothing but sand. Thanks a lot, guys.



Since Prince Sultan was still under construction, we had to stay in Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, or as we called it, "The Deid". The Deid was like a mini-city, with dorms, chow halls, a shopping center, and everything. We could even go off-base and explore Doha, the capital of Qatar. We could shop, eat, and see the sights. It was like a vacation!



However, it is also the command center for all of the high levels of leadership in the Middle East, and they were all thrilled that we were assigned to them. Shortly after our arrival, we heard rumbling that leadership was angling to get us extended out to a full 6 months. Yikes! On top of that, they were itching to get us down to Prince Sultan Air Base so we could showcase that the base was fully operational. Let the mind games begin.



Rumors of extension and moving down to Saudi Arabia aside, the standing orders from the Secretary of Defense was to return home within 60 days, so the Transportation Command, the agency responsible for moving US government personnel and cargo, had us scheduled to return home 7 December, just in time for the holidays. Well, leadership had other ideas. They called over to Transportation Command to have them reschedule the planes to come get us on 22 December, which would give them time to get our extension order routed through the wickets and approved. Supposedly, it was all the way up to the Secretary of Defense again, just awaiting his signature. We waited and waited, no updates.



As promised, on 22 December, our planes were landing to pick us up and take us home. Leadership got word that their extension had never made it to the Secretary of Defense because the war planners in Washington deemed that we weren't needed since, while tensions were high, there were already enough units in the region. So, the mad scramble began to have our people pack, board planes, and head home. This last minute scramble meant we still had to get our equipment packed and sent home, so left a small team behind. Seemed like we dodged the proverbial bullet.





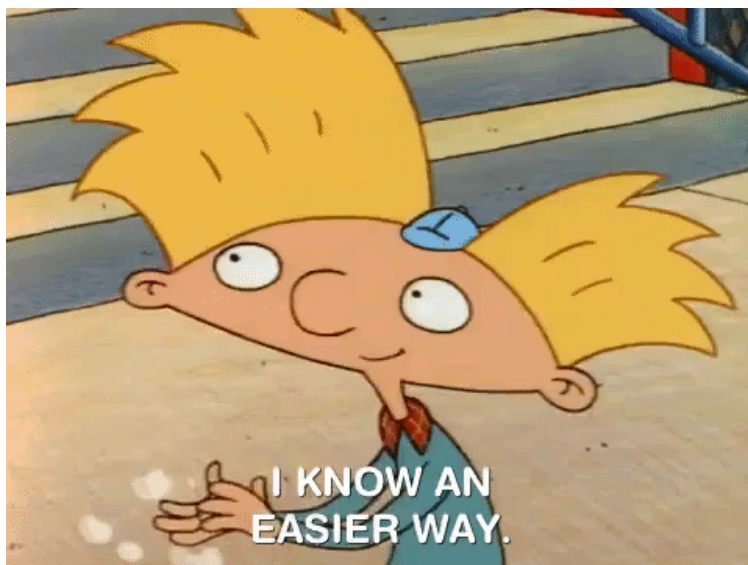
Then, wouldn't you know it, on 3 Jan 2020, a drone in Iraq took out Iranian General Qasem Solemani, which gave leadership the leverage to have our unit recalled and extended out 6 months. To make matters worse, they were now insistent that we move down to Saudi Arabia. By the end of February, we had fully moved to Prince Sultan Air Base. Life there consisted of tents, chow halls that limited food, and a small store that had just the bare essentials. We had a light at the end of the tunnel though, as our projected date to return home was at the beginning of April 2020.



I'll say it again, "Or, so I thought." In March of 2020, a little something called COVID-19 threw the world into lockdown and forced the military to stop all troop movements across the globe, which included us. Our fate again unknown, we waited in anticipation for the new date we would go home. Fate finally came through for us in the form of an approved stop movement waiver to send us home.



After all the mind games, once in a lifetime geopolitical events, and a little help from fate, we were finally home. At the end of the day, I'll always step up to serve my country where it needs me, including deployments. Maybe next though, could it be a little less, you know, difficult?



Note: I generated this text in part with GPT-3, OpenAI's large-scale language-generation model. After generating my own writing and language, I reviewed, edited, and revised the language to my own liking. I used AI assistance in the following ways: Reword my initial draft to add humor. I take full responsibility for the content of this writing.