



News Release

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OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE VISITS AFGHANISTAN VIA CHARLESTON C-17

CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. – A contingent of 15 Outback Steakhouse employees from across America traveled to Kandahar, Afghanistan, June 17 with food in tow to cook for the coalition forces deployed there.

On the flight between Ramstein AB, Germany, and Kandahar, Lt. Col. Gary Goldstone, 17th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron director of operations, described the delivery as a big surprise.

"This mission is special," Goldstone said. "We're delivering about 6,000 steaks to people who have been eating MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) for the last three-six months. The look on their faces should be telling."

A lot of planning went into the mission, which sprang from an idea of Outback Steakhouse, Inc.'s Chief Executive Officer.

"It all started when the CEO met with Gen. Tommy Franks (United States Central Command commander) at a social event," said Dave Ellis, director of research and development for Outback. "He said he wanted to get Bloomin' Onions to the troops."

Franks agreed with the idea, and United States Central Command coordinated with Outback to move the people and food to Kandahar via a Charleston-based C-17. The company sent enough ribeye steaks, filets, baked potatoes, french fries, onions, cheesecake and grilled shrimp to feed more than 6,000 people.

"We wanted to contribute in some way, to say thank you," Ellis said. "The way we know how to do that is with food."

The Outback staff, made up of service and food technicians, led teams of 10 coalition military personnel in preparing the huge cookout.

"We expected it to be rough environment," said Ellis. "I've been impressed. Everybody's been so nice to us. We were all stuck in the tent with nothing to do the first day we got here, but a tour was arranged for us, and we learned all about the base and how everything works."

Other members of the Outback staff were also impressed with the troops at Kandahar.

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“It’s amazing,” said Demi-Jon Merlina, a service technician from Phoenix, Ariz. “It gives me a new respect for our troops. I mean we have the luxury of knowing we’re going home. Some of these guys have been here for six months. I just thank God there are men and women willing to do this for our country.”

Merlina said the friendliness of the troops really overwhelmed him.

“I thought we were supposed to be the hospitality experts, but everyone here’s been so good to us, I wonder who the experts really are,” said Merlina.

According to Army Chief Warrant Officer 2nd Class John Dale, Task Force food advisor at Kandahar, a valuable experience presented itself to the teams of military personnel working with the Outbackers.

“They’re loving it,” Dale said. “They’re very excited to be given the chance to learn. It also gives Outback a chance to see how the Army does food service. It’s a learning experience for both of them.”

Dale also pointed out that the whole operation couldn’t work without help from a variety of sources, including the Air Force and Canadian military forces at Kandahar.

“A whole lot of people came together to make this work,” Dale said. “I’m thankful for all the help.”

This isn’t the first time Outback Steakhouse volunteered to help out the nation’s heroes. Immediately following the terrorist attacks Sept. 11, the New York City franchise set up shop in New Jersey and ferried hot meals across the harbor to feed hungry workers sorting through the rubble for survivors.

“We were there for the first eight days,” said Kimberly Smith, who co-owns the New York City franchise with her husband. “We served 200,000 hot meals.” After three days of ferrying food, the city granted the franchise permission to set up operations at Ground Zero, Smith said. From there, volunteers from Outback Steakhouses throughout the Northeast served up hot sandwiches, taking tubs of food to areas where exhausted firemen and police officers refused to give up the search.

“I was grateful for the chance to actually do something in a time of crisis, when so many Americans wanted to,” said Smith.

The meal was a welcome change to soldiers and airmen alike, whose daily meals consist of MREs, MREs and more MREs.

“I think everyone at Charleston AFB should go out to dinner at least once at Outback,” said Senior Airman Kenneth Wicklund, 437th Maintenance Squadron Aerospace Ground Equipment Flight, deployed to Kandahar in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. “It’s a way to say thanks in return.”

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