

“It’s a pop, and it’s over before you know it,” said U.S. Army Spc. Cody Puckett, a gunner for the 287th Engineer Co., who hails from Bay St. Louis, Miss., describing what it’s like to take a direct hit by an IED.

Puckett said the most disconcerting part of the attacks is not the initial impact, but the eerie silence that comes afterward while the dust is settling.

“That anticipation and everybody waiting ... that sucks,” Puckett said during a July 18 patrol on a road not far from Combat Outpost Zormat, Paktya province.

U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Daniel E. Talley, the platoon sergeant for 1st Platoon, agreed.

“It gives me the chills just thinking about it,” Talley said.

Neither Talley nor Puckett knew they were minutes away from the next such episode.

It was past noon when the explosion enveloped the vehicle in front of them in a cloud of brown dust and stabbed the eardrums of those hundreds of feet away, headsets notwithstanding. The blast damaged the vehicle’s radios so that it took more than a minute before the gunner of the target vehicle, U.S. Army Spc. William Eric Welford, could signal to the rest of the convoy that everyone was OK.

The vehicle that was hit had to be towed back to FOB Gardez for repairs, and Welford relocated to Puckett’s vehicle. □ Welford, who had taken the worst of the blast, did not complain. He admitted to having a headache only when pressed.

“That’s the third one this week,” he said nonchalantly.

Even when their job isn’t harrowing, it can be taxing. Because the consequences of missing an IED can be catastrophic, the convoy must advance at a glacial pace. Staying entertained in such circumstances requires a sense of humor and an ability to take things in stride.

On long patrols, the troops will kill hours by making fun of each other. Everyone knows who’s a bad driver and who’s a bad aim with a pen flare.

“It’s fun, and it doesn’t cause any rifts in the unit, which is good,” said U.S. Army Sgt. Timothy J. Ingram, leader of A Team, 2nd Squad, 3rd Platoon, who hails from Hattiesburg, Miss.

When weather keeps them stranded at other bases, sports are a source of amusement. The troops in 1st Platoon used to carry a soccer ball on the outside of the one of the vehicles for that contingency. Once, an IED hit the vehicle that was carrying the ball, knocking it loose. Talley determined dismounting to retrieve the ball would be too dangerous, but all were reluctant to leave it behind.

“We didn’t want to lose our soccer ball,” Talley said.

The platoon made a spirited effort to scoop up the soccer ball with the mechanical arm of the buffalo that Soldiers call the “spork.” Unfortunately, the ball that survived the explosion didn’t fare as well in its first encounter with the spork prongs.

Some days later, the same platoon made a surprise pit stop at an unfriendly Afghan village to buy watermelons for an Independence Day celebration. Talley, who knew the troops missed Mississippi watermelons, thought it would be good for unit morale. He also knew that Taliban had been shaking the village down for money the day before, and he saw an opportunity to help the Coalition image. Amid suspicious glares of the locals and hushed Pashto words, several troops dismounted from the vehicle, approached a vendor, and bought a dozen watermelons for \$2 each. It was a cramped convoy back to FOB Lightning.

□ “They missed watermelon season in Mississippi this year, but they made up for it in Afghanistan,” said U.S. Army Capt. Marty Davis, the commander of the 287th Engineer Co. and brother of U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Marshall Davis.

Capt. Davis said the unit is able to maintain good humor in part because they are so close-knit.

“One thing I see in them, they are accountable to each other, probably more so than most units,” he said. “They know each other, they know each other’s families, they work well together. I think they know each others’ hardships and tendencies, even outside of things that are going on here in the unit.”

Many of the troops served together in a 2004 to 2005 deployment to Iraq. Moreover, most of the Soldiers in the company are from the Lucedale area, so many are related. The company contains two sets of brothers, two father-son pairs, and a smattering of cousins, uncles and nephews. □

Sgt. 1st Class Davis was deployed to Afghanistan as recently as last summer as a general’s personal security detail, but when he heard that his “home unit” was deploying, he had to go with them. □ Despite being a National Guardsmen who had been on federal orders since 2004, he knew he had to join his brother.

“I just felt, since because it is my home unit, that I was obligated to come with them,” Sgt. 1st Class Davis said. “This is my home platoon and the people that I’ve worked with, so it was not a very hard decision for me to say, ‘no, I’ll just do another one with them, too.’”

