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Fit for the Fight

Sheri Dilena talks about seven years spent training soldiers deployed in the Middle East.

By E.M. Burton

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All images: Courtesy of Sheri Dilena

At Camp Buehring (formerly Camp Udairi) in the northwestern region of Kuwait, Sheri Dilena trains new recruits and their leadership in the CrossFit method.

Using basic equipment—sand-ball kettlebells, sandbags, tires, cases of water bottles, barriers for box jumps, mooring ropes, and anything else they can find around the camp—Dilena has helped more than 4,000 troops become harder to kill. There is a lot we can't publish due to the sensitive nature of the work and location, but Dilena is quick to thank CrossFit for helping bring the fight to the enemy.

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For over seven years, Dilena has been working with the troops at Camp Buehring and in the region as a civilian contractor. Having worked in the area of physical fitness training for many years, Dilena had been discouraged with existing fitness programs until 2008, when a visiting Marine captain introduced her to CrossFit's brand of elite fitness. The man's knowledge and expression of the legitimate science of fitness physiology and how it can be applied caught her attention.

"More impressive was the way he interacted with the other military branches," Dilena emphasized. "He related very humbly to all those he encountered and made them feel welcome in the CrossFit community."

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The warm season at Camp Buehring lasts from May to September with temperatures reaching anywhere between 120 to 140 Fahrenheit. Training outdoors, in the sand, in harsh desert conditions, with spartan equipment and training facilities (a tent), Dilena instructs U.S. and British troops in the CrossFit method. She finds that training in these unavoidable conditions with ready-to-hand equipment instills in the troops a "newfound confidence that comes from having an elite combat readiness training for the often-unknown yet essential mission needs necessary here in this region. This training actually gives them a sense of security that they are legitimately trained warriors."

CrossFit Fundamentals

One of several levels of CrossFit training classes conducted at Camp Buehring, "Easy Day" is the only approved fundamental preparation for other CrossFit training at the camp. It is mandatory and of the highest priority as the foundation for Combat Readiness Training. Easy Day consists of two very intense training sessions split over two days. Dilena's focus is "to give the troops/athletes the knowledge and practical skills of personal elite fitness for any challenge that life can dish out."

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"They are taught to learn and know their own body's parameters and are always surprised at how awesome their personal performance is when that knowledge is applied," Dilena said. "The athletes are trained to understand how this core strengthening is essential to a higher level of performance in any physical activity or sport they choose to enjoy—and that means any physical activity."

The main concentration in Easy Day training is on body-weight or light-weight basic functional movements, and typical training exercises include air squats—"No. 1 is the air squat!"—full range-of-motion sit-ups, box jumps, burpees, kettlebell swings and PVC overhead squats. The Tabata format is commonly used in training workouts, in addition to AMRAPs and rep schemes such as 21-15-9.

"Since these troops are transient, the training doesn't often advance from the fundamental body-weight exercises," Dilena explained.

She described her training sessions as "elite fitness, high intensity" and said she isn't concerned that she doesn't get to take her soldiers through the finer points of advanced movements.

"I have no problem with the redundancy of the basics—no issue at all. The troops love this program and are always asking about CrossFit programs available for them up north (in Iraq)," she said.

"I love that I get to train the troops on the basics, and they love it too," Dilena said. "The knowledge and ability gained from what is often a very brief but very dense exposure to CrossFit provides them with a profound sense of hope, in many instances resulting in an intense transformation."

"The critical transformation is not the more obvious, physical one—that's a given—but the mental/emotional one in their self-esteem, and the relatively instant sense of increased capacity. Troops with consistent fitness failures suddenly have hope that they can improve, especially when they witness their leadership—for whom attendance is mandatory, along with their PT failure troops—get smoked or humbled in the same training, in the first class!"



During Easy Day war games, troops often have to endure getting sprayed with water from a fire truck's hose.

Because of the surge in troops at Camp Buehring, Dilena has had the opportunity to "introduce the best fitness program in the world" to an unusually high number of troops, and she believes it's helped improve their morale.

"It was very apparent that our troops had little or no time to prepare for their deployment to Iraq (and some to Afghanistan), and although there were thousands more troops who came through here, I was blessed to catch 4,000 or so and engage them with the CrossFit method. They were anxious and very hungry to learn and apply. The CrossFit training they received brought them an amazing peace of mind, helped them face their fears, and gave them a confidence to go forward and fight the fight," she said.

Dilena has shared a few photos that were cleared for publication, one of which was taken after a grueling CrossFit Easy Day war game. Easy Day is starting to sound like a serious understatement.

"The fire trucks are one of the unknown things that happen," she said. "They show up during training games and hose the troops. Sometimes they spray water and

sometimes they powerfully hose the troops as they go about performing their mission in the games. They are only briefed of an unknown shortly before the games begin, meaning that they don't know what the unknown is, but they have to train through it no matter what."

Dilena has made much use of CrossFit resources available online, just as CrossFitters around the world head to CrossFit.com, the *CrossFit Journal* and special CrossFit sites such as CrossFit Endurance, CrossFit Football and more.

"I have used what I learned from K-Starr (Kelly Starrett) since before the days of MobilityWOD. ... I have retained so much valuable information from his training. Normally, I have difficulty retaining information presented online, but K-Starr brings it all together for me. He deserves immense credit because he explains in detail the science, the why's and how's!"

Dilena also credits a higher power for the success of her program in Kuwait.

"I sincerely believe my God gave me this information for the safety of our troops, as my numbers are legitimately injury-free," she said. "If and when training injuries occurred, it was outside of my training or before my involvement in their training. The troops who were hesitant but not fearful enough would come back to me and explain how they did what they did and say they regretted not listening to the 'inner coach' voice."

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— Sheri Dilena

Dilena noted that her biggest challenge in coaching is encouraging patience. Striving to achieve and overachieve, her athletes have to work really hard at being patient with themselves.

"Patience, by the way, is also mandatory for CrossFit Easy Day," Dilena said. "But I rarely have to say it. I encourage it, and then I sit back and see who responds to it."

While her experience is likely vastly different from most, Dilena shares a great deal with many CrossFit trainers and coaches the world over. When she explained that the greatest reward that comes from training troops is seeing the transformation each person undergoes, she echoed the sentiments of CrossFit trainers all over the globe.

"The light that goes on in the eyes of the new recruit who realizes that he or she can actually get stronger, faster, smarter ... no matter how unfit they are to start out with, it's amazing to witness," she said.

It's the part of the job that brings her the greatest joy.

She also sees a transformation in their leadership, though perhaps it could be described more as relief. In the past, Dilena explained, "Leadership here was sincerely concerned for the troops, and they had lost hope having exhausted their traditional options.

"The frustration that their leadership once knew has taken a dramatic turn to elation and pride. Suddenly experiencing greater retention of future leaders rather than losing them to fitness failure, there's a relief in knowing these are troops that will keep their careers."



About the Author

*E.M. Burton is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer.*