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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## 100 Days of Burpees—and Combat

Justin Conelli finds stability in combat through CrossFit Fort Bragg's 100 Day Burpee Challenge.

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By Justin Conelli

February 2011

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All images courtesy of Justin Conelli

Being deployed is like being in a time machine: days fly by or drag on and are influenced by the ever-changing tide of combat. Your time will undoubtedly be marked by key events that shape your experience, and in war that sometimes means the tragic loss of life. Daily life can be so dynamic you find yourself clutching for any type of routine to return some semblance of normalcy.

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*In the chaos of Afghanistan, Justin Conelli found a link to the stability of home through CrossFit Fort Bragg's Burpee Challenge.*

For a CrossFitter, this will no doubt involve working out, and for me, it involved the CrossFit Fort Bragg 100 Day Burpee Challenge.

I found out my home gym was putting on the burpee challenge and decided I would follow along while I was in Afghanistan. The premise is simple: do one burpee on Day 1, two on Day 2, and so on, until you ultimately complete 100 burpees on Day 100. The rules stated you could break up your daily burpees any way you want, and if you missed a day, the burpees would get carried over to the next day. Additionally, days 25, 50, 75 and 100 would be for time.

I figured it would be a great way to stay in touch with friends at home, as well as to give myself a healthy distraction with which to pass the time. What I could never have anticipated was the life-changing events that would occur during these 100 days. This is my experience.

### **Battlefield Burpees**

**Aug. 30, 2010**—The official start day of the challenge was Aug. 25. At the time, I was on a mission and hadn't committed to the challenge yet. When I returned to base, I was greeted with a nasty stomach bug brought on by the unfortunate act of drinking some tainted water. Over the course of three days, I lost 12 lb. and along with it whatever work capacity I had left from my training for the CrossFit Games. I was a shell of my former self, and it took all I had to complete the 21-burpee buy-in on Day 6 of the challenge.

**Sept. 8**—I completed 92 burpees to catch up from being gone on another mission—a small glimpse of things to come.

**Sept. 16**—We had been out on a mission for days providing security for the Afghan elections. Things were pretty slow, so I decided to knock out some burpees in the field



to lessen the burden when I got back. I had 86 burpees knocked out when I got the first tragic news of the deployment: a fellow brother in arms had been killed in combat. The two of us had just gotten to know each other a few months prior, but we were stationed at the same base, and one of our last conversations was about starting to train in the gym together. He will be missed.

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**Sept. 26**— There's no better warm-up for a workout than 126 burpees. After completing all the reps I again missed due to a mission, I made my attempt at Fight Gone Bad for the FGB5 fundraiser. Lacking all the proper equipment, I did a modified version of the workout, compiling a suspect score of 377, which nonetheless helped raise \$600 for three great causes.

**Oct. 8**—This ended up being the most important day of the challenge for me. I had been gone for over 10 days on a long mission, and the burpees were piling up. Midway through the mission, I got a call on the radio that another brother in arms had been killed not far from where I was while he attempted to save one of his fallen teammates. Despite the awful news, we continued on our mission for another few days with hardly a chance to reflect on what had happened. As we neared the last day of the operation, tragedy struck again as a teammate of mine was injured in battle when his vehicle rolled over. The two of us had been working together at the time of the accident,



*Members of CrossFit Fort Bragg competing in the final workout of the 2010 CrossFit Games Affiliate Cup.*



*Back home, members of CrossFit Fort Bragg were doing CCT 21/23 to raise money for wounded soldiers.*

when suddenly I no longer heard from him. He suffered numerous broken bones and damage to his hip, but thankfully he was able to escape with his life.

When we finally returned to base, everyone was exhausted from the extremely taxing mission. I was certainly in poor spirits, and the thought of doing over 400 burpees to catch up did not exactly sound appealing. The desire to quit was strong, and I could have easily convinced myself of all the reasons why it was OK to do so. But I thought of my teammates who had been injured and killed and all the hard work they put in just to do their jobs, and I decided it would be wrong to quit. I knocked out the 405 burpees I owed and dedicated myself to finishing the rest of the challenge.

**Oct. 9**—The flurry of injuries and deaths in a short period of time touched many people, both deployed and at home. The coaches at CrossFit Fort Bragg put on a fundraiser in honor of the fallen warriors and donated all the money to the Special Operations Warrior Foundation. They devised a workout called “CCT 21/23” in honor of the fallen combat controllers and their respective squadrons. The workout consisted of 50 pull-ups, a 1.5-mile run, 100 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, another 1.5-mile run and 50 more pull-ups—all while wearing a 20-lb. vest. The turnout was spectacular, and CrossFit Fort Bragg was able to raise more than \$2,000 for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation. I completed the WOD here in Afghanistan on the same date with a time of 49:06, after knocking out 46 burpees in the warm-up, of course.

**Oct. 13**—I completed my first timed session, on Day 50, in 2:10.

**Oct. 27**—In what had become a common occurrence, I had to complete 127 burpees to catch up from being on another mission. I had spent the last two days working with another teammate, then found out he too was wounded in combat. He was evacuated from the battlefield to my base to receive medical treatment, and thankfully I was able to greet him when he arrived. I had thought I was numb to this kind of thing but was shocked once again to see one of my friends injured. Thankfully, he received some good medical care and will be able to make a full recovery in time. That night, I took time to reflect on all the sacrifices and heroics that I’d witnessed in such a short period of time, and how experiences like these put life into perspective.

**Nov. 7**—I completed my second timed session, on Day 75, in 3:55.

**Nov. 25**—The Thanksgiving feast over here was surprisingly decent, and I chased it down with 166 burpees to catch up once again.

**Dec. 4**—The final day of the challenge had arrived. I was a couple of days late due to a mission and knocked out 99 reps to catch up. My last session would be 100 burpees for time, bringing the 5,050-rep challenge to an end. I finished the final set in 5:44.

### 100-Day Anchor

I could never have predicted all the events that happened in the 100 days it took to complete this challenge. In the end, it turned into something I never thought it would be: an anchor of stability I could count on every day.

But this small sample of time is just a microcosm of what the men and women of the military have experienced throughout the entirety of the war. I am thankful to share company with such a group of brave patriots.



### About the Author

*Justin Conelli is a special tactics officer in the U.S. Air Force, currently stationed in North Carolina with his lovely wife Elise. They've been members of CrossFit Fort Bragg for over two years, and both competed on the Affiliate Cup team that placed sixth overall at the 2010 CrossFit Games.*