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IN THE DESERT, THEY CALL HIM THE FIXER

A pool party? In Afghanistan? Navy reservist Marc Soss can swing it.

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Marc Soss sits in a cheerless, bare-walled office, high in a Tampa tower. His necktie is tight, his shirt is starched stiff, and his resume bears the dry loyalties of a tax lawyer: wills, contracts, trusts - revocable, irrevocable and charitable.

Soss drove a Honda to work. He left a suburban home, where he watches HGTV and the History Channel, reads Tom Clancy and plays with his daughter. But as the city moves outside his window, Soss launches a computer slide show that shatters the button-down image of a 41-year-old tax lawyer.

The pictures are the color of sand and desert camouflage. They show .50-caliber machine guns and bullets the size of fingers. They show unearthed missiles and bulletproof vests and Lt. Marc J. Soss, in full battle gear, boots planted in Khowst, Afghanistan.

Hold that thought. The year is 1998, and Marc Soss, law degree in hand, signs up for the Navy Reserve. "It was just something I always wanted to do," is how he explains it. Nothing more. This was before Sept. 11, before the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, before things got so serious. Soss of Bradenton plugged along at bay-area bases, serving his country and piping up from time to time at meetings with the career command. "Can I chime in on this?" he would ask. "Well," they'd say, "who are you?"

Now, jump ahead to August 2006, when duty called. He was dispatched to Camp Clark in eastern Afghanistan, a few miles from the Pakistan border. He left the downtown office, swapped starched shirts for fatigues and took a pay cut that would make one wince.

At Camp Clark, he came to be saddled with a duty: director of morale, welfare and recreation. Some soldiers call the job "movie night director." Soss, however, had disdain for the "morale suppressors" in leadership. "To say we didn't get along is an understatement," he says.

Bringing a bit of home to base

So he sought an honorable retaliation. He'd do his job well. That's when it started. Soss became the Fixer. He coordinated two road races for the runners on base, and pulled strings back home to equip them with new gear. He celebrated the birthdays of homesick soldiers with cake. He got Starbucks coffee to Afghanistan. Some of the soldiers wanted to paint the inside of their wooden cabins. Can you get us some paint? they asked Soss. What kind do you want? he asked. White, they said. He came back with eggshell white. What's that? they asked. Don't worry, Soss said. It's

classier. He knew someone who knew someone back home and had delivered head shots autographed by a Playboy centerfold. He built the base DVD collection from scratch to 300. He organized a Caddyshack night, though some of the younger soldiers didn't know what that meant.

He orchestrated a pool party with hot dogs and hamburgers and near-beer. What do you mean, pool party? the leadership asked when he pitched the idea. He built the base gymnasium from two treadmills, two elliptical trainers, a bench and a stationary bike to multiple benches, 10 treadmills and six elliptical trainers. He constructed a Chinese rock garden in front of his bare office.

The man whose favorite ride at Disney World is the carousel secured copies of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. In the desert. In Afghanistan. "Do you ever watch Ultimate Fighting Championship?" he asks a reporter. "I love that s---."

More than that, he loved helping people, seeing them happy. It wasn't just for the young enlistees, but for the village kids near the base. He brought bubble solution for the kids to blow, gave them shoes, clothes and candy from kind folks back home. "It's a third-world country, and they're the future generations," Soss says.

When he left after an injury in October, he felt like his trip was worthwhile. When a man back home heard his story, he nominated Soss for an award. In May, SemperComm, a nonprofit group that honors efforts to boost morale at remote military bases, recognized Soss and three others. He flew to Washington, D.C., met the secretary of the Navy, then came home to resume the work of a tax lawyer.

When the slide show is finished, the machine guns buried inside the hard drive, Soss sits upright at his desk. "I always wanted to do macho stuff," he says.