MCAGCC TWENTYNINE PALMS
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Activation of CTB marks beginning of new era

Lt. Col. Speros C. Koumparakis, commanding officer, Communication Training Battalion, salutes the colors during the playing of the National Anthem at the activation ceremony of CTB at Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Gray Field, March 12.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LANCE CPL. MEDINA AYALA-LO

A Marine color guard stands statuesque on the grass of Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Gray Field. Two Marines approach the color guard and ceremoniously remove the casing from each flag. The flags unfold, one revealing bold stripes and bright stars, the other embellished with an Eagle, Globe and Anchor. The unveiling of the colors mark the beginning of a new era.

An activation ceremony for Communication Training Battalion was held at Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Gray Field, March 12, 2015.

"Within the last three years, it has all come to fruition," said Lt. Col. Speros C. Koumparakis, commanding officer, CTB. "The entire Marine Corps needed to look at structure and places in which we could build efficiency."

In the Marine Corps, communication is the third largest Military Occupational Specialty. For years, the training of commissioned and enlisted was conducted in separate locations. Officers were trained at a communications school at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., and enlisted Marines were trained at the Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School aboard the Combat Center. Although both schools provided training for the same occupational specialty, their missions were different. After nearly 60 years at Edson Hall in Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., the Communications School was deactivated on June 19, 2014, in a ceremony aptly named "End of an Era."

Lt. Col. Speros C. Koumparakis, commanding officer, Communication Training Battalion, speaks to the crowd during the activation ceremony of CTB at Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Gray Field, March 12.

"Today we have activated the Communication Training Battalion, combining training of officer and enlisted under one commander," said Col. Andrew Murray, former commanding officer, Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School. "The history of MCCES and the history of Communication School began in Quantico in 1942, with the establishment of the Signal School. In establishing the Communication Training Battalion this morning we have come

See **CTB pg.** A6

Integrated Task Force LAV Platoon initiates MCOTEA assessment

Lance Cpl. Christopher Aguello, left, driver, and Lance Cpl. Brittany Holloway, right, gunner, both with Light Armored Vehicle Platoon, Company B, Ground Combat Element Integrated Task Force, secure an LAV spare tire during a Marine Corps Operational Test and Evaluation Activity aboard the Combat Center, March 12.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CPL. PAUL S. MARTINEZ

Marines with Light Armored Vehicle Platoon, Company B, Ground Combat Element Integrated Task Force, officially began the Marine Corps Operational Test and Evaluation Activity assessment at Range 500, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, California, March 10, 2015.

Following suit with Tank Platoon and Amphibious Assault Vehicle Platoon, the Marines were observed as they engaged targets with their 25 mm M242 Bushmaster chain guns, equipped with high-explosive and armor-piercing rounds. Keeping with the procedures of the assessment, each Marine wore a heart rate monitor to track individual data.

"Today is a preparation for combat tasks," said Capt. Ben Gallo, LAV functional test manager, Marine Corps Operational Test and Evaluation Activity. "It's what you would expect to have to do to make sure your vehicle is ready for a fight. Then we're moving into live-fire tasks that were pulled from table six of the LAV gunnery manual."

The exercise was modified to include a misfire drill; further challenging crews as they were faced with the unpredictability of having a weapon system go down during an engagement, and having to get it back up again.

In addition, crews were randomized, with a different vehicle commander leading a random gunner and driver throughout the engagement for the purpose of data collectors having as many variables to record as possible.

"I think it's good for everybody to learn how other Marines work and see the differences," said Cpl. Benjamin Alexander, vehicle commander, LAV Plt., Co. B, GCEITF. "I volunteered because it's a new experience. I want to challenge myself and challenge other Marines."

During the live-fire portion of the assessment, crews worked together to assault targets ranging from 900-1,500 meters away in offensive and defensive engagements requiring them to quickly maneuver

See **LAV pg.** A6

MCAGCC Gold holds 7th Regiment Midrange Rifle Competition

CWO2 David Friedman, 3rd Light Armor Reconnaissance Battalion, fires modified M16 at a target 500 yards away during the 7th Regiment Midrange Rifle Competition aboard the Combat Center, March 14, 2015

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LANCE CPL. THOMAS MUDD

As a shooter positions himself at the 300 yard firing line, he looks through his scope and centers the cross-hairs on the target. He steadies his breathing, and slowly pulls the trigger, commencing the 7th Regiment Midrange Shooting Competition.

Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Gold, the Combat Center's shooting team, held a shooting competition for civilians and service members at Range 1, March 14 and 15.

See **Rifle pg.** A6

Marine Corps' Top Shot

[Every week, thousands of fans vote for the week on the best photograph, posted on the Corps' Facebook page. This weeks top shot comes from Cpl. Elize Mckelvey.]

She captured this photo of Marines on a combat rubber raiding craft off the coast of San Diego, Calif., March 4, 2015.

This Week in Combat Center History

Reprinted from the Observation Post
March 20, 1964

Palms Base Airfield Sets Record Landings

"Busiest Little Air Strip in the World": That's the tile the three-man staff of Flight Operations feels would best describe the Base Airfields role as the air "nerve center" of the Operation Winter Night."

Normally, the Flight Op's crew logs an average of "about 225" aircraft a month. During "Operation Winter night" and ending March 11, over 573 landings by GV's R4D's, helicopters and assorted aircraft were recorded.

This figure does not an estimated 200 helicopter landings which were often accomplished on different sectors of the field simultaneuously with larger aircraft and were therefore not recorded.

The three-man Flight Ops crew: LCpl. C. E. Gibson, Cpl. R. L. Herber, and Cpl. E. W. Johnson, performed the herculean task of flight clearance and briefings as to weather, emergency procedure and evacuation. They also maintained an informal pilots-and-crew lounge complete with coffee, box lunches, mags and TV.

On the job from 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., the three Marines (who are not Air Wing personnel) were aided by the officers and men of Marine Air Base Squadron-37 (MABS-37), El Toro, Calif., and Marine Air Traffic Control Unit-65 from Yuma, Ariz.

Technically, MATCU-65 controlled all the aircraft during the operation from their Marine Corps Expeditionary Control Tower which was erected at the south-east end of the Base airstrip. MABS-37, whose mission is to set up and maintain an airfield where ever needed, installed runway light for night operations, manned crash and fire trucks, and furnished mess and transportation facilities for its own and attached personnel.

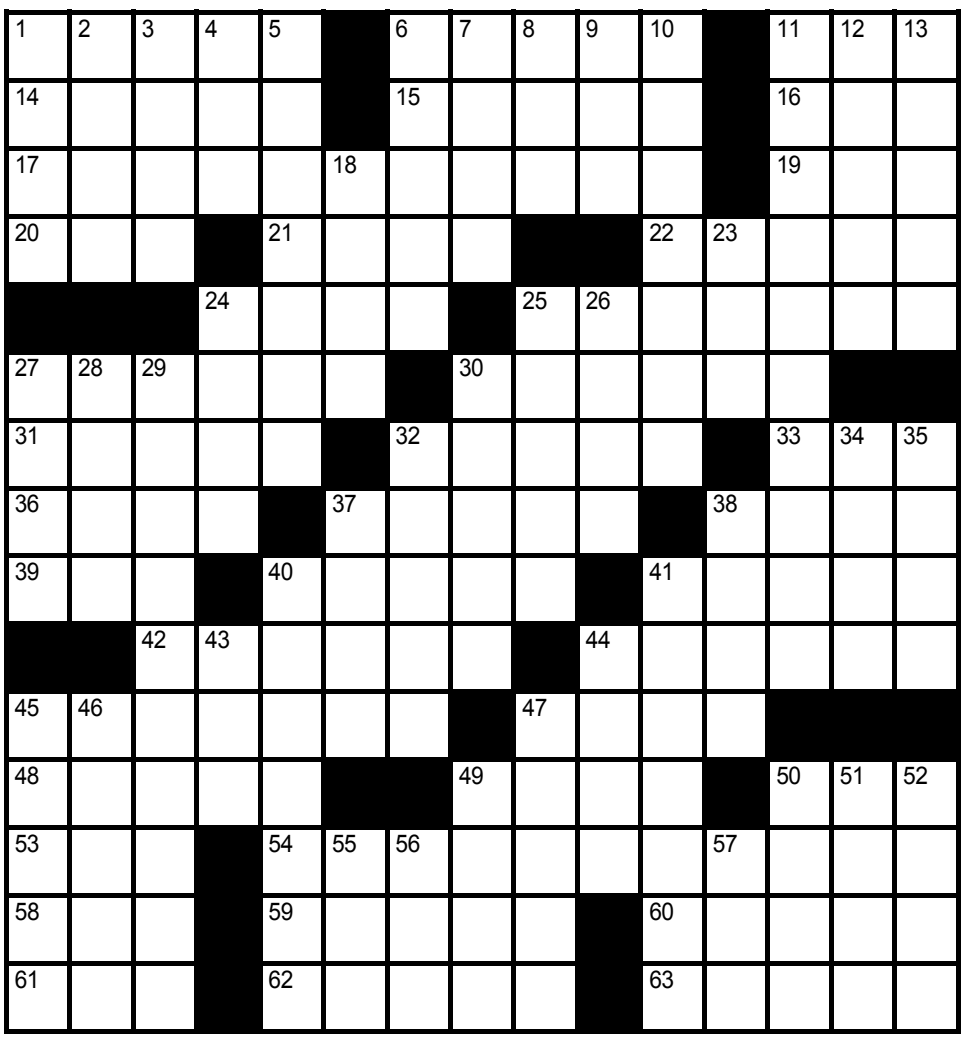
No mission records were kept at the SATS-site heli-strip, built in five days by 14 men of "d" Co., 7th Engineers to support "Winter Night," but observation aircraft and helicopters gulped down in excess of 100,000 gallons of gasoline from the bulk fuel facilities there.

The remarkable proficiency of the pilots, crewman, and maintenance personnel is attested by the fact that only three 'choppers were grounded under emergency conditions (loss of RPM's) during the entire operation, with no injuries and no permanent damage suffered.

After the Operation's "cease fire" was given, the Base Strip's bee-hive activity was, incredibly, stepped up. Flights of HUS and HR2S 'copters shuttled men and equipment in from the "battle field" and huge GV's transported them to El Toro and Camp Pendleton.

During the three-day period, from Monday through Wednesday, more than 10,000 Marines, their weapons and gear, ranging from Mules to road graders, were airlifted in 118 missions from the Base Airfield.

CROSSWORD



Across

1 Wall painting
6 Brimming
11 To's opposite
14 Video game pioneer
15 One-named Italian model
16 Alley-___ (court play)
17 Quality-check broadcast
19 Adventurer's aversion
20 Viper type
21 Harte of fiction
22 More than fubsy
24 Beast's hideout
25 Took Carnival
27 "Brrr!"
30 Christie detective
31 Biblical prophet
32 Feudal folks
33 Anti-stick spray
36 Fed lines to
37 Parade figure, informally, hidden in each of the long answers
38 Birthday order
39 The classifieds
40 Opening pitch
41 Knock across, as a run
42 Wrecks (a car)
44 Hindu deity
45 Utmost
47 It may need air
48 Scarlett of "Gone With the Wind"
49 ___ up (lay off the fastballs)
50 Light start?
53 However
54 2008 Brad Thor bestseller, with "The"
58 Semicircle path
59 "Macbeth" title
60 Aquaria
61 "Well, la-di-___!"
62 Cartoon Viking
63 All atwitter

Down

1 ___ Hari (spy)
2 Members of the Shoshonean people
3 Rough file
4 MOMA display
5 Relief for chaps
6 On the tail of
7 Light bulb unit
8 $5 bill, in slang
9 General, to a colonel
10 Order of the British Empire and others
11 Way through the woods
12 Fire up
13 Elected (to)
18 In a drought
23 Life cut short?
24 Deafening
25 Word with reef or snake
26 Narrow fissure
27 Peruvian ancestor
28 Tennyson poem
29 Jersey decoration
30 Le Pew and Le Moko
32 Scaler's steps
34 Alike
35 Hash house handout
37 Canned meat name
38 Argument
40 Type of bomber
41 Church hat
43 Legendary iceman
44 Passport permit
45 Not ___ (fair)
46 Capt. Kirk bridgemate
47 Come to the point
49 Lab burner
50 Salon job
51 "Iron Chef" props
52 "___ Bitsy Spider," children's song
55 "I got you!"
56 Give a little, in a way
57 Headed for the hills

SUDOKU

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			8				9	
			1			8		
	5						4	
		3			6			
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		4			8	1		

Last week's answers

A	S	A	P	■	S	P	L	I	T	■	O	A	T	S
M	O	N	A	■	P	R	O	N	E	■	O	G	R	E
P	U	T	T	■	A	M	O	R	E	■	H	O	Y	A
S	P	I	R	I	T	A	N	I	M	A	L	■	■	■
■	■	■	O	V	E	N	S	■	■	P	A	B	S	T
B	E	N	N	Y	■	■	■	■	P	A	L	A	T	E
I	C	E	S	■	A	M	E	R	I	C	A	N	M	E
G	Z	A	■	C	L	I	M	A	T	E	■	K	A	N
D	E	L	T	A	B	L	U	E	S	■	N	O	R	I
A	M	O	E	B	A	■	■	■	■	K	A	N	Y	E
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O	G	L	E	■	E	R	R	E	D	■	H	I	R	E
G	E	L	S	■	D	O	Y	L	E	■	A	N	E	W

1	4	9	8	7	5	2	6	3
7	6	2	9	4	3	5	1	8
5	3	8	6	2	1	9	7	4
3	1	5	2	8	7	4	9	6
9	7	6	5	3	4	1	8	2
2	8	4	1	6	9	7	3	5
4	2	7	3	1	8	6	5	9
8	9	1	4	5	6	3	2	7
6	5	3	7	9	2	8	4	1

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- Main Street Motel, 3494 Main St.
-Vulcan Baths, 805 W. Cedar St.

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- STC Smoke Shop, 6001 Adobe Rd.
- K Smoke Shop, 5865A Adobe Rd.

In Yucca Valley:
- Yucca Tobacco Mart, 57602 29 Palms Hwy.
- Puff's Tobacco Mart, 57063 29 Palms Hwy.

In Palm Springs:
- Village Pub, 266 S. Palm Canyon Dr.
- Whispering Palms Apts., 449 E. Arenas Road
- NYPD Pizza, 260-262 N. Palm Canyon Drive

For the complete orders, but not off-limits, check out the Combat Center's official-website at http://www.29palms.marines.mil

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Beverly MILLER

Home town job, rank, age

Miller has worked for Information, Tickets and Tours in the Main Exchange 15 years.

> I grew up in Louisiana, near New Orleans. I lived there for 22 years before I left with my husband.

> My husband was a Marine for 23 years. We lived in North Carolina, South Carolina, Key West, Fla., [Marine Corps Base] Camp Pendleton, and [Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center] Twentynine Palms.

> I loved going from place to place where I met a lot of new people and experienced new things. I made the best of any place I went.

> I believe that you are a guest where ever you go. Once you have been there a little while and have made a place of your own, then you will begin to enjoy the area.

> It was tough at times because my husband was not always home. He deployed to Vietnam three times for at least 13 months, if not longer, and there was also a time where he was on the drill field.

> The fact that he was not always home made me grow closer to my children. We used to get everything cleaned up before the weekend and then spend the rest of the weekend playing.

> When we first moved out here, I told my husband that the children and I were going to live in Oceanside, Calif. I did not want to live out here at all, but after about a year I was told that I had to.

> I grew to love this place. I'm pretty sure there are claw marks in the desert from when they told me I had to leave.

> I dislike when people say they don't like it here. I love it and if you really make this place your own, it is a wonderful place to live.

> After all the time I spent in the military with my husband, I went back to Louisiana and I did not really feel at home. I had done all this traveling and the rest of my family never left, which made me feel out of place.

> I moved back here when my daughter, who had married a Marine, moved here. Shortly after, my son moved here as well. Neither of them plan on moving away anytime soon and with both of my kids here, I would not want to be anywhere else.

> Now I work in a job that focuses on traveling. I have been to most of the places we offer, so I have personal stories to help people make the right choice for their trip.

> I applied for this job about a year after I moved back here. I got placed in the ITT department.

> At first I asked for a part time job but that did not last long before I asked for more time. I absolutely love doing this job.

> My favorite part about working with the ITT and MCCS is I get to meet all sorts of people and I help them choose fun things to do.

> One of the things I love to do is travel and I have been on several cruises. My favorite cruise was the one we took through the Panama Canal. It was the canal's 100th anniversary, so it made it a special occasion.

> I have met so many people that when I go out, I pretty much always see someone that I recognize. I love that about Twentynine Palms.

> I wake up every day looking forward to going to work and seeing the people of the area. It is what makes the time I put in worth it.

INTERVIEW AND PHOTO BY LANCE CPL. THOMAS MUDD

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Combat Center Marines represent Corps, Country

Pfc. Quami Dixon, student, Marine Corps Communications-Electronics School, native of New York, salutes the American Flag during the Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas Tennis Open's Salute to Heroes Ceremony in Indian Wells, Calif., March 13. The flag the Marines held spanned the area of the main court.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LANCE CPL. JULIO MCGRAW

INDIAN WELLS, Calif., – A spotlight shined on the statuesque Combat Center Color Guard holding the United States and Marine Corps flags. The sounds of more than 12,000 cheering fans echoed throughout the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, where television cameras internationally broadcasted the presentation of the colors.

Combat Center Marines and Color Guard were featured during Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas Open's Salute to Heroes at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, Calif., March 13.

Sgt. Holly West, instructor, Marine Corps Communications-Electronics School, flipped the coin at the start of the first tennis match. The Combat Center Color Guard presented the colors and more than 80 Marines from MCCES displayed an American flag that spanned the main tennis court.

"I felt honored to hold our nation's flag," said Pfc. Brittany Stevens, student, MCCES. "Nothing feels more patriotic than holding the flag in front of essentially the entire world."

The Salute to Heroes ceremony took place after Serena Williams and Monica Niculescu's, professional tennis players, match in which Williams was victorious. The match and ceremony were broadcasted on various sports channels.

At the end of the match, Marines were given a free meal at the food stands around the stadium, where many attendees of the open stopped and thanked them for their service.

"Not every Marine gets the chance to represent the Marine Corps like we did," said Sgt. Taylor Hunt, color sergeant, Combat Center Color Guard. "I think we didn't just represent the Marine Corps, but we represented the entire nation."

The Combat Center Color Guard presents the American and Marine Corps Flag during the Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas Tennis Open's Salute to Heroes Ceremony in Indian Wells, Calif., March 13. The ceremony took place after Serena Williams and Monica Niculescu's match in which Williams was victorious.

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Marines from the Marine Corps Communications-Electronic School salute the American Flag during the playing of national anthem at the Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas Tennis Open's Salute to Heroes Ceremony in Indian Wells, Calif., March 13. The Combat Center Color Guard and more than 80 Marines Participated in the ceremony.

Pfc. Brittany Stevens, student, Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School, native of Overland Park, Kan., prepares to march on to the tennis court during the Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas Tennis Open's Salute to Heroes Ceremony in Indian Wells, Calif., March 13. Marines unraveled an American Flag in-front of more than 12,000 cheering fans.

Marine Corps Communications-Electronics School Marines salute the American Flag during the Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas Tennis Open's Salute to Heroes Ceremony in Indian Wells, Calif., March 13. More than 80 Marines from the school participated in the ceremony.

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MCCS continues to play integral part in Combat Center community

STORY BY LANCE CPL. MEDINA AYALA-LO

The mission of the Combat Center is to not only train Marines for live-fire combined arms scenarios, but also to maintain and continually improve upon quality of life for those who call the Combat Center home. Marine Corps Community Services plays a pivotal role in that mission by providing services to the Marines, sailors and families aboard base.

MCCS is present across the Corps and serves as a means to increase the quality of life of service members and their families on bases around the globe. The Marine Corps established MCCS in 1999 and to this day it remains the sole organization within the Department of Defense that combines family services, off-duty volunteer education, youth programs, recreation and Marine Corps exchanges under a single organizational structure.

"MCCS' mission is to provide services and support to Marines, sailors and their families while aboard the Combat Center," said Brent Norquist, deputy assistant chief of staff, MCCS. "We do that through [more than] 40 separate programs that we provide to Marines and sailors."

MCCS is split into three well-defined lines of operation. The first is the Marine and Family Support Directorate, the second is SemperFit and the third is the Business Operations.

The Marine and Family Support Directorate encompass all of the counseling centers. Centers such as marriage counseling, substance abuse counseling and the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program are covered. Under SemperFit falls the Single Marine Program and the recreational activities that occur on base.

The third line, Business Operations, is key because it generates the revenue needed to help support the other two lines of operation. All of the profits that are made through various programs are re-invested into the organization.

"We exist to provide services and support to the Marines, sailors and families of the Combat Center," said Lt. Col. Frank Q. Marilao, assistant chief of staff, MCCS. "The component of family readiness is also very important, because when Marines deploy, they don't have to worry about what's going on at home because there's a group of folks who is dedicated to taking care of them."

There are 71 separate programs that fall under MCCS Marine Corps-wide, 40 of which Combat Center MCCS offers. MCCS as a whole currently employs more than 12,000 civilians and operates more than 2,250 facilities worldwide. Those who benefit from the facilities include active duty service members, reservists, retirees, DoD civilians and contractors, and family members.

"Our organization does touch a number of different aspects of a Marine's life," Norquist said. "Our goal is to provide as much support to the war fighters and their families so they can focus on completing their mission and they can be secure in the knowledge that we have their backs and are taking care of the rest."

> ***"MCCS' mission is to provide services and support to Marines, sailors and their families while aboard the Combat Center."***
>
> – Lt. Col. Frank Q. Marilao

> ***"When Marines deploy, they don't have to worry about what's going on at home because there's a group of folks who is dedicated to taking care of them."***
>
> – Lt. Col. Frank Q. Marilao

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(Missouri Synod)
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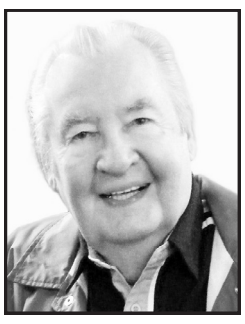
TOUGH MINDED OPTIMISM

by Lou Gerhardt



I left the Hi-Desert Continuing Care Center March 1 grateful for the wonderful care being provided day by day and night by night for people I care so much about. I have four men and women experiencing loving and patient care even as I write these words. I am thinking of Mary, Peggy, Nancy and Edward. What a caring community of people they are. They are always serving the residents!

Imagine my satisfaction when the Hi-Desert Continuing Care Center had been selected by the participants in the Hi-Desert Publishing Co. annual survey as the "best of the best" senior care facility in the Morongo Basin.

Patty and I have lived in the Morongo Basin for 19 years and I know what a fine place the Hi-Desert Continuing Care Center is. I have walked their halls, visited in room after room, conducted worship services of various kinds, eaten their nutritious meals, been good friends with many of the dedicated staff, and I know for a fact it really is an excellent "home away from home."

These words from their own literature say it best:

"At the continuing Care Center, we pride ourselves on being a place that's most like home—but with the support services necessary for those in need of nursing care and other care assistance.

We customize our services to meet each of our residents' personal preferences, special needs, strengths and capabilities. We offer the latest medical advancements along with comprehensive activities and socialization programs."

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OBSERVATION POST
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Spouses go toe-to-toe in kickball league

Ashley Mariano, pitcher, the First Ladies, pitches the ball during a spouses' kickball game at Felix Field, March 15. The participating teams include the Lady Coyotes, the Lady Spartans, The Crash, the First Ladies and the Grass Stains.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PFC. LEVI SCHULTZ

Spouses of Twentynine Palms Area Kickball Association engaged in some friendly competition during a kickball game at Felix Field aboard the Combat Center, March 15, 2015.

According to Jennifer Madden, STPAKA commissioner, native of Franklin, Ind., the program provides a means for military spouses to get outside, build bonds with the community and improve their health through exercise.

"This is our first season and our third Sunday playing," Madden said. "It's open to spouses of Marine and Navy personnel aboard the Combat Center."

The association currently has more than 70 spouses participating, who are divided into five teams based on to what unit their husband is assigned. The teams are the Lady Coyotes, the Lady Spartans, the Crash, the First Ladies and the Grass Stains.

"Its basic baseball or softball rules with a few changes," Madden said. "It's kickball. If you don't throw a few rules into the game, then it's too easy."

One example of the modified rules is that each player must hold a cup of water while running bases, without spilling any in order to score points.

The spring season started March 1 and is scheduled to conclude April 15. The five teams will participate in a tournament April 12 at Felix Field.

"Unit camaraderie is a big thing," Madden said. "We should know each other if our husbands are working together, and it's a great way to get out, get some exercise and meet new people."

For additional information contact Madden at 317-213-0778.

Jessica Kick, in-fielder, the Crash, kicks the ball during a spouses' kickball game at Felix Field, March 15. The league currently has more than 70 spouses participating who are divided into five teams.

Kandi Hart, in-fielder, the First Ladies, catches the ball during a spouses' kickball game at Felix Field March 15. This is the Spouses of Twentynine Palms Area Kickball Association's first season aboard the Combat Center.

Julia Cramer, pitcher, the Lady Coyotes, kicks the ball during a spouses' kickball game at Felix Field, March 15. Cramer plays for the Lady Coyotes, which consists of spouses from the Marine Corps Tactical Training Exercise Control Group.

Eileen Murray, pitcher, the Grass Stains, pitches the ball during a spouses' kickball game at Felix Field, March 15. The Spring Kickball League started March 1 and is scheduled until April 15

Combat Center Events

The Education Center will be offering free SAT preparation from Feb. 1 to March 22 in bldg. 1524. The course topics that will be focused on are math, writing and critical reading. The course's objective is to increase test scores, introduce test –taking strategies, and connect students with others who are taking the SAT and many more. For more information call 760-830-6881.

The registration and mandatory coaches meeting for the Intermural Softball Competition will be held March 24 at 12:00 p.m. at the sports office building 1341. The season will star April 7. The competition is free for active duty personnel and $20 for all others with current identification. For more information call 760-830-4092.

The Wood Hobby Shop provides low-cost laser engraving services to imprint unique messages and designs onto almost any surface. Patrons can also purchase woodworking supplies and lumber to build or repair your own woodwork, craft and hobby items. Patrons using the woodworking machinery are required to attend a free safety class first. For more information contact 760-830-7214.

The Education and Career Fair will be held at the West Gym bldg. 1518. If you are looking to further your education, develop new skills or looking to explore new career fields, come by and see what the fair has to offer. Be sure to bring your resume. Suggested attire is business dress or uniform. For more information call 760-830-7225.

Come visit Sandy Hill Lanes Bowling Center. With well-maintained lanes, large screen televisions, and a digital jukebox, it's a great facility for indoor recreational fun and relaxation. Tournaments are offered regularly and cosmic bowling runs every Friday and Saturday evening. For more information contact 760-830-422.

Sunset Cinema

Friday, March 20
4:30 p.m. – Big Hero 6, PG, Free Admission
7:00 p.m. – Black or White, PG-13
9:30 p.m. – Project Almanac, PG-13
12:00 a.m. – Focus, R

Saturday, March 21
10:30 a.m. – The Book of Life, PG-13, Free Admission
12:30 p.m. – The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out Of Water, PG, 3-D
3:00 p.m. – Seventh Son, PG-13, 3-D
5:30 p.m. – Jupiter Ascending, PG-13, 3-D
8:30 p.m. – McFarland, USA, PG
11:30 p.m. – Hot Tube Time Machine 2, R

Sunday, March 22
12:30 p.m. – The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out Of Water, PG, 3-D
2:30 p.m. – Hot Tube Time Machine 2, R
5:00 p.m. – The DUFF, PG-13
7:30 p.m. – Focus, R

Monday, March 23
7:00 p.m. – Jupiter Ascending, PG-13, 3-D

Tuesday, March 24
7:00 p.m. – Seventh Son, PG-13, 3-D

Wednesday, March 25
5:00 p.m. – The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge out of Water, PG, 3-D
7:30 p.m. – Hot Tub Time Machine 2, R

Thursday, March 26
5:00 p.m. – Black or White, PG-13
7:30 p.m. – Project Almanac, PG-13

Friday, March 27
6:00 p.m. – The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out Of Water, PG
8:30 p.m. – Seventh Son, PG-13
11:00 p.m. – Jupiter Ascending, PG-13

Slick Willy

Will Smith is supercool scammer in international con caper

NEIL POND

"Focus"
Starring Will Smith & Margot Robbie
Directed by Glenn Ficarra & John Requa
Rated R

In Hollywood, everyone loves a con man. From The Sting to American Hustle, movies about charismatic con artists, scamp-ish scammers and fun-loving flimflammers have been parting moviegoers from their money for decades.

Will Smith, once one of the most bankable movie stars on the planet, takes on the genre with Focus, a sleek and stylish caper flick that combines the con with comedy and romance. In Hollywood shorthand, they call that a rom-con.

Smith plays Nicky, a smooth, charming career criminal in charge of a hipster crew of pickpockets, thieves and other masters at separating unsuspecting schmoes from their credit cards, wallets, watches, jewelry and other valuables. In the opening scene, he turns the tables on the beautiful Jess (Margot Robbie), a small(er)-time hustler who quickly becomes his partner and his protégé—and, soon enough, his lover.

Nicky and Jess swap life stories, hop in and out of the sack and embark on a stealing spree in New Orleans over Super Bowl weekend that nets over $1 million in swiped goods. But the movie doesn't really catch fire until fully 45 minutes in, when they encounter a high-rolling businessman (B.D. Wong) at the big game who entices Nicky into a round of ridiculously high-stakes gambling. The drama builds to the tune of the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil," which, we later find out, is something quite more than just a song on the soundtrack.

But in this movie, with everyone on the take and on the make, and some kind of sleight of hand in practically every scene, nothing is quite what it seems—and you can't really trust anyone…or can you? This is especially true in the second half of the movie, when the story jumps ahead three years and across the globe, and all the characters end up in a completely different scenario, in different "roles."

Gerald McCraney comes onto the scene (and possibly onto Nicky); Brazilian movie superstar Rodrigo Santoro plays a suave Formula 1 racing stud; and Adrian Martinez, who's been in some 80 moves and TV shows as a supporting player, provides a lot of levity—and much of the reason for the movie's R rating—as Nicky's loyal sidekick.

Focus keeps you guessing. And it's gorgeous to look at with two beautiful co-stars, often bathed in sensuous, sexy close-ups. Robbie, who made such a splash in The Wolf of Wall Street, makes a particularly strong impression in this constantly evolving cat-and-mouse game. The on-location shots, especially when the action shifts to Buenos Aires, are golden, sunbaked vistas that will chase away even the deepest winter blues. The director-writer team of Glenn Ficarra and John Requa (Bad Santa; I Love You, Phillip Morris; and Crazy, Stupid Love) know how to keep things lively, luscious and lovely.

The dialogue can be dumb and clunky, the action isn't quite as crisp as it could be, the danger never quite sharpens to a knife's edge of worry about anyone, and some of the extremely complicated scheming requires some big, big stretching to swallow. But Focus has so much eye-candy razzle-dazzle, and it all looks so fabulous, it makes you forget about many of those pesky things, lost in its cool, groovy vibes and its long-con gamesmanship, and—hey, just a minute: Where's my wallet?!!

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