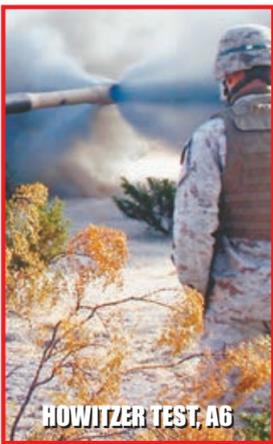


Serving the MCAGCC
Community at
Twentynine Palms, Calif.

VOL. 52 NO. 14
April 7, 2006



OBSERVATION POST



BULK RATE
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THIS ISSUE

A7- Master Sgt. Fix

B1 - Circus Chimera

B2 - Airline Ride Across America

HOT TOPICS

COMMISARY CLOSED EASTER SUNDAY

The Commissary will be closed Sunday April 16 in observance of Easter Sunday. The Commissary will reopen on Tuesday April 18 from 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.

LANDSCAPING

There will be landscaping construction at the bottom of the hill between the west side of Adobe road and the jogging trail, from the main gate to Del Valle. This work will take place from March till the end of May. Traffic will not be impeded during this period.

TAX DEADLINE IS APRIL 17

The official season for the 2005 tax year is almost here. Last day to file your taxes is April 17. Late filing and payment fees along with interest on amount owed may be charged if taxpayers did not have enough withholding during the year.

The tax office is located at the Village Center, Bldg 1551. Office hours are 7:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. Monday-Friday. The office will close at noon on Friday, April 14 and be closed all day April 17 due to the holiday weekend. Please plan accordingly. It is recommended that appointments be scheduled by calling 830-4829. Walk-ins are welcome but there will be a wait due to demand. No children are allowed at the tax center. Please make arrangements for day care.

If you prefer a direct deposit of your refund, bring in proof of your bank account, such as a MyPay print-out or a blank check showing your routing and account numbers. A joint tax return refund must be deposited into a joint bank account.

Service members who served in a combat zone may elect to have their non-taxable combat pay included in earned income if this will increase their earned income credit. A combat zone extension is available for filing tax returns, paying taxes, filing claims for refund and taking other actions with the IRS.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

- 3/4 Sgt. Maj. Change of Command
- CLB-7 Memorial Service
- IED Lane

THIS DAY IN MARINE CORPS HISTORY

7 April 1917

Marines fought in the Battle of Las

Canitas in the

Dominican Republic.

Families, friends, Combat Center welcome home 3/7



Family members of 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment cheer as a convoy of buses brings four busloads of Marines and Sailors back to the Combat Center to reunite with their family March 29.

LANCE CPL. MICHAEL S. CIFUENTES

COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

Families and friends of the Marines and Sailors of 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment left different areas of the country to gather at the Combat Center's Victory Field March 29 and 31 to welcome home from Iraq their seven-months-deployed loved ones.

Anticipation and anxiety ran high on both days as families showed up hours in advance to reserve a spot on the field, where they could post their welcome back signs and wait to greet their loved ones with hugs and kisses.

The return relieved a lot of stress and worry for many families, such as the Fords from Little Rock, Ark. Their pride streamed through the whole family, even the youngest, Matt Ford, the 9-year-old brother of Lance Cpl. Marc A. Ford, an ammunition man with Lima Company.

"I wrote him every chance I had," said Matt as he waited in desert digital pattern utilities for his brother to come home. "I even got to talk to him on the phone when he was gone. He told me a lot about Iraq. He told me it was a very bad place right now, and they're making it better. I was pretty scared. I didn't want him to get hurt."

Matt has a picture of him hanging up in his fourth grade classroom. He's very proud to have an older brother to look up to, and he dreams to become a Marine like his older brother, he said. He even role-plays as an infantryman when he plays with his friends at home.

See 37, A5



Lance Cpl. Morgan R. Ballis, a Tucson, Ariz., native with Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, receives a kiss from his 5-year-old brother, Ryan, at Victory Field after returning home March 29.

3rd LAR keeps watchful eyes on Iraq's rural western region

CPL. GRAHAM A. PAULSGROVE
1ST MARINE DIVISION



In western Al Anbar province, Iraq, Marine patrols must be on the alert at all times for insurgent activities, even in areas deemed friendly, such as Raballah, Iraq.

JOINT BORDER COORDINATION CENTER RUTBAH, Iraq — Trading one desert for another, Marines based in California's Mojave Desert have returned for another deployment to Iraq's Al Anbar province.

For some of the Marines, it's their third deployment in as many years in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Marines, from the Twentynine Palms, Calif.-based 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, are charged with conducting continued security and stability operations in this vast desert region of Iraq.

But the Marines have an additional mission this go-around: to train Iraqi soldiers to take over the region by year's end. The unit's "area of operations" spans from the Iraqi-Jordanian border to more than 120 miles east into Al Anbar's southwestern desert.

The Marines work hand-in-hand with the Iraqi soldiers, who are beginning to take the lead in more operations in western Al Anbar province.

It's a mission they don't take lightly.

Block the bad guys

"We have mainly been doing cordon and knocks in the towns, route security, and manning check points with the Iraqi soldiers," said Cpl. Jeremy D. Quackenbush, describing the battalion's first few weeks in the region.

At the Joint Border Control Center here Marines and Iraqi soldiers maintain a heavy presence in this bermed-up city. Iraqi and Coalition Forces conduct

See 3rd LAR, A4



Birth announcements

COLBY OWEN THACKER

Son of Lance Cpl. and Mrs. Jacob Thacker
Born Feb. 18, 2006, weighing 8 lbs. 14 oz.
and measuring 19 inches.

CAROLINE ELISABETH BOND

Daughter of 1st Lt. and Mrs. Michael L. Bond
Born Feb. 20, 2006, weighing 9 lbs. 11 oz.
and measuring 22 inches.

KIANA ROSE FLANARY

Daughter of Staff Sgt. and Mrs. Sean K. Flanary
Born Feb. 20, 2006, weighing 5 lbs. 7 oz. and measuring 19.5 inches.

MADDOX ALLAN CANTWELL

Son of Mr. and Mrs. David Cantwell
Born Feb. 23, 2006, weighing 6 lbs. 14 oz. and measuring 20 inches.

DOMINICK VINCENT ALVARADO

Son of Petty Officer 3rd Class. and Mrs. Alexis Alvarado
Born Feb. 27, 2006, weighing 6 lbs. 15 oz. and measuring 19.8 inches.

MYRALI RAMOS

Daughter of Cpl. and Mrs. Luis Ramos
Born Feb. 28, 2006, weighing 6 lbs. 13 oz. and measuring 19.6 inches.

JONATHAN RYAN HUBER

Son of Staff Sgt. and Mrs. John Huber
Born March 1, 2006, weighing 6 lbs. 7 oz. and measuring 19.2 inches.

VIKTORIA KAITLIN KING

Daughter of Capt. and Mrs. Travis M. King
Born March 1, 2006, weighing 6 lbs. 14 oz. and measuring 19 inches.

JAMES MICHAEL McCOY Jr.

Son of Lance Cpl. and Mrs. James McCoy
Born March 3, 2006, weighing 7 lbs. 11 oz. and measuring 20.6 inches.

ALEXANDRA ELISE AGUILAR

Daughter of Mr. Anthony Aguilar and Mrs. Priscilla Gumataotao
Born March 5, 2006, weighing 7 lbs. 3 oz. and measuring 20.6 inches.

CHRISTOPHER DEMOSTHENOUS Jr.

Son of Staff Sgt. and Mrs. Christopher Demosthenous
Born March 6, 2006, weighing 6 lbs. 13 oz. and measuring 20 inches.

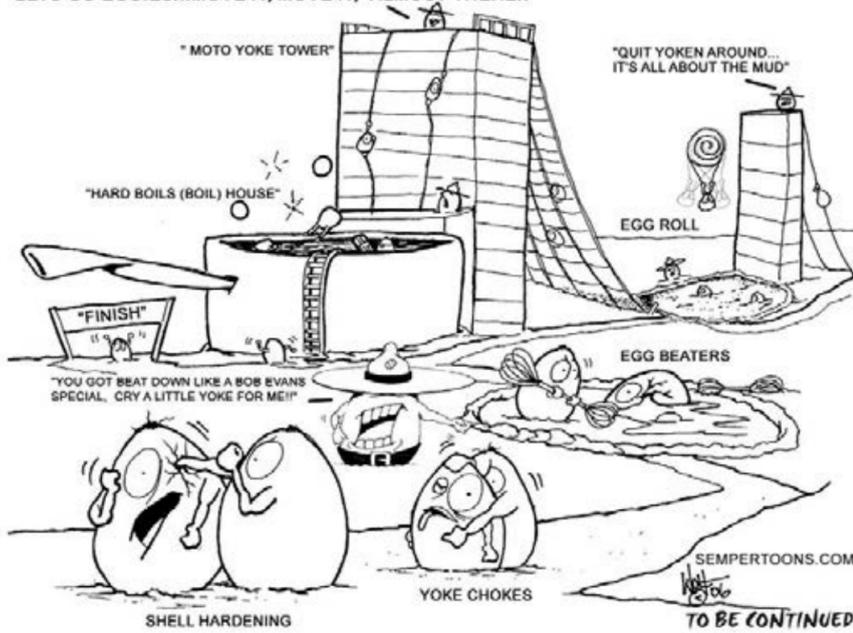
Sempertoons

By Gunnery Sgt. Charles Wolf

PART 3 of a 4 PART SERIES
SemperToons Presents: How Easter Eggs get hard for Easter.

The final test before becoming true Hard Boiled Eggs is the "CRACKABLE" This 2 minute event will push a YOKE to their very limit. Not all yokes make it through each of the grueling events, but those that do find an Easter pride most eggs only talk about while on the shelf at FOOD LION.

"Its tuff to be Hard, but, tougher to be HARD Boiled"
LETS GO EGGIES...MOVE IT, MOVE IT, ALMOST THERE!!



C.O.P. Corner



Community Oriented Policing

The proactive voice of crime prevention



Presented by the Provost Marshal's Office Crime Prevention Section

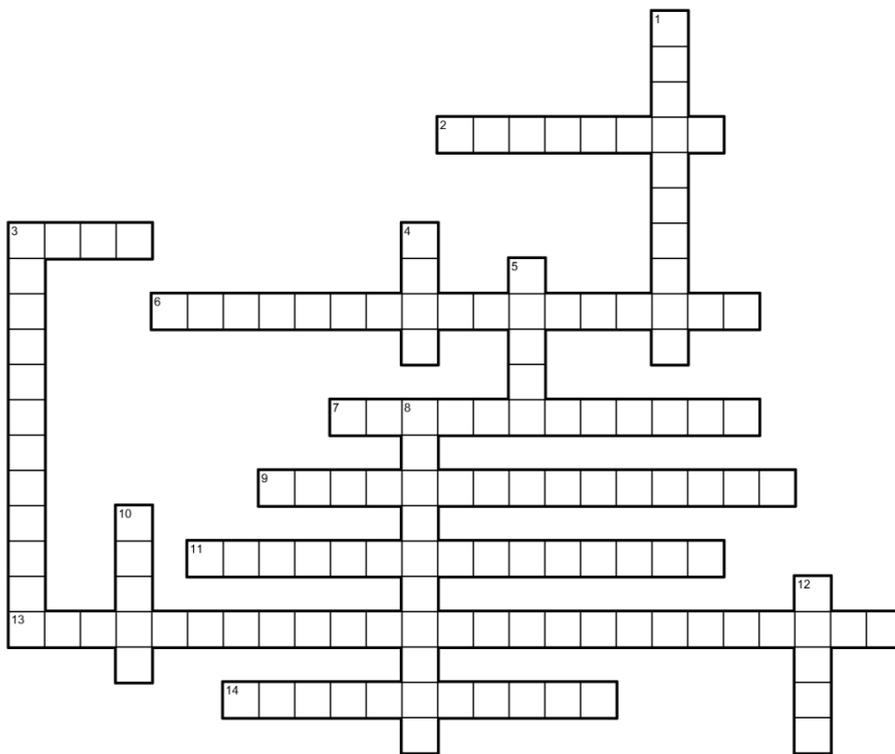
Are your children safe while playing?

- There is safety in numbers. Encourage your children to play with a group of friends. Tell them to avoid places that could be dangerous such as vacant buildings, alleys, playgrounds or parks with broken equipment and litter.
- Teach your children to settle arguments with words, not fists, and to walk away when others are arguing. Remind them that taunting and teasing can hurt friends and make enemies.
- Inform your children of the safest routes to and from school, stores, and friends' houses. Walk the routes together and point out places they could go for help.
- Teach your children to be alert in the neighborhood, and tell you, a teacher, a neighbor, or a police officer about anything they see that doesn't seem quite right.
- Learn the school's policies on absent children. Are parents called when a child is absent?
- Check out daycare and after-school programs, look at certifications, staff qualifications, rules on parental permission slips for field trips, reputation in the community, parent participation, and policies on parental visits.

The following services are available to on-base personnel and residents through Crime Prevention: literature, briefs, education, crime assessments, safety tips, the Stranger Danger program, McGruff the Crime Dog, the Officer Friendly program, the Property Marking program, and the Child Identification and Fingerprinting program. For more information call Crime Prevention, 830-6094/5457.

Presented by the Provost Marshal's Office Crime Prevention Section

MOVIES WE DON'T ADMIT WE LIKE



ACROSS

- A widower's spirit leaves his body and is able to communicate with his three children.
- "___! Or my mom will shoot!"
- "There's no crying in baseball!"
- This little league football team came up with the play "The Annexation of Puerto Rico."
- "It's not a tumor."
- Much of the film is portrayed through the thoughts of a baby, Mikey.
- "...Heroes in a half shell... Turtle Power!"
- ___ the Babysitter's Dead.

DOWN

- "Follow the yellow brick road."
- "Something wonderful has happened... Number Five is alive!"
- "Think of a happy place, Peter."
- ___ Fang. A movie based off a novel by Jack London about a wolf that becomes tamed.
- A film about a band of kids from a section of Astoria, Oregon called the "Goon Docks."
- Unlikely twins, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito, who were separated at birth.
- A boy, whose bike was run over by a robber, received a ___ check and writes it out for a million dollars.

[Solutions on A4]

Centerspeak

"What's the best/worst April Fool's joke you have been a part of?"

Opinions expressed in Centerspeak are not necessarily those of the OBSERVATION POST, the Marine Corps or Department of Defense.



LANCE CPL. JEREMY SMITH
1ST TANKS, ALPHA COMPANY

"My wife told her mother we had called off the wedding. Her mother was pretty upset."



JOY HOWARD
SCHOOLTEACHER, VISITING

"My boyfriend told me he was activated and he wasn't at the time, but the next day he actually did get activated."



LANCE CPL. MARSHALL SPRING
HQBN, PROVOST MARSHAL OFFICE

"We convinced a new Marine to ask one of the corporals how many pull-ups the corporal's dad can do. We had already planned for the corporal to say his dad doesn't have any arms and get all upset at the Marine. He's still scared to ask anybody anything."



SGT. CHAD WHITEHEAD
3/4, HEADQUARTERS & SERVICE

"Icy Hot on the toilet seat."

What's on your mind?

Centerspeak welcomes questions or submissions from service members, Department of Defense civilians and family members.

Address submissions to:
Commanding General
Public Affairs Office
(Attn. Press Chief)
MCAGCC
Box 788200
Twentynine Palms, CA 92278-8200

Or E-mail to:
evan.eagan@usmc.mil

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1st Lt. Christy L. Kercheval
Gunnery Sgt. Chris W. Cox
Sgt. Jennie E. Haskamp
Michael J. Armstrong
Sgt. Robert L. Fisher III
Cpl. Evan M. Eagan
Cpl. Heidi E. Loreda
Cpl. Brian A. Tuthill
Lance Cpl. Michael S. Cifuentes
Lance Cpl. Regina N. Ortiz

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Safe children, healthy families are a shared responsibility

PERRY FORD

PREVENTION & EDUCATION (COUNSELING SERVICES)

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month and this year's theme is "Safe Children and Healthy Families Are a Shared Responsibility."

A nurturing home environment, safe places to play, good medical care, stimulating schools — so many ingredients are necessary to help children grow up to be safe and healthy. When children are surrounded with secure relationships and stimulating experiences, they draw from that environment to become confident, caring adults. The primary responsibility for children's health and well-being rests with parents, but they cannot do it alone. All families benefit from the help of strong, supportive neighborhoods and communities. We all play a role in helping our children thrive.

Parents are children's first teachers, but not their only teacher. Childcare providers, school teachers, doctors, neigh-

bors, coaches, and grandparents all influence children as well. The quality and stability of young children's relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development. Children learn a lot in their early years — they learn respect for others, right from wrong, and how to get along with each other. All the people they come in contact with can help reinforce this learning and influence their long-term development.

Surround a child with secure relationships and stimulating experiences and he will be armed with the tools necessary to become a confident, caring, adult, and equipped to be a vital part of society; but, if he is surrounded by abuse, neglect, violence or given little emotional or intellectual stimulation, it will be difficult for them to grow up successfully.

Imagine coming home from the hospital with your new baby and having no family members nearby and no close friends or close ties to your neighborhood. Imagine these stresses are compounded by financial worries, marital prob-

lems, and constant deployments. The loneliness and stress would put a strain on the most loving parent and could cause a parent to neglect, or abuse a child due to their own despair. Social isolation is common for new military parents, often struggling to figure out how to juggle marriage, careers, and parenting. Children do well when parents do well.

There are many things you can do to support kids and parents aboard the MCAGCC. Be a good neighbor, offer to babysit, donate your children's used clothing, furniture, and toys for use by another family. Be kind and supportive, particularly to new parents. Be involved with programs and activities that support children and parents. Talk to others about getting involved with such activities.

There is an old proverb that says, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Remember, supporting families and children is a shared responsibility. We can all have a positive part.

EDS signs NMCI contract extension

PRESS RELEASE

NMCI

PLANO, Texas and HERNDON, Va. — EDS today announced that the U.S. Department of the Navy has agreed to exercise its option to extend the Navy Marine Corps Intranet contract through September 2010.

This three-year extension will add more than \$3 billion to the program's overall total contract value. The Navy Marine Corps Intranet is the single largest government contract in the history of EDS.

"The extension of the NMCI contract represents a significant achievement for EDS," said Mike Jordan, EDS chairman and CEO. "Through the strong relationship between EDS and the Department of the Navy, we have been able to craft a contract extension that ensures the long-term success of the Navy and Marine Corps' mission, while providing one of the most secure private network platforms in the world."

"Affordability, perfor-

mance, schedule and security are the reasons this is the right choice to make," said Rear Admiral James B. Godwin III, Program Executive Officer for Enterprise Information Systems. "Today's agreement allows both the Department of the Navy and EDS to continue to move forward with positive momentum. We have worked very hard to ensure affordability of the NMCI seat price, as well as include new provisions in the contract on performance and schedule integrity."

During its five-plus years, the NMCI program has achieved significant milestones:

- **Size and scope:** NMCI is the world's largest, most secure private network serving more than 500,000 Sailors and Marines globally.
- **Seat Cutover:** EDS has connected more than 1,000 networked sites across the United States and has cut over more than 290,000 seats to the NMCI environment.
- **Security:** NMCI has significantly enhanced the

protection of the Navy's IT infrastructure through stringent, enterprise-wide security measures. The network has stopped 20 million unauthorized access attempts in 2005, and trapped, quarantined and disinfected 70,000 viruses.

- Mike Koehler, EDS enterprise client executive for NMCI, said the extension validates EDS' strong and productive relationship with the Department of the Navy and its leadership role in serving large, global enterprises.
- "We are jointly committed to extending and enhancing the EDS-Navy partnership. Our strong account management has NMCI's operating performance solidly under control and we continue to see ongoing improvements," said Koehler.
- The Department of the Navy's exercise of this option is reflected in EDS' previously issued financial guidance.

About EDS

EDS (NYSE:EDS) is a leading global technology services company delivering business solutions to its clients. EDS founded the information technology outsourcing industry more than 40 years ago.

Today, EDS delivers a broad portfolio of information technology and business process outsourcing services to clients in the manufacturing, financial services, healthcare, communications, energy, transportation, and consumer and retail industries and to governments around the world.

Learn more at <http://www.eds.com>.

MCAGCC Twentynine Palms TECHNOLOGY EXPO

TUESDAY

10 a.m. - 2 p.m.
Community Center
Building 1004

All Military and Contractor Personnel are invited to attend at NO FEE!

Exhibitors Will Demonstrate the Latest In: IT Products, Software, Storage Solutions, Training, Secure Communication Solutions, Security Equipment, Data Storage, and much more!

Refreshments will be served and giveaways offered while supplies last.

For a list of exhibiting companies or to request a company, please contact Kristin Francies

or
Pre-Register at
<http://www.federalevents.com>.

Kristin Francies
francies@ncsi.com
Phone: 301-596-8899 ext 214
Fax: 301-596-6274



CPL. GRAHAM A. PAULSGROVE

Cpl. Andrew N. King, from Gloversville, N.Y., watches for suspicious activity as Marines search a near-by building for weapons and insurgents in Ramallah, a small town outside of Ar Rutbah in western Al Anbar province, Iraq, March 29, 2006.

3rd LAR, A1

combined operations here to screen for would-be smugglers coming in and out of Ar Rutbah — the most populated city in this barren region with 25,000 people.

In late January, Coalition

Forces built an eight-foot high dirt berm around the city to help curb insurgent activity.

Traditionally a hub for smugglers and terrorists looking for somewhere to hide out in Iraq, Rutbah now has three entry control points — the only way in or out of the city

— which are manned by Iraqi soldiers. The soldiers check IDs and search vehicles in hopes of preventing smugglers and criminals from entering, and eventually leaving, the city.

The increased security measures here were put in place to help Coalition and Iraqi military forces stop criminals, blocking them before they can venture further east into Al Anbar province. The road which leads from the Iraqi-Jordanian border also cuts through Rutbah and leads to Iraqi cities synonymous with violence — Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad.

“With our forces and the Iraqi forces, we control the entrance and exit to the main city in our area of operation, stemming the flow of insurgents in and out of the city,” said Sgt.

Maj. Leland W. Hatfield, the battalion’s senior enlisted.

Today, vehicles passed in and out of Rutbah — Iraq’s last populated city before reaching the Jordanian-Iraqi border — without incident. All seems quiet. The Marines keep an eye out from their post here, looking for any suspicious activity. Iraqi soldiers do their duty — search vehicles and check paperwork of people entering the city.

“We sat in elevated positions on the sides of the main road watching traffic, to see what everybody was doing,” said Yorktown, Indiana, native Staff Sgt. Neil A. McKibben, 34, a platoon sergeant with the battalion. “It was pretty quiet.”

Presence equals security, stability and success

Though the area has been quiet recently, the Marines leave nothing to chance. They maintain a strong presence in the communities here, speaking with townspeople during their patrols, looking for signs of intimidation of locals, weapons caches or other insurgent activity. They talk to townspeople to ensure there is no insurgent activity going on.

For the most part, everything seems in order.

“The people were very receptive to us — a few told us that they feel safer when we are in the area,” said McKibben. “The kids smiled at us and the adults waved. Instinct can tell you a lot about a situation, and I could tell the people were being very genuine.”

Interaction between locals and the Marines was friendly,

a sign of trust between Coalition Forces and locals here. A few of the interactions were humorous.

One woman jokingly referred to her husband as a ‘loser’ because he didn’t have a job and sold their car, according to McKibben.

While the Marines can’t help with locals’ marital problems, they can help the people by helping provide a safe place to live and work.

“The citizens have told us that is providing them more safety and comfort,” said Hatfield, who is from Cincinnati, Iowa, about their successes.

During a recent combined counterinsurgency operation, Marines and Iraqi soldiers detained several wanted insurgents, proof that there is still a need for a military presence in the area.

Though the Marines’ assistance is still required here, Iraqi Security Forces are beginning to have an increasing role in providing their own security here and throughout the rest of Al Anbar province.

“Everything has been running smoothly,” said Quackenbush, one of the battalion’s team leaders and a Pittsburg native. “The Iraqis are easy to work with and are eager to learn. They are here to make Iraq a better place.”

Improved Force Protection

Elsewhere, the Marines are busy combing their enormous area of operations — miles of open desert dotted with small towns. The Marines patrol the roads daily in their Light Armored Vehicles — large, armored, eight-wheeled vehicles. They spend hours each

day “outside the wire” to keep a watchful eye out for insurgent activity.

But Iraqi and Coalition military forces don’t rely solely on their presence in the region to deter criminal activity. They’ve also stepped-up security measures at both Rutbah and along the Iraqi-Jordanian border to further deny criminals free movement throughout Al Anbar province.

Nearly 15 months ago, a suicide bomber drove a truck through the Port of Entry at Trebil — located 40 miles west of Rutbah — and into the Marines’ forward operating base there, killing two Marines and injuring six others. Since then, the Iraqi Government and the Marines have beefed up their force protection measures in the hopes of preventing any future attacks.

There’s also a new Port Director at Trebil, Iraqi Maj. Gen. Rhuda, who is credited with helping keep smugglers out of the country by cracking down on internal corruption within the Iraqi Border Patrol unit there and enforcing border control measures. There’s also a new Port Director at the port of entry facility in Walid — just north of Trebil — and Marine officials say he, too, is fighting corruption and smuggling along Iraq’s western border.

A noble mission

But there’s more to the Marines’ mission in this desolate and barren slab of desert than just keeping insurgents and smugglers out. Several weeks ago, the battalion helped one particular group of foreigners travel through Iraq — four busloads of Muslims making a religious pilgrimage to the holy city of Najaf, Iraq.

The pilgrims, concerned about their safety while traveling in southwestern Iraq, traveled from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to Trebil, where Marines linked up with them and provided armed security for at least a portion of their 370-plus mile trip.

The pilgrims arrived at their destination without incident.

“In the interest of maintaining good relations, we said we would help,” said Maj. Matt Good, the battalion’s operations officer. “Any time we can extend the olive branch, we do.”

Hopefully, the Marines’ deployment will bare more stories such as this one, and less of that seen in mainstream media — daily killings, sectarian strife, political struggles within the Iraqi government.

Still a combat zone

But then again, this is still a combat zone, and the Marines and Iraqi soldiers who patrol the border ports, highways and local towns daily say they are prepared for the worst.

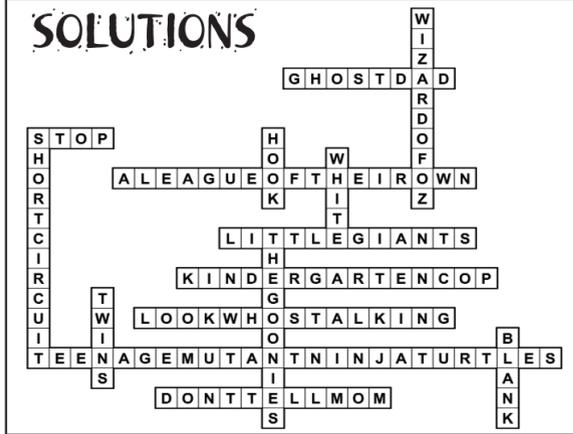
Before leaving California for the deployment, the battalion underwent months of preparatory training in Southern California’s desert — home to the Corps’ largest, most sophisticated combined arms training facility. Marine units are required to spend several weeks there learning skills that will help them survive in Iraq: urban patrolling, how to spot and react to improvised explosive devices, convoy security and even Iraqi cultural courtesies and customs.

“The training...had a level of realism that reinforced what many Marines had learned on their first tour of Iraq, and for our new Marines, it opened their eyes of what could happen,” said Hatfield.

Though the deployment means they’ll spend at least half a year away from their friends, families and homes in the United States, the Marines say they know they have a job to do here, and that their sacrifices are not in vain.

“We will continue to show the Iraqi people that we are sincere in our efforts to provide them with the freedom they desire,” said Hatfield.

SOLUTIONS



3/7, A1

"My friends thought it was very cool that my brother is fighting in Iraq," said Matt. "All the Marines that were out there are our heroes — especially the ones who don't come home. I'm very happy that he'll be home now. He has a new [convertible] car waiting for him at home, and he will be taking me to school with the top down."

As the buses arrived at the base, the loved ones demonstrated overwhelming happiness and emotion, anticipating the moment they would reunite with their service members.

"I've never felt like this ever before," said Marsha Cossich, Ford's mother. "I was right here on this base the day he left, and it's a nicer feeling coming back because I feel a whole lot better today. I've been so excited, I couldn't sleep or eat. I just can't wait to actually leave with him."

The Ford family showed their patriotism and pride by wearing homemade T-shirts with the face of their Marine and an eagle, globe and anchor on the front. They appreciated the hard work of the Marines and Sailors, and the sacrifices their families have made. Their thoughts and prayers go to the parents of the service members who died, Ford's mother said.

Lance Cpl. Francisco J. Conroy's family and closest friends traveled from his hometown of Phoenix, to be present for his return. Conroy is a mortarman with Weapons Co., 3/7.

"We all drove here to not only show or tell, but express our pride and appreciation to all the Marines and Sailors who deployed," said Conroy's mother, Maria. "We talked to him at times when he was out there, but he didn't want to say much. He knew I would worry."

"But I know he needs our support and that's why we came out here with some of his friends too," she continued. "There are so many Americans that are dissatisfied about what is going on, but our boys are out there and they are proud to be there. I always tell my son how proud I am of him and he knows it."

The time, efforts and sacrifices the battalion left out there was definitely worth the reception awaiting us, said 1st Sgt. Joseph C. Breze, Weapons Company first sergeant, talking about reuniting with their family and friends.

"We did a lot out there," said Breze, a Pittsburgh native, who says the latest deployment was different from their previous one. "I've seen the difference in the country since we've been there last. Our company did an outstanding job. We got dirty, fought every day and gave 100 percent effort nonstop."



LANCE CPL. MICHAEL S. CIFUENTES
Cpl. Jacob I. Salcido, a Lexington, Ky., native with Weapons Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, is greeted with a kiss by his fiancé, Krystal Konz, March 29 on Victory Field moments after his bus arrived to the Combat Center.

USA Cares: 'Hand up, not a hand out'

LANCE CPL. REGINA N. ORTIZ

COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

A representative from USA Cares, a military family assistance center, visited the Combat Center Monday to spread the word about the wide range of help available to military families in need.

Emily Dieruf, the organization's outreach director, sat down with members of the Combat Center community to discuss what USA Cares, a non-profit organization, is all about.

A little more than three years ago, the organization began in Kentucky as Kentucky Cares, but with volunteers pouring in from all over the U.S., the organization became USA Cares.

USA Cares helps all branches of military families with quality of life issues such as food, housing, utility bills and transportation needs. Families are given grants, not loans, in order to take care of their needs. More than 92 percent of their funding goes to these grants, said Dieruf.

Active duty service members, reservists, national guardsmen and their family members are eligible to receive help from USA Cares. Anyone closely associated with a service member with a valid military identification card, such as a mother, father or grandparent, can receive help from the organization. 'Abandoned wives' are military spouses who have lost their husbands or who have been divorced from a military member and need help getting back on their feet. They, too, are eligible to receive help, said Dieruf.

Each case is examined by a virtual committee who decides if assistance can be given. Meaning the application process is done online. The applicant must provide as much information as possible without disclosing race or sex. Any information provided is kept confidential.

USA Cares has given assistance to more than 2,070 families in 48 states and seven territories overseas in the past three years, giving away more than \$1.1 million. Twenty-one military homes were saved from foreclosure

by USA Cares and one of their partners, Home Preservation Foundation, in less than three months.

"We want to be the first and last call," said Dieruf, "but if we can't help, we'll make sure to point them to the right direction."

There is no competition among USA Cares and other military families' assistance programs. American Red Cross, Army Emergency Relief and similar organizations across the military community are working together to get help for those in need, said Dieruf.

USA Cares is a community of volunteers who devote their time and selves to helping military families in need. Not only do they raise money and awareness for their cause, some members have also ventured outside of that to develop side projects.

Operation Lap Wrap was started for wounded veterans who are bound to a wheel chair or who have lost limbs. Volunteers make hand-made quilts to show they care and appre-

ciate their service. More than 1,000 blankets have been delivered to severely wounded service members and veterans in military hospitals through this operation, according to the Web site <http://www.usacares.us>.

Another program started by USA Cares volunteers is "Operation Slugger." In coordination with the Louisville Slugger baseball equipment manufacturer, USA Cares shipped more than 13.5 tons of sports equipment to the military members serving in Iraq and Afghanistan this past February, said Dieruf.

USA Cares was selected and granted a \$1 million grant from an anonymous donor from the California Community Foundation at the beginning of this year. This will give USA Cares an opportunity to reach out and spread the word to people in need at bases across America and around the globe.

To learn more, or to request help, log on to <http://www.usacares.us>.



LANCE CPL. MICHAEL S. CIFUENTES

An M198 Howitzer, with a maximum charge allowed on the weapon system, fires a 155-millimeter rocket assisted projectile round during a maintenance evaluation test at the Combat Center's Quackenbush training area Tuesday.

3/12 Lima Battery tests supercharged Howitzers

LANCE CPL. MICHAEL S. CIFUENTES

COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

The earth trembled deep in the valley of the Combat Center's Quackenbush training area Tuesday as cannoneers with Lima Battery, 3rd Battalion, 12th Marine Regiment, mixed up with a Howitzer evaluation team from Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow, Calif., and caused a deafening ruckus in the desolate Mojave terrain with 10, M198 Howitzers and more than 75, 155 mm rounds.

The purpose of the shoot was to provide MCLB Barstow personnel the opportunity to exercise and evaluate the big guns stored at their facility.

"The Barstow evaluation team requires necessary tests after making repairs on their howitzers," said Capt. David L. Padilla, the commanding officer of Lima Battery. "It's a requirement coming out of their base.

"Since the test date fit our schedule, our battery was able to fulfill their needs and evaluate their 10 weapons systems," said Padilla. "It saves the Marine Corps a lot of money because otherwise, their team would have to hire contractors to do the job, which would take them two days. We managed to complete the weapon evaluation in half a day."

The evaluation consisted of howitzers lined up side by side, roughly 20 meters apart. For testing purposes, there were no direct targets. The weapons were aimed straight forward, directed at a mountainside.

The howitzer's recoil system was the main issue in the evaluations, said Padilla. Normally, the cannoneers would use a small charge, enough to reach the target. During the firing this time, the maximum charge allowed to shoot on an M198 Howitzer was used, commonly known to artillerymen as a super-eight charge. It was in the form of a 6.25-inch by 30-inch tube, filled with roughly 30 pounds of propellant and igniter base.

Also included with that powerfully charged shots were rocket-assisted projectile rounds, a combination that demolished the solid desert terrain and whose report rumbled

through the High Desert like thunder.

"This is the first time this howitzer made me jump a bit," said Lance Cpl. Keith R. Bednar, a cannoneer with Lima Battery. "After seeing the long tube of gunpowder inserted behind that RAP round, I knew it was going to be trouble.

"After being behind the howitzer after it's been shooting that for a while, you become a bit dizzy," he added as his equilibrium was distorted from multiple howitzer blasts. "The Howitzers moved back about four feet every time it was fired with these charges."

The charge and capabilities of the weapons system to fire off the round caused the trails of each Howitzer to drive back through the dirt 17 to 19 feet by the end of the day, after being dug in approximately one foot.

"It was definitely a first time for most cannoneers with this battery seeing such firepower," said Padilla. "It was a great experience for the Marines and a good day for the Barstow personnel, because eight out of the 10 weapons had no problems."

To see and feel the power and effects of our maximum charge is a good experience for us too, he added

"We are preparing to deploy to Iraq as a firing battery in support of Regimental Combat Team 7," said Padilla.

Lima Battery picked up training at the Combat Center again after returning from a six-month deployment to Okinawa in February. They have been training with the M777 Lightweight Howitzer, but are prepared to pick back up with the M198 as, said Padilla as Tuesday's shoot demonstrated. Just like in Operation Iraqi Freedom I, the battery will bring their destruction capabilities with them for OIF II in the fall.

Master sergeant retires from Marine Corps, starts new career



Master Sgt. Timothy Fix has his recently earned patrolman's badge pinned on by one of his police academy instructors, Capt. Kevin Conner, at a ceremony at the Cathedral City Police Department March 29.

LANCE CPL. REGINA N. ORTIZ
COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

As Master Sgt. Timothy Fix prepares to retire after 25 years of service in the Marine Corps, another chapter in his life will be opened.

Through diligence, perseverance and dedication, Fix has strived to make the best out of completing his life-long dream career as a Marine, and will take what he has learned and loves about the Corps to the streets of Cathedral City, where he will serve as a police officer.

Fix, a 44-year-old native of Jenks, Okla., wanted to become a Marine at a young age, since observing his Marine father serve proudly, he said.

"I used to call the recruiter, but he would hang up because I was only 13," Fix explained.

Fix graduated boot camp Nov. 6, 1981, from Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, and went on to train to become a warehouseman. He later became a logistics embarkation specialist, which led him to his current role of operations chief at the Combat Center's Installation and Logistics Directorate.

With Marine Corps retirement around the corner in May, Fix decided to look at his options.

"We retire young," he explained. "We have the chance for a second career, so I am going for it."

Seeking new challenges and excitement, Fix wanted to help keep society safe and protect the innocent, where no two days were the same. That goal is what made him decide to pursue a career in law enforcement, he said.

"But what it really comes down to is that I get to work in another career that has its own bond, its own brotherhood with a sense of family, much like what I've known from being a Marine," said Fix.

He began his training as a police officer at the Public Safety Academy College of the Desert in February 2005, while serving as a full-time Marine, as well as a full-time husband and father of three.

"I had to give up a lot of my free time to get ready for my second career, but it has been worth it," he said. "I kept my eye on the prize and had a lot of encouragement from the academy staff, classmates, friends and family."

As a master sergeant in the Marine Corps, Fix is considered "Top," but he was at the bottom of the pack, once again, as a police trainee.

"It was like boot camp," he explained. "But with a little less patience."

Fix learned a lot from the Marine Corps throughout his career and applied it to his police training.

"Command presence, bearing, discipline, ethics, team work, leadership, and values are all needed to be in law enforcement," he said. "Being a Marine gave me a leg up when I started the academy."

Fix is scheduled to graduate from the police academy May 25 and will retire from the Marine Corps May 26. These aren't the last things on the list of goals he has made for himself.

"I want to have a successful and rewarding career as a police officer," he said. "I also want to get my master's degree."

Fix encourages any Marine who is getting out of the Marine Corps, who will miss what it means to be a Marine, to pursue a career in law enforcement, he said.

"It's all the things we love about the Corps without all the moving around the world," he explained. "It helps fill a void most Marines have after leaving the Corps, but I encourage Marines to join mostly because they need us. We are hard-working with a sense of purpose. We go the extra mile to get the mission accomplished."

For more information on a career in law enforcement, go to the Education Office, building 1524, or call Lt. Laura Hanlon, Cathedral City Police Department recruiter and police training instructor, at (760) 770-0315.

Marine mechanics in Iraq keep supply convoys rolling

SGT. ENRIQUE S. DIAZ
1ST MARINE LOGISTICS GROUP

AL ASAD AIR BASE, Iraq — Working long hours under the sweltering Iraqi sun may not sound like an ideal work environment, but some Marine mechanics here are not only unfazed by the situation, they're enjoying it.

"I just like being a mechanic here, I'm getting more hands-on experience," said Lance Cpl. Adriana R. Anderson, as she took a moment to rest while replacing an air compressor on top of a V8 engine.

The 22-year-old, part of a Marine motor transportation platoon at this U.S. airbase in Iraq's western Al Anbar province, has been working on the engine for several days and is nearing completion.

Anderson's platoon, a part of Combat Logistics Battalion-7's Maintenance Company, is responsible for repairing vehicles used by American service members to transport supplies and personnel throughout Al Anbar province.

The trucks the Marines repair range in size, and complexity, from humvees to the logistics vehicle system, or LVS, the Marine Corps' version of a hydraulic tractor-trailer used for carrying large loads on supply runs. High-tech seven-ton trucks and old U.S. Army 2 1/2 ton troop carriers are other common vehi-

cles that are serviced.

The deployment is the first time for some of the mechanics to work on some of the vehicles or to replace major components such as engines and transmissions. Such advanced skills are different from the basic maintenance and diagnostics they were taught in their formal training and are often learned from the seasoned Marines who have been turning wrenches for a while.

The Marines' lack of experience and diverse workload may seem like a compounded obstacle that would cause problems for the unit. However, these mechanics are not only up to the challenge, but appreciate the opportunity to learn skills they could use later in their careers.

"Every day I'm doing different kinds of repairs and gaining experience," said Cpl. Patrick L. Harper, a 21-year-old from Augusta, Ga. "When I go back to Okinawa, I can help those Marines that never had that chance to work on many trucks get the job done quicker and more efficiently."

The platoon of 13 mechanics has already repaired 114 trucks in less than two months. Taking in mind that every day any four of the wrench turners fulfill collateral security and administrative duties and are off the shop floor, only eight Marines are actually working to accomplish the same



Cpl. Robert J. Lynn, a mechanic with Maintenance Company's Motor Transport Maintenance Platoon bolts a shroud onto a new radiator Saturday.

job usually reserved for an entire company.

Long days working to repair immediately-needed vehicles are ebbed with moments of tranquility as the mechanics wait for the next truck to be inducted into the maintenance cycle or a special part to be delivered from America.

"It's hours and hours of pure chaos with sudden blirps of boredom," said Master Sgt. Gilberto J. Rivera, MTM platoon commander.

"It's like the weather; it can change at any moment," said Rivera, a 37-year-old Sahuarita, Ariz., native.

After the day has ended, it is not uncommon for the mechanics, male and female alike, to be covered in grease from their steal-toe boots and fire-resistant coveralls up to strands of their

outside the base — often the result of an improvised explosive attack or regular wear and tear of the vehicles, which are loaded with heavy supplies and driven across Al Anbar Province daily.

The wrecker Marines stay just as busy as their mechanic counterparts as they often ride along on convoys in the event that their services are needed to tow a broken vehicle back to base.

Sometimes the recovery service is needed for damaged vehicles after an enemy attack. So far, the wrecker Marines have gone on five missions to recover vehicles damaged by insurgent attacks.

"You never know what is going to happen. You're

always on the ball, always keeping alert to make sure there are no IEDs that could have been missed by the rest of the convoy," said Lance Cpl. Cory S. Henderson, a 20-year-old San Bernadino, Calif., native.

As the days pass, the Marines continue their never-ending job to repair the hard-driven vehicles. The mechanics understand that as long vehicles are used, they will eventually need repair. And they are ready to provide their services.

"It's a lot of hours but that's OK. We came here to do a mission and get the job done; we can't have all these trucks in [the shop]... we need them out on the road," said Harper.

1/7 starts third tour in Iraq, assists Iraqi Army

CPL. ANTONIO ROSAS
1ST MARINE DIVISION

CAMP AL QA'IM, Iraq — Marines from 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment never thought they'd see the Al Qa'im region of Iraq again when they departed their military camp here in March last year.

One year later, the Twenty-nine Palms, Calif.-based unit has returned to this remote forward operating base here, located just east of the Syrian border in western Al Anbar Province, to continue to keep insurgents at bay and provide stability in the region.

But this time, they've got a new mission — assisting an Iraqi Army unit to eventually take control of the area.

The battalion has integrated Iraqi soldiers into daily operations, such as patrolling, responding to improvised explosive devices, manning security posts, and interacting with the local populace in this once insurgent-heavy region of Al Anbar Province.

The battalion's deployment to Iraq is part of a regularly scheduled rotation of forces in western Al Anbar Province. More than 23,000 Marines and Sailors of the Camp Pendleton, Calif.-based I Marine Expeditionary Force have replaced the Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based II Marine Expeditionary Force.

Last year, the battalion participated in a variety of major combat operations to quell insurgents throughout Al Anbar Province. This year, however, it's the Iraqi Security Forces who will eventually take the lead while the Marines assist them.

But as the Marines advise their partnered Iraqi Army battalion how to conduct — and eventually take the lead in — counterinsurgency operations, the Iraqi soldiers offer their own unique abilities in the fight against terrorism,

according to Lt. Col. Nicholas F. Marano, commander for 1st Bn., 7th Marines.

"By patrolling and operating with the Iraqi Forces, it will give our company commanders better intelligence and cultural awareness," said Marano. "The Iraqi Army soldiers can tell the difference between someone local and someone from outside the area."

Distinguishing between local townspeople and insurgents is harder for the Marines because they don't have the same cultural familiarity of Iraq as the Iraqi soldiers.

Marano noted that an integral part of continuing Iraqi progress in the region is for Iraqi and Coalition forces to work with the local populace to integrate the Iraqi police back into the community.

"The implementation of an effective police force and supporting judicial system is an essential ingredient in the counterinsurgency fight because it bridges the gap between military action and local civic control," added Maj. Mark D. Dietz, the battalion's operations officer.

But while the Marines now have a battalion of Iraqi soldiers to help share the responsibility of security operations in this region, atmospherics in the Qa'im region "are at their highest levels and remain on the upswing," according to Dietz.

"The battalion was fortunate in returning to an area that a high percentage of the Marines, particularly their junior leadership, are familiar with," said Dietz. "However, the dynamics of the AO [area of operations] have changed dramatically since [we] were here last."

In an effort to keep insurgents out of the Syrian border area, Coalition forces established multiple battle positions after last November's



Iraqi Army soldiers and Marines from Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, patrol the town of Ubayde, Iraq, in western Al Anbar Province, March 20.

Operation Steel Curtain, the largest counterinsurgency operation to date in western Al Anbar Province. During the 18-days of "Steel Curtain," more than 2,500 Marines, Sailors, soldiers and Iraqi soldiers cleared the cities of Husaybah and Karabilah of anti-Iraqi forces, often fighting insurgents house-to-house. The operation resulted in more than 250 killed or captured insurgents.

But once Iraqi soldiers and the Marines left the area, the "bad guys moved back in," said Maj. Stanton L. Chambers, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment's acting executive officer.

The Marines and Iraqi soldiers found a solution, though. They created several new, permanent battle posts to further prevent any free movement by insurgents back into the area once the Marines left, said Chambers, from Grand Prairie, Texas.

In short, the battle positions allow Coalition forces to

keep a watchful eye on the region, discouraging insurgent activity. But establishing the positions was an achievement unto itself, according to Chambers.

The 36-year-old said that just several months ago, the region proved to be a hotbed of insurgent activity and home to some of the most "hellacious firefights," according to Chambers.

"Our goal is to teach the Iraqi Army soldiers until they can handle (operations) on their own."

—Lance Cpl. Mario B. Cia

Some of the battle positions took daily enemy fire, he recalled. But the Marines held their ground, and the results of the Marines' and Iraqi soldiers' efforts are now apparent: less insurgent activity, more cooperation from locals, and a more secure environment for local leaders and the national Iraqi Government to operate in.

In addition to beefing up the Coalition's presence in the area to keep insurgents out, Iraqi soldiers and Marines also regularly met with leaders and sheiks to address locals' concerns.

The Iraqi Army leaders know many of the tribal and municipal leaders and they are naturally going to work

together, said Marano. "I am enthusiastic about working with them and after meeting with the Iraqi Army leaders, they are enthusiastic to assume control of the battle positions."

In addition to providing security here, Marines and Iraqi soldiers are also working close with the Iraqi Government to restore the local infrastructure. They're working closely with local communities here to keep schools open, water treatment plants running, health clinics open and provide monetary assistance to those citizens whose homes have been destroyed from previous battles.

As 1st Bn., 7th Marines assumes control of the area, they are working hand-in-hand with the Iraqi soldiers to continue the progress that's been made in the region over the past year.

Though Marano's Marines are no rookies to the region on conducting counterinsurgency operations, the turnover between the two battalions was critical to a successful transition between the two units, as it provided invaluable information to assist the California-based Marines with advising the still-developing Iraqi Army unit here.

"IA [Iraqi Army] progress, particularly in the Al Qa'im region, has shown remarkable improvement since our last deployment," said Dietz. "The IA Brigade is fully partnered with the Marines down to the squad and platoon level. All operations are planned and executed jointly with the Iraqis assuming the lead role at a progressive rate."

"They [Iraqi soldiers] have their own standard operating procedures although they try to mimic the Marines. Once they learn what they need to know they will be alright," said Staff Sgt. Robert A. Bridges, a machine gun section leader from Lima Company, 3rd Bn., 6th Marines — the Marine unit "1/7" has replaced.

The 34-year-old from Virginia Beach, Va., has spent six months working with Iraqi soldiers, including during major combat operations last November. He said he is confident the Iraqi soldiers will continue to progress with the new Marine unit.

A handful of the 1st Battalion's Marines will be part of the local Military Transition Team — a group of Coalition servicemembers assigned to logistically assist and guide each Iraqi military unit's transition to independent operations — and will have a more direct impact on the Iraqi soldiers' development.

"Our goal is to teach the Iraqi Army soldiers until they can handle [operations] on their own," said Lance Cpl. Mario B. Cia, 23, a squad automatic weapon gunner from Baker Company, 1st Bn., 7th Marines.

Though Marines from Baker Company have worked with the Iraqis for just a few days, they've already begun to notice progress.

"Some things that we teach them, such as weapons-handling procedures, they are getting it right the first time," said Lance Cpl. Brandon M. McKinney, 23, another machine gunner from Baker Company. "Regardless of what happens here in the future, I know we did our best to train them."

By year's end, Coalition forces say Iraqi Security Forces will be operating independently in western Al Anbar Province.

But while Marines here are set on putting Iraqi Security forces at the forefront, there is still work to be done and security to be provided. Prior experience from past deployments — especially from the battalion's junior leadership — has given the Marines corporate knowledge that will allow them to extinguish any remaining pockets of the insurgency.

"A counterinsurgency is won and lost at the squad and platoon level where our greatest strength and experience lies," said Dietz.

Combat meritoriously promoted 'War Dog' continues path in Corps

LANCE CPL. MICHAEL S. CIFUENTES

COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

During 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment's last deployment, Staff Sgt. Todd M. Leahey, a squad leader with a mobile assault platoon, Weapons Company, demonstrated actions surpassing his rank responsibilities, according to his citation, warranting him a combat meritorious promotion.

According to a military fact sheet, meritorious promotions are not used as rewards or when a personal commendation or award is appropriate. A meritorious promotion is based entirely on the Marine's demonstrated capability to employ the responsibilities and duties of their higher rank in an appropriate method.

Commanding generals may award combat meritorious promotions to privates first class through sergeants. In the cases of sergeants and staff sergeants, commanding generals make recommendations to the Commandant's office, who approves or disapproves the recommendations, based on the Marine's action and performance in combat or under combat conditions. According to Headquarters Marine Corps promotion branch, Marines recommended for a combat meritorious promotion must have demonstrated outstanding leadership to a degree rarely attained by Marines of equal grade. Determination of eligibility for promotion is based on the command's recommendation and combat performance.

"Staff Sgt. Leahey is an all around, solid Marine," said 1st Sgt. Daniel W. Fliegel, Leahey's first sergeant from in Iraq. "Our company established a mobile assault platoon during the last deployment, which combined all weapon elements into one platoon.

"Staff Sgt. Leahey led his platoon through many successful missions and was very noticeable about it," said the Fliegel, a Dundas, Minn., native. "You can always tell who his guys were because they emulated him."

2/7, who call themselves the "War Dogs," mainly operated in the southern part of Fallujah, Iraq, along the Euphrates River, said Fliegel. As a squad leader, Leahey led his squad through more than 160 combat patrols, discovering and destroying multiple weapon caches consisting of more than 400 mortar rounds, three dozen rockets, two dozen explosive projectiles, artillery shells, and numerous smaller munitions. After his squad's biggest find, 300 rounds of various munitions near Al Taqaddum, Iraq, the 28-year-old earned a special honor from 2/7's commanding officer and a new name from his Marines.

"I took my squad up a hill where I wanted to clear out trash and debris to set up an OP," said Leahey, a St. Peters, Mo., native. "As the Marines were setting up the area, one found an old 155 mm [artillery round]. We started searching for more, and we continued to find round after round. After digging up the place we ended up finding over 300 rounds and a dozen rocket components."

Two days of hard, yet careful, work brought his commander out, Lt. Col. Joseph A. L'Etoile, to see what his Marines were doing.

He brought out a logistics truck for us with some hot chow [meals]," said Leahey, remembering the commander and that day. "Throughout our whole deployment, that was the first time we had hot chow in the field. So, the Marines gave me the name 'Hot Plate' because of my findings and what it brought to us."

While serving as sergeant of the guard at an entry control point to the city later in the deployments, Leahey supervised the daily processing of more than 250 vehicles

and 300 Iraqi citizens. He also led an assault on a building that resulted in the capture of a high-valued individual.

Leahey's squad were always ready for whatever was thrown at us, at any time, he said. One night they received notice of a high-valued individual spotted in a building. His squad was on the scene, had the individual detained and brought back to our base within one hour. This man was a Marine Expeditionary Force-level, high-valued target.

Growing up, Leahey had strong ties to the military. His grandfather, whom he looks to as a mentor and hero, was a World War II veteran, serving in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, during the Japanese attacks in 1941, and went on to reach the rank of colonel.

He graduated from Francis Howell High School in 1995, and two weeks later he was in boot camp. He had many reasons to join the military, but his high school weight lifting coach, Coach White, a former Marine drill instructor and a Vietnam War veteran, was the man who steered him most to become a Leatherneck.

After his first, four-year term in the Marine Corps as an infantryman with 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, Leahey decided to leave the Corps and further his education, so he enrolled in college courses at St. Charles County Community College in Missouri. He then proceeded to the University of Missouri, St. Louis. His goals were to earn a degree in criminal justice.

In April 2001, Leahey decided to return to the Marine Corps, and he joined 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment. His first deployment to Iraq was during Operation Iraq Freedom I. His battalion joined efforts in the push to Baghdad, to secure Saddam Hussein's stronghold.

His experience in OIF III differed from that of OIF I, he said. The constant threat of IED's presented more danger for him and his battalion. Also, as a squad leader, his tasks changed when his company combined anti-armor teams with dismount capabilities. The change was initiated by 2/7's battalion commander.

My Marines were very effective with our new force," said Leahey. "We conducted any mission a regular rifle squad would carry out, but we

had the firepower of a weapons company. We reinforced a lot of line companies and we hunted for bad guys from four to 10 days at a time."

Since Leahey's company were out in platoons with crew-served weapons, anti-tank weapons, automatic machine guns and dismounted infantrymen, no one really wanted to mess with them, he said. They didn't have to use that much firepower. This gave them a better chance to build a good relation with the Iraqi civilians.

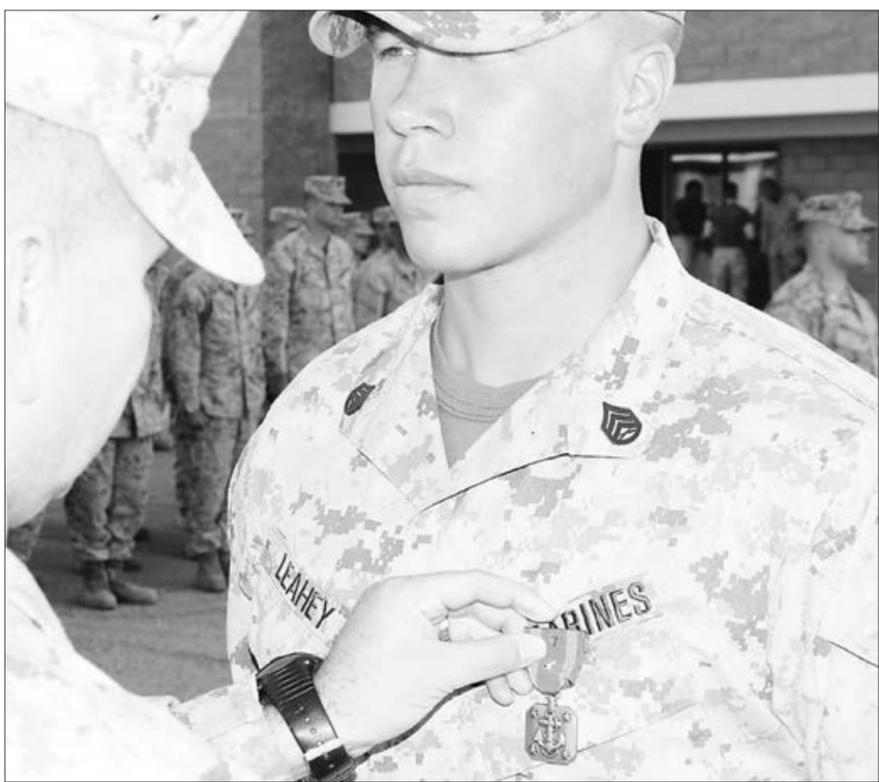
During OIF III, Leahey's company commanding officer elected him for a combat meritorious promotion. For his professionalism, his pride as a squad leader and his persistent outstanding actions while in and out of the field, Leahey was promoted from sergeant to staff sergeant.

"The Marines in my squad made this happen for me," said Leahey. "They were persistent, professional and outstanding Marines. They worked really hard and they believed in being over there. They believed in the Marine Corps. My promotion is a reflection of them. There were four meritorious promotions from my squad. And while keeping professional, none of them were afraid to get dirty and work until told to stop. They were always ready on a moments notice. I look up to the Marines in my squad."

After following the experience of his grandfather, and continuing his great work ethic, which he says he gets from his mother, Leahey is slated to continue his journey in the Marine Corps as a recruiter in Jacksonville, Fla. His goal is to stay the course in the Corps as a career. He looks back on his deployments as a great experience and will take the memories of them with him wherever he goes, he said.

"I went to Iraq with an open mind both times," said Leahey. "I definitely built up a respect for Iraqi people. They take their hardships of life head-on and fight for freedom and liberties that a lot of Americans take for granted. Coming back from a deployment, and being in the comfort of my family, I appreciate what we have here in the U.S. a lot more. I feel much more love for my country."

Leahey will miss the intense Weapons Company



LANCE CPL. MICHAEL S. CIFUENTES

Staff Sgt. Todd M. Leahey, a squad leader with Weapons Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, gets the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with Combat Distinguishing Device pinned on March 30, at the battalion's formation lot.

lifestyle, he said. More so, he will miss the Marines and Sailors he worked with.

"My company worked so hard and improved so much in one year," said Leahey. "I've gained a lot more discipline working alongside them. Every day we had a huge workload, and our days were all about mission accomplishment. Even after losing Marines, it just stiffened our resolve. It's a real honor to have served with Marines of their caliber."

As a father of a 2-year-old daughter, Trinity, and a 2-month-old son, Charles, Leahey needs more time to spend with his family, he said. His family gave him the support he needed as a deployed Marine and he wishes to return the support.

"My wife, especially, is a real strong supporter of what I'm doing," said Leahey.

"She organized a 'Support the Troops' rally in her hometown while protests against the war rally was going on in the same area.

"She sang the national anthem during the rally as well," continued Leahey. "She is a big supporter of all the troops serving in the military, and she's my biggest supporter. She's sacrificed a lot as a Marine wife. Her patriotism motivated me."

While serving a b-billet in Florida, Leahey hopes to continue his hobbies of working out at the gym and traveling with his family. He gives thanks and appreciation to his battalion, company, squad and assistant patrol leader. They

all left their full efforts on the battlefield and are always ready to go back, he said.

"His presence was felt by everyone in our company," said Fliegel. "We are definitely going to miss him. But, his stories and nicknames, such as 'Hot Plate' and 'FOB [Forward Operating Base] Leahey' will continue to be told amongst our company."



The tip of the "big top" announces the circus is in town.

CIRCUS HERE TODAY

*Ah! The smell of popcorn.
The piles of cotton candy
and colorful snow cones.
The acts of daring-do
and the booming voice of
the ringmaster bellowing
under the big top.*

PHOTOS AND STORY
BY CPL. HEIDI E. LOREDO

COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

Circus Chimera brought the big top to the Combat Center's back yard for three performances Monday and Tuesday.

This year's Circus Chimera show is a retelling of Lewis Carroll's classic, "Alice In Wonderland."

It featured a cast of performers from all over the world including Chinese jugglers, Kenyan acrobats, aerialists from Peru, and a golden-voiced ringmaster.

The two-hour show kept audiences — young, and young at heart — on the edge of their seats. The human endurance, strength and tricks made the fast-paced program exciting family fun.

Ringmaster Roy Ordaz said he's brought together some of the world's best entertainers, including Ekaterina Bazarova, a former Russian Olympic gymnast turned contortionist who plays Alice. She has performed all over Europe with the world famous Budapest Circus, entertaining both the public and royalty from Moscow to Monte Carlo.

Other performers have traveled from China, Peru and Argentina, a cultural aspect that Ordaz says makes the show unique.

Foot jugglers, rolling bungee routines, acrobats, rope dancers, aerial acrobats and contortionists peppered the show that has been on tour across the country since February.

With or without animals the theatrical style performance was enjoyed by patrons.



Genia Naidenkine hands out balloons to children prior to the show before stirring up the audience with his antics.



Ekaterina Bazarova, portrays Alice in Wonderland. The contortionist is also the International Twister champion. She has performed all over Europe with the world famous Budapest Circus, entertaining both the public and royalty from Moscow to Monte Carlo.



Two-year-old Catherine Lee enjoys her ride on the train prior to the big top for the show.



Gravity seems to cease to exist for the New Dynasty Acrobatic Troupe as they fly through a hoop one-by-one.



The New Dynasty Acrobatic Troupe shows off their endurance and strength on the "spider pole."

Pilots set out to honor 9/11 crew members



CPL. HEIDI E. LOREDO

Five airline pilots prepare to embark on a 33-day ride across the nation in the "Airline Ride Across America," a cross country bicycle ride intended to raise money for the Pentagon Memorial, the Flight 93 National Memorial and the World Trade Center Memorial to honor crew members who perished as a result of the events that took place on Sept. 11, 2001.

CPL. HEIDI E. LOREDO
COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

LOS ANGELES — The rumbling echoes of plane engines belted in the sky near Los Angeles International Airport April 2, as five pilots embarked on a journey from coast to coast to honor crew members who perished as a result of the events that took place on Sept. 11, 2001.

The clear sky and sunny morning resembled that fateful day five years ago when terrorists hijacked airline flights and attacked the nation. Today, US Airways Capt. Tom Heidenberger, 28-year veteran pilot and the leader of the pack, set out from Dockweiler Beach in Los Angeles to honor the victims.

The "Airline Ride Across America" is a cross-country bicycle ride intended to raise money for the Pentagon Memorial, the Flight 93 National Memorial in Pennsylvania and the World Trade Center Memorial.

"The Airline Ride Across America trip was an idea that came to me in the late fall," said Heidenberger. "What prompted me to do this were the 33 crew members who perished that day. They were the first of the first responders. Slowly through

time, the events have been forgotten, and it's my intent to see that these 33 individuals will forever be remembered."

But the tragedy of 9/11 holds a personal meaning to Heidenberger. He was sitting in his home working on a crossword puzzle when a neighbor stormed into his house and turned the TV on to watch the events unfold. Heidenberger's wife, Michele, was the senior flight attendant on board American Airlines flight 77 which crashed into the Pentagon.

"Yes I do have a very personal stake in it, but I don't just do this for my wife," said Heidenberger. "I do this for the 33 people, and I do it for the victims who perished that same day."

Heidenberger, at 59, recently retired, is joined by a group of other commercial pilots on the cross-country bike ride. The team of five is expected to be joined by other supporters on bikes. On Sunday, a dozen joined them as they looped around LAX escorted by the California Highway Patrol and the L.A. Police Department. The ride began in Los Angeles because it is where the majority of the flights hit by 9/11 were headed.

Each leg of the 3,300-mile, 33-day trip will be ridden in memory of one of the 33 flight crew members who died on the four hijacked planes.

Heidenberger said they will average 100 miles per day for four weeks, each week is dedicated to each flight.

The first day of the trip was dedicated to Anaheim, Calif., native, Capt. Charles F. Burlingame, a pilot on American Airlines Flight 77 on 9/11. His widow, Sheri, will drive a support vehicle throughout the trip.

"What better way to start a trip out than to follow a leader, a captain," said Heidenberger.

Flight attendants, dressed in their uniforms, came to Dockweiler to support the team.

"Every day, flights take off and land. We have those crew members in our thoughts, and it's important that they're never forgotten," said Darren Shiroma, a union representative for United Airlines in Los Angeles. "They died in the line of duty, and with all of the heightened security concerns since 9/11, flight attendants are on the front lines."

The five riders will travel through more than a dozen states. Stops also are planned for Shanksville, Pa., the World Trade Center site and the Pentagon, where the ride will end on May 9. The final leg of the trip will be dedicated to Michele, Heidenberger's wife.

NMCRS kicks off 2006 fund drive with golf tournament

LANCE CPL. REGINA N. ORTIZ
COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

The Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society kicked off their 2006 fund drive with a golf tournament at the Combat Center's Desert Winds Golf Course March 31.

More than 54 golfers, in teams of four, participated in the tournament on the breezy, cool day to support NMCRS.

"The Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society does a great job of filling in the gap," said Robert Semonich, comptroller from the Comptroller Directorate, explaining why he stands behind NMCRS. "It helps people do what you can't do yourself, or what the Marine Corps can't do for you."

Semonich, along with his teammates, have donated to NMCRS, almost every year for their own reasons, they said.

"They provide much needed funding for young Marines and Sailors in times of need," explained 1st Lt. Lance Raymond, comptroller.

As a thank you for the support, prizes were awarded to the first, second and third place teams; closest to the pin and longest drive. Prizes were merchandise items from the golf course.

The relief society is one of the oldest organizations to provide financial and educational

assistance to military members at more than 250 office locations at installations across America and overseas, according to the Web site, <http://www.nmcrs.org>.

This month-long fund drive is the only fund drive held each year to receive donations for the NMCRS mission. It is held to encourage active-duty military members to donate, although civilians are welcome to donate as well, said 2nd Lt. Jennifer Root, NMCRS fund-drive base coordinator.

Each unit aboard the Combat Center has a unit representative from NMCRS to brief the units, collect funds and sponsor events.

"Since the organization provides support for active duty Marines and Sailors and their dependents," explained Root, "the purpose of this annual fund drive is to solicit donations from the active duty military members aboard this base."

Each service member will be given an allotment form to donate on a monthly basis. The minimum requirement for this type of donation is \$1 per month. Cash or checks are also acceptable. Unit representatives will collect donations every week until April 28.

However, NMCRS has its doors open year-round for donations at their office in building 1551.

NMCRS provides interest-free loans and grants to meet emergency needs, such as emergency transportation, funeral expenses, medical and dental bills, food, rent, utilities, childcare expenses, essential vehicle repairs and disaster relief assistance to active duty or retired Marines and Sailors and family members. They also provide scholarships and interest-free loans for education purposes.

The relief society also organizes a food locker, a layette program, thrift shops and visiting nurses' services. They also provide education on money management, childcare and general health issues.

Last year, NMCRS provided more than \$35.9 million involving more than 43,000 cases worldwide. More than \$27.6 million went to interest-free loans and \$5.5 million went to grants, according to the Web site.

The Combat Center's NMCRS chapter helped more than 695 individual clients and funded more than \$398,000 in interest-free loans and \$57,000 in grants. The 2005 fund-drive collected more than \$89,000. This year's goal is to collect more than last year, said Root.

For more information or to donate, contact your unit's NMCRS representative, call NMCRS at 830-6323.



LANCE CPL. REGINA N. ORTIZ

1st Lt. David Lund, comptroller, putts his golf ball into the 4th hole at the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society's Golf Tournament March 31 at the Desert Winds Golf Course.

Men's Varsity Basketball team wins tourney

CPL. EVAN M. EAGAN
COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

The Twentynine Palms Varsity Basketball Team recently competed in two inter-service tournaments, winning one and taking third place in the other.

The first tournament Team Two-Nine, as they are called, played in was the 2006 Silver State Classic at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., March 17-19.

The tournament consisted of six teams divided in two divisions, and was played in a round-robin format.

After losing its first game 67-71 to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., Two-Nine regrouped and rallied their way through the next two games, earning a spot in the championship game against Beale Air Force Base, Calif.

Beale AFB, who was undefeated thanks to a 6'11", All-Armed Forces center, proved no match for the Combat Center as Two-Nine won 87-70, clinching the 2006 Silver State Basketball Classic title.

"We take great pride in representing the Combat Center and work hard to ensure that we are competitive and disciplined on the court, as well as off," said Team Two-Nine player Spencer Rutledge. "Often undersized, we pulled together as a team with strength of heart and character, supported by our physical conditioning. It was a great win for us."

Two players from the team were recognized for exceptional play at the completion of the tournament. Derek Griffin was named to the All-Tournament Team, and Spencer Rutledge was named the tournament most valuable player.

The second tournament the team competed in was the 2006 King of the Coast Basketball Tournament held Saturday at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego.

This tournament was played in round-robin format as well and consisted of teams from Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., the recruit depot and the USS Nimitz.

Jumping out to a comfortable lead early and holding it for most of the game, Two-Nine looked poised to defeat its first opponent, Camp Pendleton. However, with four minutes remaining in the game, Pendleton took its first lead of the game, swaying the momentum in their favor. The Combat Center could not recover and suffered a heart-breaking first game loss.

In their second game of the day, Two-Nine jumped out to a sizable lead early against MCRD San Diego. Able to hold on this time, the Combat Center evened its record at 1-1.

In what would be their third and final game of the tournament, Two-Nine jumped out to a huge lead against the USS Nimitz. Leading by as many as 18 points in the first half, Two-Nine let the Nimitz back in the game however, and eventually lost.



Members of the Twentynine Palms Men's Varsity Basketball Team pose for a photo after taking first place in the 2006 Silver State Classic at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., March 19. COURTESY PHOTO

Although suffering two heartbreaking loses in the tournament, players from the Combat Center remained positive about the experience.

"By controlling the majority of all three games this weekend, we proved to ourselves that we are very capable of taking first place," said Lance Raymond, a player with Two-Nine. "However, we didn't play consistent and finish games at the

same level we started them at. We have to learn to play our game for the entire 40 minutes."

The team hopes to travel to Hawaii to play in the Aloha Classic sponsored by Hickam Air Force Base, from Monday to April 15. Last year Team Two-Nine competed in that tournament, winning their division, but eventually losing in the semi-final round.

Free MASP class prepares Marines for college, better careers

CPL. BRIAN A. TUTHILL
COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

Marines and Sailors ready to separate from the Marine Corps or looking to enhance their current careers can enroll in the Military Academic Skills Program to refresh their school fundamentals and to ready themselves for future challenges.

The MASP course, sponsored by Copper Mountain College aboard the Combat Center at no cost to service members, is a four-week class designed as a basic skills refresher to prepare Marines for college-level studies, said Dr. Jim Arneson, director of base programs for the college.

"Many of our students are near the end of their enlistments and are preparing to leave active duty," said Arneson. "Others do it because they are career Marines who are going to laterally move into another job field. Either way, it brings them up to a high school graduate level of study."

The MASP class covers three basic disciplines: reading, writing and mathematics. Students attend both morning and evening courses unless they are already proficient with either their math or English skills.

Because the course is through Copper Mountain College, it is also open to spouses and civilians who qualify with the Test of Adult Basic Education, said Arneson.

Marines planning to laterally move into another military occupational specialty sometimes don't have a high enough general technical score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery to qualify for the job they would like.

This course may be the answer they are looking for, said Gunnery Sgt. Patrick E. Whitaker, base career planner.

"A lot of Marines just are not aware of this class," he said. "But this program definitely helps. The Marines who take advantage of this really seem to do well. Marines with a low ASVAB score and want to lat move, I tell them to go and take this class because it defi-

nately works.

"I once sent a Marine there with a GT score of 92," Whitaker continued. "He walked out of that class with a 128. All he did was take it seriously. It's a great program."

Marines who enroll in the class to better prepare themselves for college also say it has helped them improve their skills and study habits.

"I came here because I wanted to sharpen my skills before I hit the civilian world, just like most of the other Marines," said Staff Sgt. Francisco Urena, Headquarters and Service Company, 1st Tank Battalion, who is acting as a class leader among the 23 other students. "I'm heading to college and after being away from school for eight years, my skills are a little rusty."

"Just after being here one week so many things have come back to me that I'm amazed at how easy it is to pick it back up," continued Urena, a 25-year-old Lawrence, Mass., native, who

plans to return to Massachusetts to attend school. "Before we started, everyone took the TABE test to see where we were. We retested and almost everyone has seen big improvements."

The enrollment process is relatively simple, said Arneson. Applicants need only fill out the MASP contract form and have it signed by their supervisor and officer in charge and return it to the Copper Mountain College office. They will then take the TABE test to determine their placement and meet with Arneson to be assigned to a class.

Once class begins, a student is only allowed two absences from both the morning and afternoon courses.

"Students are only allowed two absences and on the third absence, they are dropped from the class," said Arneson. "Also, when they are absent, we have to inform their units."

For Anita Williams, an adjutant professor at Copper Mountain College and a

MASP mathematics instructor, her experience has been positive as she helps Marines and Sailors get back into the classroom.

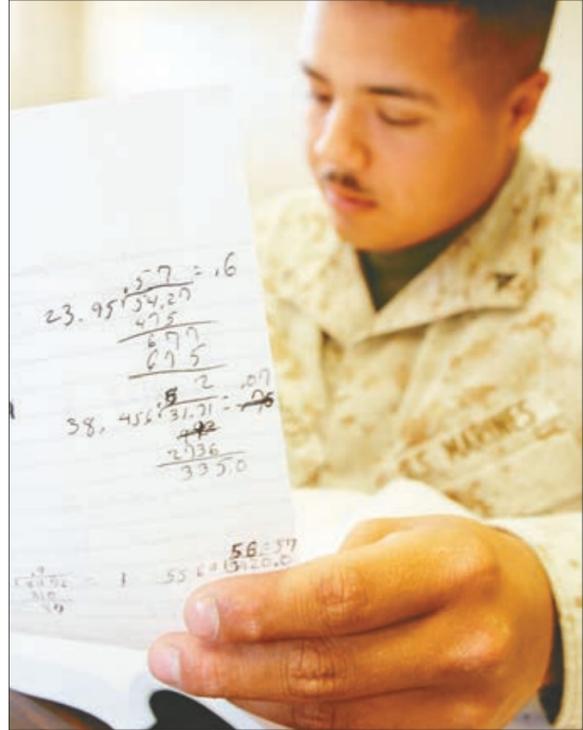
"I love teaching Marines, and I get to have fun with them here," said Williams, a Marine spouse and Rocky Mountain, N.C., native. "They learn that learning can be fun, even those who don't like math."

"Here, they are in teams and rely on each other," she continued. "Marines do that well. In college, the professor will not always be available and they will most likely have to rely on their fellow classmates for help."

Williams has a no-calculator policy in her class and said she enjoys watching her students prove to themselves what they can accomplish.

"This is simply a great course that gives them the opportunity to succeed," she said.

For more information on the MASP course, visit building 1526 or call 830-6375.



Lance Cpl. Ricardo Cardoso, machine gunner, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, studies math notes in the Military Academics Skills Program at the Copper Mountain College classroom. CPL. BRIAN A. TUTHILL

SPORT SHORTS

INTRAMURAL SOFTBALL

The Commanding General's Intramural Softball season is about to begin and teams are looking for players. Pre-season begins April 17 and the regular season will start April 25. Games are Tuesday and Thursday nights and open to all base personnel. Call Randy Husted 830-4092 to get in contact with a coach.

LEISURE

EASTER EGG-STRAVAGANZA

The Palms Baptist Church, located at 5285 Adobe Rd., is holding an Easter Egg-Stravaganza tomorrow, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. There will be pony rides, egg and cookie decorating, a petting zoo, a balloon artist and an Easter egg hunt. Food will be sold at concession stands. Call 367-3713 for more information.

EASTER EGG HUNT

Religious Ministries is sponsoring an Easter Egg Hunt April 15. Come to Felix Field from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. and play games, eat food, have fun, and find Easter eggs! No pets or alcohol will be allowed. The football field will be off limits due to re-sodding. Parental supervision is required.

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY "RELAY FOR LIFE"

There will be an American Cancer Society Relay For Life from 9 a.m. on April 29 to 9 a.m. on April 30 at Yucca Valley High School. You do not have to be there the entire 24 hours, members can sign up for time slots. Relay For Life is a community gathering where everyone can participate in the fight against cancer. Teams camp out at a local high school, park, or fairground and take turns walking or running around a track or path. Each team is asked to have a representative on the track at all times during the event, because cancer never sleeps. Relays are an overnight event, up to 24 hours in length. Relay For Life brings together millions of people to raise money to help prevent cancer, save lives, and diminish suffering from the disease. The relay brings people together from all walks of life with the common goal of eliminating cancer. For more information, contact HM2 Sjaarda at 830-2140 or 367-2324.

MCAGCC TWENTYNINE PALMS TECHNOLOGY EXPO

All Military, GS and contractor personnel are invited to attend the MCAGCC Technology Expo April 11 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Community Center, Building 1004. Exhibitors will demonstrate the latest in IT products, software, storage solutions, training, secure communication solutions, security equipment, data storage, and much more. Refreshments will be served and giveaways will be offered while supplies last. For a list of exhibiting companies, or to request a company, please contact Kristin Francies at francies@ncsi.com, or by phone at 301-596-8899 ext. 214.

Did You Know?

Mark McGwire's record-setting 70 home runs in the 1998 season traveled a total of 29,598 feet, enough to fly over Mount Everest.

Artillery Egg-stravaganza

The Easter Bunny flaunted his guns while showing off the M777 lightweight howitzer to the children of 3rd Battalion, 11th Marines. The battalion, who currently has four of its five batteries on deck, holds a family function once a quarter. The Egg-stravaganza found the families at Victory Field Saturday, for a potluck. In addition to an egg hunt, guests enjoyed volleyball, sack races and a Jupiter jump.



2ND LT SEAN T. CAMPBELL

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