



OBSERVATION POST

MCAGCC TWENTYNINE PALMS

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Extraordinary Heroism

Nation's Second Highest Award

By Cpl. Sarah Dietz

June 18, 2010, started out as a standard blistering hot day in Helmand province, Afghanistan. Cpl. Clifford Wooldridge had no way of knowing that was the day he'd distinguish himself as a true warrior among warfighters.

Posting security alone for his Marines with- drawal from the recent counter ambush strike, Wooldridge, then serving with 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, heard voices from behind a nearby wall. As he rushed toward the struc- ture, he found two enemy combatants. He raised his M249 Squad Automatic Weapon and with a few short bursts, killed them both.

He was out of rounds. Wooldridge bent down to reload, but there was no time. He saw a muzzle come from around the corner. Without a moment's hesitation, he leaped and grabbed the barrel of the gun. Wooldridge threw his enemy to the ground and fought him hand-to-hand, eventually picking up the insurgent's machine gun and beating him with it until the fight was over.

The 24-year-old infantry Marine, who had just led his squad in a counter ambush strike on 15 insurgents moments before, earned himself the nation's second highest award, the Navy Cross Medal.

The Robert O. Work, undersecretary of the Navy, presented Wooldridge, a Port Angeles, Wash., native, with the Navy Cross Medal May 18 at the Combat Center's Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Grey Field.

"The things that Sgt. Wooldridge did just

sends chills down my spine," Work said. "It's just an unbelievable act of courage and selfless- ness. Not only did he maneuver against the enemy and disperse them, saving his squad, but he covered the withdrawal of his own fire team all alone, but all alone he confronted three Taliban and overcame all three of them."

Wooldridge, now a combat weapons instructor, Marine Corps Security Forces Regiment, Chesapeake, Va., came to the Combat Center to receive his award in front of his 3/7 brothers.

"It goes out to my unit, 3/7," Wooldridge said. "For all the guys who didn't get any recognition for their actions. It's for them and also for my buddies who didn't make it back."

Wooldridge is the 31st Marine recipient of the Navy Cross Medal during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.



Watchdogs come home

Photos and story by
Lance Cpl. Ali Azimi
Combat Correspondent

The goal and hope for any deployment is to accomplish the mission and bring every Marine home. Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron 1 accomplished this goal Sunday, returning home after a seven-month deployment to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

The "Watchdogs" left in October, and during the course of the following months, they acted as lookout from the sky for Marines on the ground.

"With us being up there, it increases flight time," said Cpl. Carlos Gallardo, unmanned aerial vehicle electrician, VMU-1. "It gets a guy out of that cockpit while retaining that eye in the sky."

The unit used UAVs to provide over-watch for convoys and various Marine units as they traversed the dangerous riddled with improvised explosive devices.

VMU-1 Marines searched for possible ambushes and even the direction of unseen enemy fire. To add to the support of the Marines on the ground, VMU-1 provided intelligence, scanning suspicious enemy compounds or IED caches before Marines went in themselves.

After seven months of hard work, VMU-1 Marines finally

See **VMU-1** page A5



Sgt. Curtis J. Bailey, avionics technician, Marine Unmanned Aerial Squadron 1, hugs his son for the first time in seven months during VMU-1's homecoming at Del Valle Field May 20.



COMMANDING GENERAL
MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND TASK FORCE TRAINING COMMAND
MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER
TWENTYNINE PALMS, CALIFORNIA

23 May 2012

Marines, Sailors, Civilians, and Family members of the Combat Center:

Each Memorial Day, we pause to pay our respects and honor those brave servicemen and women who fought and died for our great Nation. Some of you have endured the loss of comrades and family members on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is only fitting that each of us set aside a few moments on Memorial Day to reflect on their sacrifices. Additionally, there are currently units from the Combat Center deployed, or preparing to deploy, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. While some of us enjoy a richly deserved long holiday weekend, many Marines, Sailors, and Civilians will be training or supporting Marines who will soon deploy into harm's way — I ask that you pause and think of them as well.

Traditionally, Memorial Day also marks the beginning of summer. We often celebrate this by gathering with family and friends, enjoying good company, food, beverages, and recreation. This long Memorial Day weekend also serves as a kick-off of our Corps' "101 Critical Days of Summer" safety campaign. Safety and the preservation of our Marines, Sailors, Civilians, and family members is a year round effort. At the start of each summer we refocus on understanding risk and making sound, mature decisions not only on duty, but off duty as well. Our Marine Corps always accomplishes the mission. Our collective mission this holiday weekend is to enjoy time with family and friends, relax and reenergize. However, the mission will only be fully accomplished when we return everyone safely to their units and sections, fully prepared to continue the all-important mission here aboard the Combat Center.

Leaders at all levels must be fully aware of the liberty plans of all those in their charge before sounding liberty call. It is this engaged leadership that continues to be a hallmark of Marines everywhere. Moreover, each of us has an unwavering responsibility to conduct our- selves in a safe and responsible manner, while reflecting the high stan- dards of our Corps at all times, in all settings.

Thank you for your continued service to our Nation and our Corps. I wish you and your families a very happy Memorial Day!

Semper Fidelis,

G. W. SMITH, JR.
Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps

VFW, family to military community

Lance Cpl. Ali Azimi
Combat Correspondent

The Veterans of Foreign War is an organization made up of service members across all branches who have come together to help their fellow brothers and sisters in the Armed Forces.

When it started in 1899, it was a simple way for wounded or sick veterans of the Spanish- American War and Philippine Insurrection to group together and support each other, both morally and financially, during a time before government health benefits. These groups pro- gressed into organizations and came to be called the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Today, the VFW has approximately 2.1 million mem- bers across the world, providing more than 11 million hours of volunteering and \$3 million in college scholar- ships every year. The VFW has also been instrumental in the establishment in a number of military charities and funds, including the GI Bill.

VFW Post 7264 in Joshua Tree has been supporting service members locally at the Combat Center and around the Morongo Basin since its opening 40 years ago. The 439 members currently work to raise money for Marine Wing Support Squadron 374, their adopted unit at the Combat Center, and veterans in financial hardship.

MWSS-374 has been the adopted unit of the VFW post in Joshua Tree for the past eight years.

The post has raised more than \$9,000 for MWSS-374 Marines and their families in the last eight years, sending care packages

overseas and gifts for their families remaining at home.

In addition to the money raised for the unit, the VFW's relief fund has gone to aid veterans in financial distress and continued support of the troops.

Joshua Tree VFW Post 7264 also takes on the

See **VFW** page A5

"The best part is just being with a bunch of people who understand."

— Roger Sherwin

This Week in Combat Center History



Reprinted from the Observation Post dated May 31, 1960, Vol. 4, No. 17
Marine Aviation Marks 48th Year

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Forty-eight years ago, on May 22, 1912, Marine Corps aviation was born when 1st Lt. Alfred A. Cunningham reported to the U.S. Naval Academy for "duty connected with flying."

Marine aviation has come a long way since the day of the clumsy, slow moving biplane. Today the skies over this desert Base are traveled by the Corps newest innovation, the helicopter. This modern day aircraft is capable of performing feats that the Wright brothers never dreamed possible.

When the United States entered World War I, Marine Corps aviation consisted of six officers, one warrant officer and forty-three enlisted men.

On Armistice Day the Marine Corps had a total of 282 officers and 2,180 enlisted men. By June of 1920 there were less than 1,000

Marines on active aviation duty. This figure was not to rise above 1,500 for 20 years following the war.

The peak number of Marine aviation units was reached on September 30, 1944 when the Corps had a total of five air wings, thirty-one aircraft groups and 145 aircraft squadrons. The personnel peak was January 31, 1945 when 125, Marines were serving in aviation.

Today Marine aviation follows two separate but parallel lines, fixed and rotary wing aircraft. In the fixed wing line the "Wildcats," "Hellcats" and "Corsairs" of onl a few years ago replaced by "Furies," "Skyhawks," "Crusaders" and Skyrays." Marine pilotsnow have the capabilities of delivering atomic weapons with their aircraft. Helicopters are constantly being improved. New observation type 'Copters as well as huge transports are now used by the Corps.

OFF-LIMITS ESTABLISHMENTS

MCIWest off-limits establishments guidance prohibits service members from patronizing the following locations. This order applies to all military personnel.

Local off-limits guidance prohibits service members from patronizing the following locations.

In Oceanside:

- Angelo's Kars, 222 S. Coast Hwy, Oceanside, Calif., 92054
- Angelo's Kars, 226 S. Coast Hwy, Oceanside, Calif., 92054

In San Diego:

- Club Mustang, 2200 University Ave.
- Club San Diego, 3955 Fourth St.
- Get It On Shoppe, 3219 Mission Blvd.
- Main Street Motel, 3494 Main St.
- Vulcan Baths, 805 W. Cedar St.

In National City:

- Dream Crystal, 15366 Highland Ave.
- Sports Auto Sales, 1112 National City Blvd.

In Twentynine Palms:

- Adobe Smoke Shop, 6441 Adobe Rd.
- STC Smoke Shop, 6001 Adobe Rd.
- K Smoke Shopp, 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.

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

HOT TOPIC

REMEMBRANCE RUN

A remembrance run will be held May 31, dedicated to the servicemembers who lost their lives in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. There will be an 8 kilometer race, where the first 300 participants will receive a free t-shirt and a 5 kilometer run, where the first 100 participants will receive a free t-shirt. Register at the Community Center, Building 1004. For more information call 830-3380.

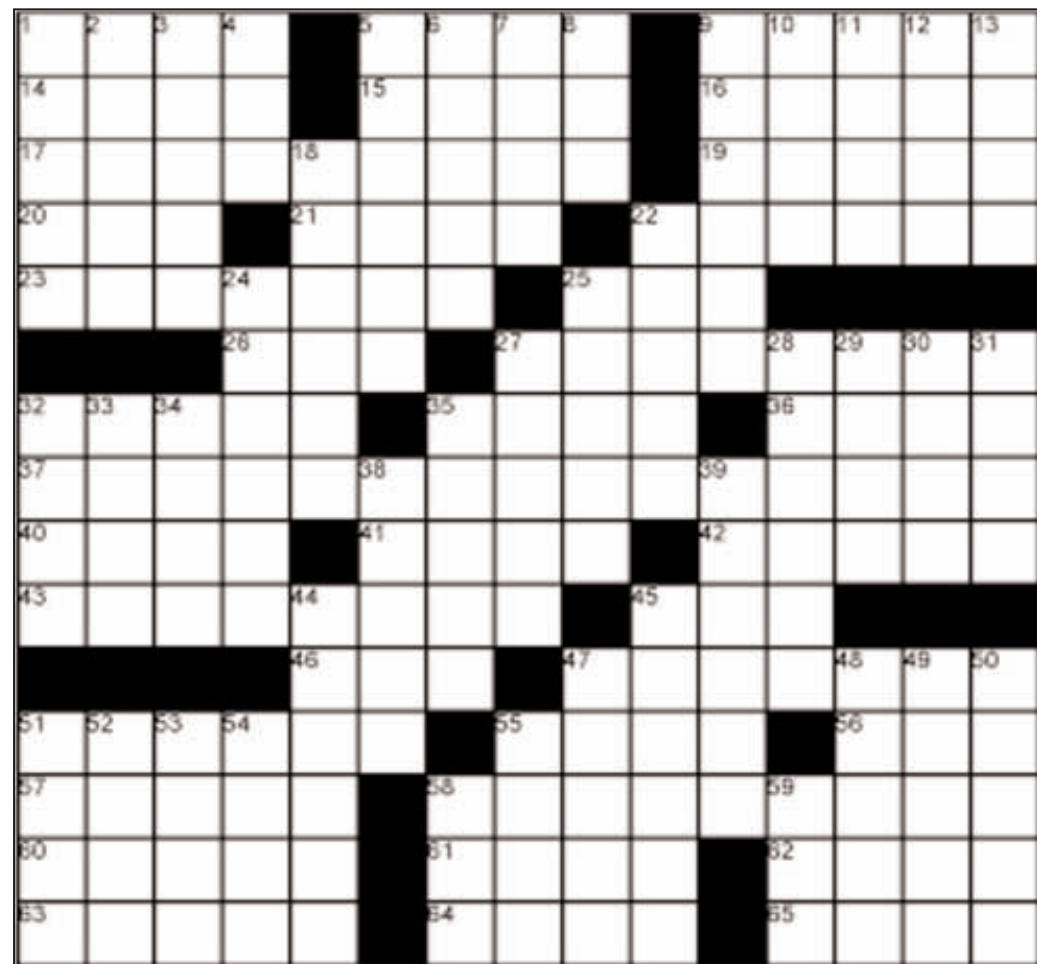
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PUZZLES COURTESY OF © 2011 HOMETOWN CONTENT

SCROUNGING IT UP

See answers on page A5



ACROSS

- In the altogether
- Reedy instrument
- Go's mate
- Say for sure
- Act the goldbrick
- Bring a smileto
- Turned down an invitation
- Flaxen fabric
- "Exodus" hero
- Baloney
- Bernadette of "Silent Movie"
- Readied for mailing
- __ Clemente
- Intl. group since 1948
- Sunday readings
- Some saxes
- Take-?out order?
- Butler, to Gable
- Risked future harm
- Mold-?ripened cheese
- Not exactly a world-?beater
- Part of a step
- Overhaul, as a country road
- __ Solo of "Star Wars"
- Checkers side
- Slowest on the uptake
- Producer Bochco
- Act the ratfink
- Bath bathroo
- Insertion mark
- Scrammed surreptitiously
- Automobile-?eschewing sect
- Gofer
- Pew's place
- Words before car or cop
- Deuce beater
- Like batik fabrics

DOWN

- Cakes with kicks
- Manage to avoid
- Aqua __ (gold dissolver)
- Bit of work
- Doo-?wop selections
- Serenaded the ump
- Clothhoppers
- Gece preceder
- Lead ore
- Give off
- Ignore, with "out"
- Netizen, e.g.
- Confident solvers' tools
- Rio Grande city
- KP implement
- Heavyweight champ dethroned by Foreman
- Like bar snacks
- Gas or clutch
- Bobby Orr's team
- Arcing tosses
- Fashion mag
- Crystal ball gazer
- E.g., e.g.
- Handed-?down history
- Pre-?calc course
- Foiled on the ice
- Like cheesecloth
- Popsicle flavor
- Motown's Franklin
- Regatta site
- Part of LED
- Broncos great John
- Vino variety
- Fiddled
- Lingering emotional injury
- Unlikely to bite
- Ms. Brockovich
- Ed Norton's wear
- Culinary directive
- Calendar col.
- "Tell me more ..."

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<http://www.facebook.com/the.combatcenter>

How does high blood pressure cause strokes?

SHARI LOPATIN

TriWest Healthcare Alliance

Did you know that one in every three U.S. adults has suffered from high blood pressure, a major risk factor for stroke? And, stroke is the third leading cause of death in the U.S.

Those facts came straight from the American Stroke Association and the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

The relationship between stroke and high blood pressure has been well-documented. The American Stroke Association states, "Managing high blood pressure is the most important thing you can do to lessen your risk for stroke."

What is blood pressure?

As the heart pumps blood through the body, it also pushes blood against the body's arteries. The force of this push is blood pressure.

However, if this pressure rises too much and stays high it can damage the heart, blood vessels, kidneys and other parts of the body, according to NHLBI. It can also lead to a stroke.

What causes high blood pressure?

Blood pressure tends to rise with age.

However, other causes may include obesity, chronic kidney disease, thyroid disease, sleep apnea or certain asthma and cold-relief medications.

Unfortunately, high blood pressure usually has no symptoms, according to NHLBI. Occasionally, it may cause headaches. Many people have high blood pressure for years and don't even know it.

The best ways to prevent high blood pressure from escalating are to:

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Exercise regularly
- Manage stress effectively
- Limit the amount of salt and alcohol consumption
- Avoid cigarette smoke
- Check your blood pressure regularly

The stroke correlation

According to the American Stroke Association, a stroke happens when a blood vessel to the brain is either blocked by a blood clot, or completely bursts. This prevents oxygen from reaching the brain, causing the affected part to die.

High blood pressure is a major risk factor for stroke because it damages arteries. And when arteries are damaged, they clog or burst more easily.

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you can find it in the
Observation Post
Classified section**

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

THE FIGHTER

Mark Geletko

Fight Club 29 head coach,
Pittsburg, Pa., 52

INTERVIEWED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY
LANCE CPL. ALI AZIMI

May 18, 2012

> **If you you know me, you know** I don't do anything halfway. If we are going to do this, we are going to do it 100 percent.

> **I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,** in 1960 and lived there all my life until I joined the Corps.

> **My father was one of 13 brothers.** So I have a lot of cousins, and we are always competitive.

> **Back in high school** I played football, hockey and ran track.

> **After I got out** of high school and got away from

high school sports, I was looking for something to fill that void. I got into amateur boxing and that became my competitive fix.

> **I worked at a steel mill** after I got out of school for about four years. I was a steel worker. A laborer, basically pick n' shovel and sledge hammers stuff.

> **I had three uncles and several** cousins who all served in the Marine Corps. So when I decided to go into the service, they said, "Well I know you are going in the Marine Corps right?" It was a given.

> **Coming into the Marine Corps,** it was still a challenge, physically and culturally. My first two years I went to Okinawa. It was a total reversal of the working class environment I had known in Pittsburgh.

> **I got to be a drill instructor** twice, once as a senior for recruits at Parris Island, and at Quantico for Officers Candidate School.

> **Recruits do a lot of dumb** things. We had one that jumped in the back of a delivery truck and rode it off-base. We didn't find him until he got to Georgia.

> **We were in Thailand** training and I was trying to get a fight because I was dabbling in Maui Thai at the time. There was nobody in Thailand big enough to fight me. I was 220 and the Thai's didn't have anyone my size.

> **I eventually got** injured and had to stop fighting, so my Maui Thai coach asked me to stay on as a coach.

> **After I came out to Twentynine Palms,** I began to meet other Marines through the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program that were interested in mixed martial arts. So we began to talk about where there are some tournaments that we can do.

> **When we started the team** we had five guys. I had some experience as a boxing and Maui Thai coach, so I taught the striking side. We had some wrestlers who would teach the grappling side.

> **The pinnacle of my coaching** career was coaching in Serbia. I remember one of my coaching fighters that we took got a raw call. The whole arena is full of about three or four thousand Eastern Europeans and they're just booing me and they're throwing these plastic bottles at me. I say to myself, "You know this is the tip of the spear right here." I'm being booed on an international level, stoned with bottles and arguing with this ref that doesn't understand English.

> **This year we went back to Vegas,** won, and I was named the world team coach again I will be taking four of my fighters to compete again in the world games in Moscow, Russia, and hopefully we will be taking the gold this year.

> **It's a good group, I wouldn't** trade it for anything. I've been blessed to be able to start this and find guys like this to keep it going.

> **I've never really** thought this is too much. When you meet guys like this you want to keep it going because you don't want to disappoint those guys. They're like my kids.

> **I don't care for people my age** too much. I'd rather hang out with these guys and my kids at home.

> **We have UFC parties.** Everyone comes over. My wife and I make Mexican food and watch the fights.

> **My kids and I wrestle** all the time. My wife gets mad at us because we roll over the couches and break stuff. I still win because I'm heavier than them.

> **I've taught them Muay Thai in my garage,** just teaching them basic self-defense and how to strike and kick. They've logged in many hours on the Thai bag.

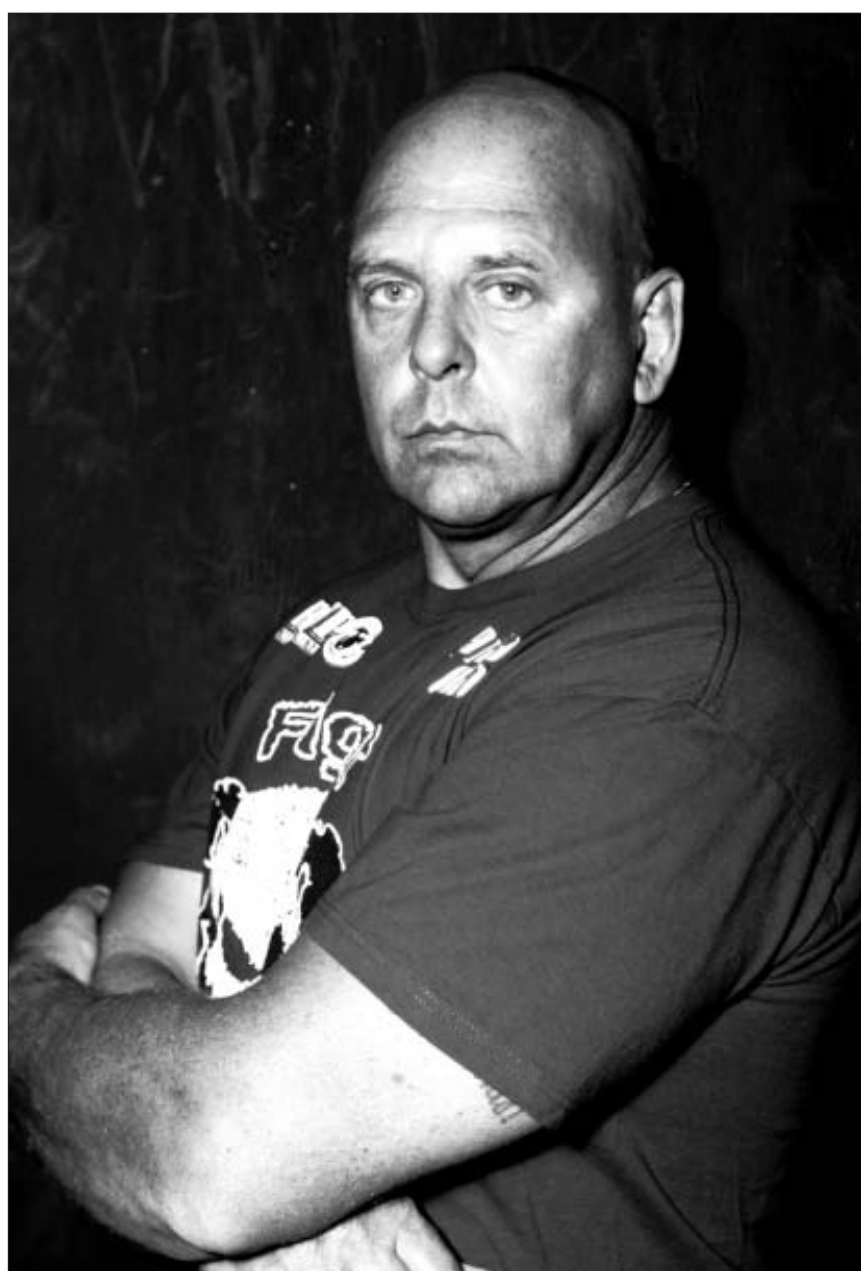
> **My kids are more** conventional athletes right now. My oldest son plays college soccer, my youngest is about to play college football in the fall.

> **I coached them until the 8th grade,** then I let their high school coaches take over.

> **I'm a big Steelers fan.** I put my "terrible towels" out in the living room and I have my game shirt that I like to wear. I don't wash that shirt all season.

> **My youngest son is there** with me. He has his shirt and we watch it together.

> **My wife can't watch.** She has to go to the back. She's not a true believer. We've been married 23 years. It's just an agreement we have.



Through a Letter

■ Local elementary students bring 'thank you' cards to Combat Center Marines

Story and photos by
Lance Cpl. D. J. Wu

Children, part of the K-Kids program from Twentynine Palms and Palm Vista Elementary Schools, wrote letters to Marines aboard the Combat Center May 12.

60 kids from the respective schools brought around 1,000 letters to show their appreciation to the Combat Center's Marines and sailors for protecting freedom and the United States.

The K-Kids program helps local school children connect with their community through events like this. The kids came here with their mentors.

"K-Kids is a student leadership group that promotes leadership skills and community service within the school and community," said Vincent Bullion, physical education teacher and K-Kids faculty advisor.

The kids flew off the bus at the sight of the nearly 50 Marines and sailors formed up to the side of the bus. The school children were eager to give their handwritten cards to a Marine or sailor and thank them with a handshake and a hug.

For the short time the kids were aboard the Combat Center, the Marines and sailors of 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, made it a memorable one. They graciously accepted the letters and played with the kids in the playground.

Cpl. Erick Juarez, infantryman, 2/7, said that they really appreciated the kids' energy and enthusiasm.

The day was full of smiles. The Marines and sailors shared the letters they received to the rest of their battalion returning from training later that day.



[Top] Journey Platzke, 10, student, Twentynine Palms Elementary School, shakes hands with Cpl. Horlan Spurgin, infantryman, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, after Platzke gives a letter to Spurgin.

[Above] Children from Twentynine Palms and Palm Vista Elementary Schools played with Marines and sailors with 2/7, at Felix Field playground.

[Left] Shelby Kenny, 7, Twentynine Palms Elementary School hugs Lance Cpl. Aaron Maczynski, infantryman, 2/7, after giving him her 'thank you' letter.

Photos by Lance Cpl. Ali Azimi



VMU-1, from A1

returned home, where their family and friends were waiting in anticipation.

"We had a great deployment. Our Marines accomplished everything they set out to do and more," said Elaina Avalos, family readiness officer, VMU-1. "We are really excited to have them home."

The crowd of excited

loved ones made small talk and passed the time as they waited in the hot and sunny 97 F weather. As the buses arrived everyone moved from the center of Del Valle Field to the fences where the 132 Marines would be unloaded.

The first Marine to step off the bus was Sgt. Justin Bowlin, avionics technician, VMU-1. Waiting alongside the bus was his wife, Cori,

holding their 6-month old son, Kaiden. This would be the first time Bowlin would hold his son.

"He was born two weeks after my husband deployed," said Cori. "We Skyped during the birth, but right around the time he was born the Skype went out. Then when we got it to work Kaiden was already there crying and he was like 'oh my god, you had him.'"

Teary-eyed, Cori hugged her husband and handed Kaiden over to his father, who held him for the first time.

The rest of the homecoming event had the same tone of happy relief as the Marines were welcomed home by their families and loved ones. Kids hugged their father's legs and tried to lift their heavy sea bags to the cars.

"It's a good feeling being back," Gallardo said.

[Left] Amalia Schocken (left), wife of Staff Sgt. Arthur Schocken, unmanned aerial vehicle operator, Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron 1, and their daughter, Gigi (right), wave at the bus which was holding their loved one during VMU-1's homecoming at Del Valle Field May 20.

[Top Right] Maj. David Son, assistant operations officer, VMU-1, holds his 2-year-old son, Xander, as he points to the camera his mom is holding.

[Bottom Right] Capt. Veronica Kaltrider, logistics officer, VMU-1, is welcomed home.

VFW, from A1

responsibility of flag retirements. Members retire between 1,500 to 1,800 flags annually.

But the VFW is not just about raising money, it is also about camaraderie. The post provides a place for military members of all branches, from all wars, to come together.

"The best part is just being with a bunch of people who understand," said Roger Sherwin, commander, VFW Post 7264, Joshua Tree. "We all have something in common."

The post hosts a number of social events, such as barbeques and pool tourna-

ments, monthly. The building also features a kitchen and bar for a safe place to eat or enjoy a beer with peers.

In order to join the VFW, service members must have served in a combat zone, although any active duty military members are allowed inside and at social events.

Relatives of service members who have served in combat zones, past or present, may also join the VFW auxiliary, providing them with all the privileges of a member and the company of others who know the strains of having a loved one in a service.

For more information or to join go to <http://www.vfw.org> or call 366-2717.

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REORAVEL	HAN								
STEVEN	RED	DON	EST						
CABRET	STOLE	AWAY							
AMISH	AIDS	HAVE							
RENTA	TREY	DYED							

Adopt-a-School

■ Combat Center Marines visit local elementary school, give valuable lessons on physical fitness

Photos and story by
Lance Cpl. Ali Azimi

The students of Landers Elementary School in Yucca Valley were given a taste of the Marine Corps on their own playground May 17.

Marine faculty advisers of the Staff Noncommissioned Officer's Academy taught students about hydration, the importance of fitness and how to run through a physical training circuit the Marines constructed on the playground.

"This shows Marines are more than just the warriors and fighters," said Sgt. Iris Marini, faculty adviser, Sergeant's Course. "We are also able to tone it down and interact with kids to have a positive influence on them."

The faculty advisers took on two classes of students at a time. First they worked with the 3rd and 4th-graders followed by the 5th and 6th.

As the 3rd and 4th graders walked out, they noticed the Marines standing in the middle of the playground, and lost control. There was screaming, laughing and the random student jumping into the air out of excitement.

Around the playground stood sets of cones, a mat and a large string of rope, all part of the circuit course, usually completed by sergeants in the academy.

After warming up and a quick run through of the course, the

students began their exercises.

"A lot of kids normally come to P.E. and don't always seem to be that motivated, they got out here and were really motivated," said Vicki Chambless, physical education teacher, Landers Elementary. "The kids really look up to the Marines."

The 5th and 6th-grade classes soon followed. The kids zoomed through the course, completing each exercise to the best of their abilities.

Among their ranks stood one particularly motivated girl with dreams of becoming a Marine one day.

"I always wanted to be a Marine," said Randy Jean Price Car, 5th-grade student. "Today I realized it's going to be a lot of hard work and I'm going to love it."

The students got one last surprise for the day as the Marines introduced them to the ammunition can lift.

Many of the kids stepped up to the ammo cans with confidence from running through the course. Their facial expression changed as they picked up the cans and found out its true weight was deceiving of its size.

"They were extremely motivated," Marini said. "If this is something the academy is going to adopt, I would definitely be all for it."



[Top] Landers Elementary School students conduct a physical training circuit course constructed by Marine faculty advisers of the Combat Center's Sergeant's Course, as part of the Adopt-a-School program.

[Bottom Left] Jaycub Franklin, student, Landers Elementary School, runs through a physical training circuit course during the Adopt-a-School program at his school.

[Bottom Right] A student from Landers Elementary School jumps from side to side of a rope to work out her cardio and footwork.



Meeting an Idol

My time with Kelly Pickler

WORDS/PHOTOS: CPL. SARAH DIETZ

Country star Kellie Pickler sings to a crowd of Combat Center personnel Saturday in the We Salute You Concert 2012 at Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Grey Field. Brett Elderedge opened up the concert before Pickler took the stage.

You can tell a lot about a person by their hand shake. It's the very first moment of a real first impression, letting you subconsciously gauge mood, enthusiasm, personality and confidence.

My introductory handshake with Kellie Pickler both took me by surprise and invalidated any of those typical "dumb blond" jokes that went viral on the Internet after her appearance on the "Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader?" show.

At our first meeting, this petite woman, who looked like she didn't have an ounce of fat on her, confidently grasped my hand like the rough-n-tumble, down-home country girl she is. I had to step back and shake my hand out.

No dumb blond would shake hands like that. She's hard core.

I felt a little naive to have profiled her as such beforehand, but my only experiences with her were YouTube clips of her as a teenager on American Idol.

She didn't win the 5th season of American Idol, but she was the first of the top six contestants to sign a record deal. In my opinion, she is a true American idol herself.

She greeted every fan in line to see her during the meet-and-greet at Hashmarks with a hug and a thank you. This small town girl had a huge heart for the military. If she could meet every Marine on base, she would greet them all with open arms.

She was even asked out to the Marine Corps Ball. Pvt. Ben Meadows, student, Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School, asked Pickler to his unit's ball in November. And she said yes.

"If we can make it happen, I will go," she said. "Why not? It's just a special way to say thank you."

With the meet-and-greet over, we sat down in a separate, private room for the interview. I noticed

she had a sergeant major chevron on the left shoulder of her black t-shirt. She told me that Sgt. Maj. Matthew B. Brookshire, the Combat Center's sergeant major, had given it to her.

I explained what being given a chevron means, and that it is a pretty big honor to get to wear one. She got really excited.

She then jumped up to grab her purse, dug through it, pulled out a challenge coin she was given and proudly held it out on display. "I'm just so excited!"

We sat and talked about what it meant for her to be here, a pretty basic question I ask any artist who comes to the Combat Center.

"I come from a military family," Pickler said. "My Grandpa Pickler was a Marine, I've always had very close ties to the military. Not everyone can be a Marine; it takes a very special person to be able to do this. My hat's off to all of you." Pickler grew up with her grandparents.

This was her first visit to Twentynine Palms, and it was exactly what she heard it would be.

"Everyone kept calling this the sand box. It sure is," she said, laughing.

Our originally-planned 15-minute interview went on for nearly 45 minutes. She talked about her experiences with the USO playing in Iraq and Afghanistan as she plowed through a very not dainty meal of a burger and fries.

"I've made so many friends in the military, which definitely makes me feel safe," she said. "Don't (mess) with me, I'll call my Marines!"

She told me all the big guns she got to fire overseas, from machine guns out of the back of helicopters to mortars. When she talked to me about the weapons, she lit up with this almost half-crazed expression of joy.

She also shared stories about the time she

went fishing in Baghdad, Iraq, in a moat outside one of Saddam Hussein's palaces he built for his daughter's wedding party.

I just laughed along with her. Only a girl from North Carolina would be this excited about fishing in the desert war zone before her next concert.

On the table we were sitting at, someone placed a bunch of Marine Corps-themed T-shirts for her. She spotted a black tank top with Marine Corps jargon and designs printed all over it. Her eyes got really big. Dropped any sense of formality, she rushed off to the corner of the room to change, being sure to place the sergeant major chevron back on the left shoulder.

"Does it look alright?" she asked.

Of course it did, it's Kellie Pickler. That, and she was asking a girl who doesn't get much choice in her own outfits for work.

Her casual nature about changing attire so soon before a show surprised me, though. I always imagined a team of people running around to find the perfect outfit, brushing material down, pinning it back, make-up artists and hair stylists fussing over every follicle before the singer takes the stage. Maybe it's like that in different genres of music, or maybe it's like that with most other artists out there. Pickler was her own relaxed person, and just rolled with it.

Pickler and her band left for her fifth USO tour to the Middle East this week to play for the deployed troops.

"It's so important for them to know we support them," she said to the cheering crowd lining the field below the stage later that night. "We have their back because they have ours. I want to make them feel like they're back home, even if it's just one hour."



[Top Left] The crowd goes wild when country singers Brett Elderedge and Kellie Pickler took the stage Saturday at the We Salute You Concert 2012. [Bottom Left] An audience gathers as country singer Brett Elderedge takes the stage to open for Kellie Pickler. [Right] Country star Kellie Pickler sings to Combat Center personnel during the We Salute You 2012 concert Saturday.



Combat Center Clubs

Excursions Enlisted Club

Friday: Social hour with food, 5 - 7 p.m. followed by DJ Gjettblaque, 8 - 11 p.m., Ladies Night
Saturday: Variety Night, DJ Gjettblaque 8 - 11 p.m.
Thursday: Social hour, 7:30 - 9:30 p.m.

Bloodstripes NCO Club

Friday: Social hour with food, 5 - 7 p.m.
Wednesday: Free gourmet bar food, 5 to 7 p.m.
Thursday: Social hour, 7 - 9 p.m.

Hashmarks 29 SNCO Club

Friday: Social hour, 5:30 - 7:30 p.m.
Monday-Friday: All-hands lunch from 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.
Monday: Steak night and full menu, 4:30 - 8 p.m.
Tuesday: Social hour, 5 - 7 p.m.
Thursday: Social hour, 5 - 7 p.m.

Combat Center Officers' Club

Monday: Steak night, 5 - 7:30 p.m.
Monday-Friday: All-hands lunch, from 11 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.
Thursday: Taco Night, 5 - 7 p.m.

For complete calendars visit <http://www.mccs29palms.com>.

Local Events

A Little Murder Never Hurt Anybody

When: Every Friday & Saturday until June 2
Where: Theatre 29
736377 Sullivan Rd., Twentynine Palms, Calif.
For tickets and information call 316-4151
or visit <http://www.theatre29.org>

Free Line Dance Lessons

Learn to dance to traditional country music
When: 5 - 9 p.m., every Sunday
Where: Willie Boy's Saloon and Dance Hall
50048 29 Palms Hwy, Morongo Valley, Calif.
For more information, call 363-3343.

Terry Hanson & The Westerners

Well known country artist comes to Pioneertown
When: 8 p.m., Friday May 25
Where: Pappy and Harriets Pioneertown Palace
53688 Pioneertown Rd., Poinneertown, Calif.
For more information, call 365-5956

Lower Desert

Dwight Yoakam

Country music star live
When: 8 p.m., Friday, May 25
Where: Spotlight 29 Casino Resort
46-200 Harrison Place, Coachella, Calif.
For more information call 866-377-6829 or visit
<http://www.spotlight29.com>.

Sugarland

Country group live in concert
When: 9 p.m., Saturday, May 26
Where: Agua Caliente
32-250 Bob Hope Dr., Rancho Mirage
For more information call 888-999-1995 or visit
<http://hotwatercasino.com>.

Joan Sebastian

Grammy Award-winning Mexican singer, songwriter
When: 8 p.m., Saturday, June 16
Where: Fantasy Springs Resort Casino
84-245 Indio Springs Parkway, Indio
For more information call 800-827-2946 or visit
<http://www.fantasyspringsresort.com>.

Carlos Mencia

Night of laughter with famous comedian
When: 8 p.m., Saturday, June 16
Where: Morongo Casino Resort and Spa
49500 Seminole Drive, Cabazon, Calif.
For more information call 800-252-4499 or visit
<http://www.morongocasinosort.com>.

Sunset Cinema

Friday, May 25

6 p.m. - Wrath of the Titans, Rated PG-13
9 p.m. - Lockout, Rated PG-13
Midnight - American Reunion, Rated R

Saturday, May 26

10:30 a.m. - **Free Matinee** Coraline, Rated PG
12:30 p.m. - Mirror Mirror, Rated PG
3 p.m. - Wrath of the Titans 3D, Rated PG-13
6 p.m. - The Hunger Games, Rated PG-13
9 p.m. - Lockout, Rated PG-13
Midnight - Cabin in the Woods, Rated R

Sunday, May 27

12:30 p.m. - The Three Stooges, Rated PG
3 p.m. - The Lucky One, Rated PG-13
6 p.m. - Wrath of the Titans 3D, Rated PG-13
9 p.m. - American Reunion, Rated R

Monday, May 28

2 p.m. - Mirror Mirror, Rated PG
6 p.m. - The Hunger Games, Rated PG-13
9 p.m. - Lockout, Rated PG-13

Tuesday, May 29

7 p.m. - Wrath of the Titans 3D, Rated PG-13

Wednesday, May 30

5:30 p.m. - The Three Stooges, Rated PG
8:30 p.m. - American Reunion, Rated R

Thursday, May 31

5:30 p.m. - Mirror Mirror, Rated PG
8:30 p.m. - Wrath of the Titans, Rated PG-13

'The Dictator' sweeps country with political satire



COURTESY PHOTO

Sasha Baron Cohen, the British comedian, famous for pranking unsuspecting Americans in the over-the-top mockumentaries "Bruno" and "Borat," makes a much more conventional comedy with this satiric rip about a Middle Eastern "mad dog" despot.

NEIL POND

"The Dictator"

Starring Sasha Baron Cohen,
Ana Faris and Ben Kingsley
Directed by Larry Charles
R, 83 min

It's "conventional" in that it's a straight-up comedy, not an elaborate ruse that makes its rube victims the butt of the joke. But being conventional doesn't mean it's any less likely to rock someone's boat.

Cohen, working once again with director (and former "Seinfeld" TV writer) Larry Charles, has never been shy to tread on, shall we say, areas of sensitivity. And "The Dictator" is a full-on, politically incorrect military assault that makes sure it not only covers, but beats down pretty much everything that someone, somewhere would consider precious and dear.

There are jokes about sex, race, women, religion, instruments of torture, acts of terrorism, 9/11, and people who eat at Applebees. There are bits involving anatomical nether regions, references to just about every form of bodily fluid, and a scene in which we find out that pigeon poop isn't the only dropping that can make for a messy morning stroll through Manhattan.

It's audaciously offensive and sometimes flat-out hilarious.

Cohen (also one of the writers) stars as Gen. Aladeen, the tyrannical, Gaddafi-esque dictator of the fictional republic of Wadiya. When his plans to produce weapons-grade uranium hit a diplomatic snag, he's forced to make a trip into the heart of the evil empire---New York City, U.S.A.--to address the United Nations.

On America's golden shores, Aladeen falls victim to a foiled assassination attempt orchestrated by his older brother (Sir Ben Kingsley), forcing him to go into hiding in the Big Apple. As he plots to regain his throne, he uses a Brooklyn whole-foods store run by a waifish feminist vegetarian eco-activist (Anna Faris) as his cover.

The cast includes several familiar faces in cameos, including Megan Fox, John C. Reilly, Chris Elliott, Edward Norton and Gary Shandling.

Much of what follows is your basic fish-out-of-water comedy, but immersed (and gargling) in Cohen's take-no-prisoners, push-the-envelope humor. Be warned, this is hard stuff. If you don't have the stomach for it, you'd be best advised to stay away from the bar.

But if you're not outraged, you may indeed find it funny...if not occasionally

brilliant. Cohen's send-up, which mashes both American and Middle Eastern stereotypes into one big, bubbling joke of a melting pot, is ballsy, you've got to give him that. As a satirist, he's doing what satirists have done for centuries, projecting barbed contemporary commentary through the prism of humor.

And as a moviemaker, he's following a line all the way back to Charlie Chaplin. The genius film pioneer wrote, directed and starred in his own parody of another tyrant back in 1940 when his then-controversial "The Great Dictator" took comedic aim at Adolph Hitler, fascism, anti-Semitism and the growing threat of the Nazi empire.

Love him or loath him, Cohen and his gonzo comedy aren't for everybody. But just remember, 70 years ago, neither was Charlie Chaplin.

DADDY DAY CARE

3rd AABn fathers bring their kids to work, give them a taste of the Corps

Photos by Diane Durden



[Above] Jacob Clover, 5, son of Sgt. Jason Clover, company training non-commissioned officer, Company D, 3rd Assault Amphibian Battalion, uses a communication helmet to talk to his dad during Bring Your Child to Work Day May 18. The Marines' children were invited to join their dads at the unit's maintenance ramp to help them better understand what their parents do when the Marine is away from home.

[Top, right] Isaac Jacquez-Canas, 2, son of Cpl. Francisco Jacquez, amphibious assault vehicle mechanic, D Co., 3rd AABn., gets a birds-eye view of the unit's maintenance lot from the turret of a medium tactical vehicle replacement.

[Bottom, right] Kaydance Schicke, 5, daughter of Chief Warrant Officer 2 John Schicke, maintenance officer, D Co., 3rd AABn., gets a firsthand look at one of the vehicles her dad is responsible for maintaining.

