

THE STAFF

Meet the Public Affairs Marines who bring you the Observation Post



Cpl. Sarah Dietz

Layout and Design, Editor
22, Grand Haven, Mich.

- > **The past year?** It was crazy, went by so fast. It was pretty stressful, I think our office got to know each other better through it, though.
- > **My favorite shoot** was when an artillery battalion from the Australian Army came to train with 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, at the Combat Center. It was a lot of fun writing a story about how artillerymen work and it was a good time sitting in the field between fires talking to the Australians, learning about their culture and explaining ours to them. It blew my mind how many misconceptions they had about Americans. Then again, I always envisioned most Australians to be either surfers with cool accents or wilderness men who hunted kangaroos wearing those cool hats.
- > **Doing this job** has given me the opportunity to meet tons of new people and learn things about the Marine Corps I may have not in other jobs. I have spent time in the field with artillery units, tankers, infantrymen and Marines that work in the airfield. I have seen many different aspects of the Corps and have learned so much from the people around me.
- > **Sacrifice inspires me.** The people who should have their stories told are people who sacrifice themselves daily for a cause they believe in.
- > **I've learned this year** that first impressions aren't everything. People change and aren't perfect, and people need second chances.

Cpl. D. J. Wu

Combat Correspondent
24, Boston, Mass.

- > **I did a lot of** work in the past year. It's been tough.
- > **Anytime I get to put** myself in the paper is my favorite. The "Adventures of Scuba Dave" was one of my favorite issues.
- > **I think it's one of** the most dynamic MOSs in the Corps. You get to see so many different things. I can be out in the field with grunts, tankers, pilots and everyone else and see them doing their jobs. On another day I see the same people volunteering in the community.
- > **Sunsets and cigars.** I like to watch the sunset over the mountains and smoke a cigar and just let my thoughts go.
- > **You have to wait** for the moment. The moments happen all the time. You have to be ready when it comes.



Cpl. William J. Jackson

Press Chief
22, South Sioux City, Neb.

- > **The past year** has been an eye-opening experience. I'd describe it as a whirlwind, traveling and sightseeing.
- > **Personally, I found** the Highway 62 video to be my favorite thing to work on. Within a few days our whole shop came up with a campaign that should have taken at least a month of planning. In the end it's not always about the final product but about how well you can manage the stress of another project on top of a full work load.
- > **I'd say knowing that** I have a lot of freedoms when it comes to how and what I work on is the best part of the job. I've never done the same thing in consecutive days and I've been able to do stories in a completely different light than the previous ones. It has made me more open to ideas and has opened me up to how I interact with people.
- > **Michael Phelps inspires me.** I know this answer is more of a who than what, but he's the most decorated Olympian of all time. Plus, he also holds the all-time records for Olympic gold medals, Olympic gold medals in individual events and Olympic medals in individual events for a male. Tell me that's not inspiring.
- > **I've learned to trust** the abilities I have and to always ask questions. Take chances and never be satisfied with anything or you'll never grow.

Cpl. Ali Azimi

Combat Correspondent
20, Los Angeles, Calif.

- > **This year it had its good parts** and its bad parts. I look forward to seeing what 2013 has to hold.
- > **My favorite event** this year was going up to Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center Bridgeport, Calif., with 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment's cold weather training. Coming out of Southern California, it was a new challenge being surrounded by all the snow in such a high elevation.
- > **Public Affairs has allowed** me to experience different parts of the Corps. I feel like I have a better view of the whole picture.
- > **Movies really inspire me.** I see Jet Li kicking butt or a messenger from the Persians getting Spartan kicked, and I suddenly have the enthusiasm to improve myself and my life.
- > **I've learned to always** purchase full coverage on all your vehicles; don't let friends ride your motorcycle, even if they say they know how, and save money until you need it.



Lance Cpl. Lauren A. Kurkimilis

Broadcast Chief
25, Cape Coral, Fla.

- > **2012 was my first year** in Twentynine Palms, and I had never been to the west coast before. So I got to check out L.A., San Diego and Las Vegas and I saw snow for the first time.
- > **I got the chance** to take portraits of different Combat Center women for Women's History Month. Until then, I had no idea I enjoyed taking portraits so much.
- > **Public affairs is a** very unique MOS. I get a chance to think outside of the box every day and I'm given the unique opportunity to learn about other people's jobs and tell their stories.
- > **I am inspired** by selfless, positive people, by those who find peace in other's happiness and are graceful in the face of adversity.
- > **I've learned** to take things slowly, enjoy the quiet and to create happiness in my life.



THE BOSSIES



Gunnery Sgt. Leo Salinas



Capt. Nicholas Mannweiler



1st Lt. Sin Kook



> **The past year** was simultaneously one of the most challenging and most rewarding years I've had as a PAO. From supporting the Marines in Bridgeport following the tragic gas explosion in February to covering all the unique training exercises this year, 2012 was one heck of a ride.

> **Large Scale Exercise 1/Javelin Thrust** was by far my favorite event of the year. Marines are loyal to each other and work extremely well together, but when you've got three very different commands working together in one large exercise, it's important to give them fair treatment. I enjoyed working on the PAO plan that covered such an important exercise.

> **Public Affairs is my calling.** I serve at the pleasure of the Marine Corps in any capacity ordered, but I love the unique aspects and challenges of Public Affairs. We have to understand the big picture so we can explain to family members, decision makers and citizens how we use the precious resources entrusted to us as a Corps. As PAO, we serve as equal parts sherpa, interpreter, and spokesperson, helping the two worlds to better understand each other. I personally love the opportunity to see the Marine Corps from the 20,000 foot viewpoint.

> **Many things inspire me.** As the father of a 1 year old, I'm inspired by the single Marine parents and the spouses of deployed Marines. It's both the most rewarding thing I've ever done and the most challenging thing I've ever done. To handle the home front in a solo capacity, it's not twice as hard. It's a full time job for two people. So I am inspired by those tough individuals that take on that mantle of responsibility. I'm also inspired by the warfighters that we support, the men and women that leave the wire and put it out on the line every day while deployed. I'm not a trigger-puller, but I work hard to make sure that I am every bit as deserving to be called a Marine so I can represent them to the American public and our local community.

> **Later this year, I will** execute PCS orders and move on to my next assignment. My experience at 29 Palms, especially over the last year, cements my belief that you thrive where you are planted, giving it every bit of effort and dedication as the Marines, sailors and civilians that come to work every day here or while deployed. There are many good reasons to give every assignment your maximum professional effort, but the most important reason is that the whole point of it is to improve service to the warfighter and to our Corps so we can continue to do the nation's service. The point when ego enters the equation, you're trying to put the "I" in team. I'll be forever grateful for my tour at the Combat Center and the people that helped shape the experience.

> *It happened.* Life goes on.

> *My favorite activity in 2012*, although it had nothing to do with our job, was the hike behind Ocotillo Housing. Why? The first hike I ever took the Marines on, the scenery was beautiful, since it was right around sunrise, and no one brought a camera to capture the moment, and it would have been the best shot. Physical activity, "hardship" and the irony of public affairs. Three out of nine things I like most about life.

> *You meet someone new everyday.* It sounds cliché but it's true!

> *Capt Mannweiler* inspires me. Next question.

> *No matter what*, you are in control of your own happiness. Whether it's through religion, work, sports, whatever, you will make the ultimate decision of your happiness. Be happy.

> **The year began** and ended. I got older by one year.

> **My favorite project** we did this past year was the PME in Joshua Tree where our photographers took pictures and we picked our top shots. Then we went to Facebook for the community to pick the winners. I was very proud of the PAO Team for the work they put into their photos.

> **A steady paycheck?** I think of Public Affairs like being a policeman. You really don't appreciate or need them till you call. But if you really are in need of them, man...

> **What inspires me?** Really not sure, hmmm..., can I get back to you next year?

> **This year was** about everyone, next year will be about anyone, the future is about me.

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A world apart

This was my first year stationed in Twentynine Palms and my family is in Florida. They are proud of what I do but I've missed Christmas, Thanksgiving and birthdays. A heartache I share with so many other Marines is that being stationed so far away means sometimes I miss out on the one thing that means the most to me, my family.

Story by Lance Cpl. Lauren A. Kurkimilis

Pops

Most fathers would fear the day their only daughter enlists in the military, but not mine. He actually encouraged it. Like, a lot. Sure, I'm his little girl, but along with Barbie and My Little Pony, I was played baseball and collected X-Men cards. You see, my father grew up with three brothers whose first-born children were all boys. Then when I came along in to that world of men they all thought, "What do we do with it?" The product was me, a half-breed girly tom boy. Then, when I was young, my mother passed away and my dad was

then left to be both parents in one.

We've always been close so being apart isn't easy, but we make the best of it. We call each other, send each other music we like and funny pictures, and go on vacations together. He taught me how to play piano, paint a bedroom, properly put up a 9-foot artificial Christmas tree, to do a back hand spring, to be silly, to mourn and to deal with the hard things in life but also to enjoy the little things too. I cry on his shoulder as much as he cries on mine. He's not just my father, he's my friend.



Kier Bear

Kieran is my little clone. He's six (although he would tell you almost seven), he's the smartest little kid I know. I'm sure every big sister would say that, but it's true. He reads at a 5th grade level, memorizes the names of tanks, and will tell you when you're wrong and why you're wrong, every time, without hesitation. I was 18 when he was born and I've always been like another mother to him. I was there the day he was born, when he took his first steps and said his first words. He's so young. So, the hardest part of not being there is missing all the mile-stones he comes to. I've missed his first day

of school, birthdays, and teaching him to swim. When I go home, I make sure to spend individual time with him. Usually that means we spend a day at Chucky Cheese with lots of scream children, but he loves it, so I love to do it. Whenever my leave is over and we explain to him why I have to leave he understands that I'm going back to California and won't be back for a while. He's so strong that he never sheds a tear until after I'm gone. He doesn't want it to make me sad. He's six (almost seven) and he's already a brave, strong little man that makes sacrifices to take care of me.

Patty Man

Patrick is my angel. He's 17, and showed me how I should live my life. Patrick was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder the same year my mother passed away. He was two and I was 10. We were children and, in our own, separate ways, we were lost. When I didn't know what to do, I'd wrap up all of my love and grief in to being there for him and in turn, he was there for me. I would talk to him about my problems and why life was

sometimes unfair and even though he wouldn't talk back, he would listen. He was my silent savior.

I taught him how to swim, how to be affectionate and how to count past 1,000. I even got him to say his first word and that achievement alone I consider to be most important to me. His hard work to do basic things like speak, read, and write inspired what I wanted to be when I grew up, a special education teacher



and speech pathologist. I saw how our family's dedication to his progress has been, and always will be integral to his development.

Patrick looks at the world through unique eyes. He has no concern for war, politics or the judgment of others. The things that are real to him are love, happiness and family. That is what he has taught me. When I'm home, he'll sometimes ask nothing more than for me

to sit next to him. He'll say, "Lauren, right here," as he points to the couch cushion next to him. He'll look at me for a moment almost as though he still wants me to tell him all of my problems. He wants to be there for me. He'll even sometimes hold my hand and say, "Lauren to stay," letting me know he doesn't want me to leave. I promise him that I'll be home soon and one day I'll be home for good.

Bubleba

Bryan is my best friend. He was born one year and nine months before me. He beat me up, teased me, and talked me into doing really stupid, sometimes dangerous, things and I was his annoying kid sister, who tagged along to everything he did. We fought a lot, just as young siblings do, but that all came to an end when our mom got sick. She was diagnosed with T-cell Lymphoma in February of 1997. The worse she got, the more she showed us what it meant to be strong and graceful no matter what life brings. In those few months, she passed on the last life lessons she could give us. As hard as she fought, she passed away on a Thursday in October.

I can count on one hand the amount of times Bryan and I have argued since then. We stopped seeing our differences and realized that no one else would ever know what it was like

to be her children and to lose her too soon.

Bryan marches to the beat of his own drum, or perhaps I should say beats per minute. He's a DJ by the name White Ring. He found an obscure genre of electronic music, called witch house, and within it made a name for himself. Although he is definitely a starving artist, he has played shows from New York to California, and his music has been used in TV shows, movies and runway shows. He's lived in New Orleans, Brooklyn and Seattle all in pursuit of his passion in life and now that passion is going to bring him closer to me, Los Angeles. He always tells me that he's proud of me for growing up to be the person I am and I am so proud of him for having the courage to chase his dreams. He is a risk taker, a dreamer and one of my greatest inspirations.



These men are my life and although we've been a world apart this past year, they are the ones closest to me. They're more than 2,000 miles away but I stay connected to them, not just with phone calls, e-mails and visits, but also through the love they've given me that I carry with me always.

to the United States. I came by myself. I only had enough money to buy food. America was far away. Sometimes I got a ride, sometimes I didn't."

D.J. Wu in time

JANUARY

My first day back in the new year and I changed jobs. For the last few months, I was laying out the newspaper, but no more. I'm back to the grind of covering and writing stories. It's been a few months since I've even taken a picture and I feel rusty. But I look forward to radio and the Combat Center Update. Another year of "Lance Cpl. D. J. Wu."

MARCH

It's my birthday this month. I'll turn 24. Not a big deal. I didn't really do anything for it. I think just a cigar and some scotch by myself. Work this month wasn't very exciting. We really had to look for stories for the paper. I also made my first trip to Vegas for the year. It's always an entertaining trip.

MAY

May was uneventful.

JULY

It was Jackson's birthday this month. He turned 22. We went to Vegas. It was like most of our Vegas trips. Tragedy struck us when we realized our beer pong hot spot closed down. We "Tebowed" at the remains of the old casino.

SEPTEMBER

I got "chosen" for shooting coaches course. I fought it at first but it turned out to be a good time. I shot a pistol for the first time, which was cool. I met some good people. I've always found that going to the shooting range is a good opportunity to meet new people.

NOVEMBER

I think that covering memorials is one of the hardest parts of this job and I have covered two of them this month. You need to take pictures of people crying and find the emotion in the event. Then you have to talk to the bereaved and that's just a ton of awkward. It's hard to not feel like a jerk... I have covered a bunch of other stories this month. We're down to the crunch now with the holidays coming. We have to have all our stuff ready. I'm scrambling to get stuff done.

FEBRUARY

Getting back into to grind has been tough. A lot happened in February. I've already been back into the field a few times. It was almost refreshing, doing "Marine" things again. I worked with some Canadian Army guys this month. Most of them only spoke French. It was a tough story. I think I had one good photo from that shoot. February has been tough for me and my family back home. My dad's mom died this time last year and his oldest brother, my uncle, passed this month too. All the work and personal stuff does get tough but I have to make my way through it.

APRIL

Some big things this month. The highlight, work-wise, was the students from USC came for a leadership challenge. They went through an expedited boot camp. I also tried out SCUBA diving for the first time. We did get some awesome underwater shots. That was one of my favorite shoots since I've been here. The story was called "The Adventures of SCUBA Dave."

JUNE

We had a lot of dry stories assigned to me this month. I enjoy writing the stories I've found myself, as oppose to being assigned one. It is more interesting to me when I write what I want to. I covered plenty of stories that never make it to print. It's all part of the job though.

AUGUST

I couldn't wait to go home. It's been nine months since I've been to Boston. Still had to get through some work but my head wasn't in the game. I went home to help my sister move into Syracuse University for her sophomore year. I'm proud of her, she's doing well up there. Seeing old friends and family, I enjoyed it. I got a new tattoo.

OCTOBER

Fall and October is usually something that I relish. Halloween and new beers. But there's also a lot of work to do this season. The theme of the year has been, tough. It's the most work I've ever done. I'll get through it though. Hopefully I'll get promoted soon, I should pay more attention to that.

DECEMBER

I've made major advancements this month. I finally got my driver's license. At least I did it before I turned 25. I'm also going to get promoted next month! Goodbye days of "Lance Cpl. D. J. Wu." Hopefully that will mean a good start to the new year.

We went out as an office to Palm Springs Tramway before the holiday break. There was snow up there. We played in it like we all remembered from when we were kids. It's the most refreshed I felt in a long time.

It's difficult knowing you won't be home for the holidays. I think this is the first Christmas that I won't be in Boston with my family. I got here two years ago on Dec. 27.

This holiday season was significant for me because my father called me, which is rare. We have a language barrier between us so it's difficult to communicate. He said in his Chinese words that he missed me and asked when I would be back home. I tried to answer back in what little Chinese I knew, but it was difficult. His health isn't good which is concerning news to me, it was good to hear from him.

I found out that I'm doing layout for the paper again.



Story behind

PhotoFiasco

How a simple photo shoot turned disastrous

Stories and photos by Cpl. Sarah Dietz

Well, taking this photo was a nightmare. The problem wasn't the the twins in the photo, Jared and Jordan Chambers. They were actually really sweet and accommodating to me. What made it a nightmare was a series of unfortunate events that leaves me, to this day, shaking my head in embarrassment.

When I heard about Jared and Jordan I had to get a photo and talk to them, see if I could make a story about it. How often do you get two Marine brothers, twins, in the same unit, company, and platoon, in the same MOS?

My lance corporal and I grabbed the government vehicle and headed to Range 220.

Getting to Range 220 is fairly simple, there is only one road to take after passing Camp Wilson. But if your co-worker gave you the wrong directions, in the opposite direction, on the largest Marine Corps Base in the Department of Defense ... you get lost. *Thanks Jackson.*

After running into two very different and incorrect infantry battalions, we got correct directions and were two hours late for the interview. The sun had already gone down, making taking photos of the twins difficult and I was

feeling like a typical dumb blonde apologizing to a staff sergeant for the mix-up.

Jared and Jordan just laughed at me and shook their heads, though I had a feeling they were resenting me for keeping them up during their rest period in the freezing cold of winter, but they didn't show it.

I can't print this story without a picture. I didn't have sufficient light to take their picture so I had no choice but to come back the next day.

Well, at least I know where I'm going now.

I took the newest member of my office with me the following day. *I should take her with to show her a thing or two about photography.* Getting there wasn't a problem as I figured it wouldn't be.

Jared and Jordan, looked like they had been in the field for a few weeks, dirty and tired, which is perfect for photos but they were not enthusiastic about posing because they were self-conscious. They toughed out the cold and waited for us anyway.

When I was done torturing them I said thank you and hopped back into our government vehicle. *YES! Nothing went wrong today and we can head back to the office to finish my story.*

Tap! Tap! Tap!... What now?...

A Marine with the unit's motor transport section was knocking on our window. "Did you

know you have some flat tires?" *SOME flat tires?!*

We hopped out and saw that the two back tires of the vehicle were flat. *...dang it.*

Marines from the battalion seemed to come out of the sand hills to gather around these two female Marines who needed help. *...great as if it isn't embarrassing enough.*

The issue was we only had one spare tire but even that wasn't accessible because of a lock that is standard in most government vehicles, and we didn't have a key for it.

At least the vehicle's heat is working....

We endured awkward stares from what seemed like the entire infantry battalion at the forward operating base we were at passed by to check on us.

Two hours later, we were rescued by a coworker and our vehicle towed.

That wasn't even the end of it. Yes, there's more.

I spent quite a while at my office answering to a furious gunnery sergeant I could have sworn believed I broke glass bottles myself and drove over them to pop the tires just so I could waste a work day.

While at the time, it was the perfect storm for me, looking back at last winter, I can laugh about it. Good thing the photo turned out.

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Whatever you're looking for, you can find it in the **Observation Post Classified section**

the photos

StarStruck

My encounter with country star Kellie Pickler



These photos are in my top shots not only because of my respect for the woman in the photos, but the terrible misconception I had about her.

Kellie Pickler was coming to the Combat Center and I jumped to volunteer for the story. *I want to meet her! I'm pretty sure I'm the only country music fan in my office anyway.*

While I was a fan of her music, I had no idea what she was like as a person.

I don't want to look stupid by not knowing anything about her. I flipped on good ol' Youtube to do my research. I found a bunch of videos of her in her early career, many of which didn't impress me much. She portrayed herself as a space cadet mostly.

I chuckled at the thought of a popular country artist being a ... as much as I hate to say it ... a stereotypical blonde.

The interview came. My nerves were going crazy, I was so excited to meet her. I was jumping inside from excitement.

When she walked in the room. **TOTAL SHOCK.** This petite woman, with a tiny, fragile-looking frame and little to no fat on her, shook my hand like the down-home country girl she is. I had to step back and shake out my hand.

No ditzy blonde shakes hands like that, she's hardcore.

I froze, wide-eyed and feeling naïve for believing those videos on Youtube.

She was really sweet and took time to welcome every fan that got special passes to meet her to sign autographs and pictures.

She took an instant liking to me and sat down for the interview.

"Do you care if I eat during this darlin'?" I'm starving," she said.

Of course not! I thought. *I'm sitting down face-to-face with Kellie Pickler.*

She grabbed a cheeseburger and fries and talked away.

Our 15 minute interview turned into 45 minutes. We talked about everything, home life, military life, her tour; we were having a good conversation and I almost forgot I was interviewing her.

We talked so long I thought she was going to be late for her own concert.

One thing that struck me about her was her deep respect for the military. She would do anything short of enlisting herself to support us.

When we were wrapping the interview up, I thanked her for her time and was heading for the door when she said, "Wait!"

I turned around and she wrapped her arms around me and gave me this big hug. *Whoab!*

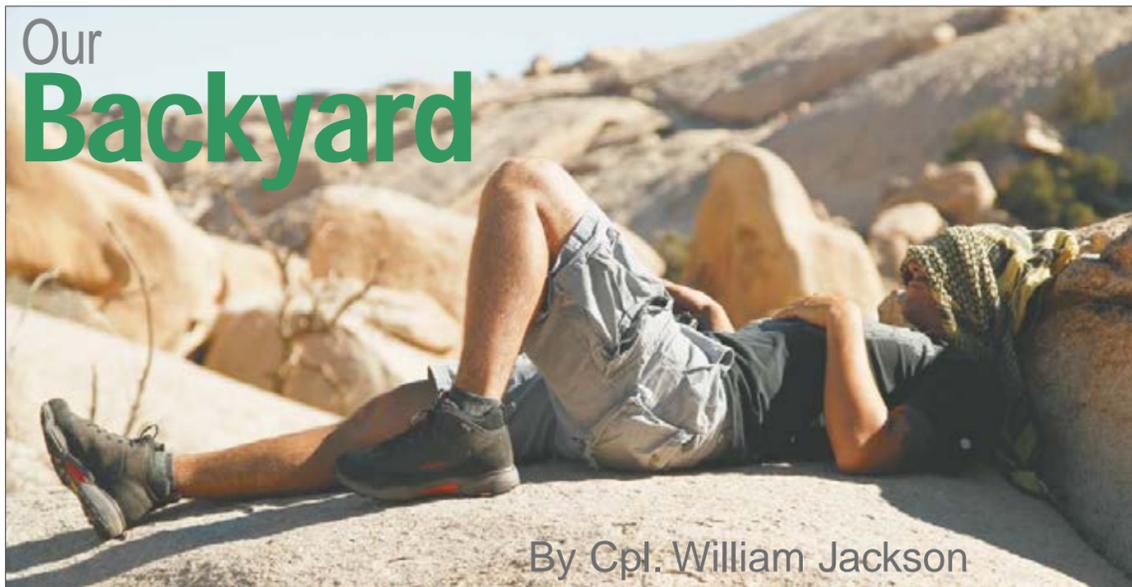
She was aware I was told by management that I was not allowed on stage, "You are coming on stage with me," she said. My jaw dropped. *Is she serious?!*

"I want you to get all the pictures you need," she raised her eyebrows as if they were telling me not to argue. *Psb...OK!*

The concert was so full of energy and she let me stand right behind her to get all the pictures I needed — some of which are going in my portfolio. Coolest shoot I've done this year I think.



Our Backyard



By Cpl. William Jackson

It was the middle of July and heat waves radiated off of Lake Bandini, and mainside. I was wearing service alphas and I was checking into my first duty station.

There were horror stories about the Stumps, like unbearable heat and the stench of Lake Bandini. There were rumors of Marines getting struck by lightning in the field or getting lost in the middle of the desert. Granted, bad things happen everywhere, but everytime I hear a new story I keep thinking, "What horrible thing will happen to me?" This place has been my home for the past three years, and no, nothing terrible has happened to me.

When I first heard the horror stories, they came from my brother and my recruiter. We've all heard them. In fact, I still hear them.

I've always insisted that I didn't care where I went, "The needs of the Marine Corps," still resonates through my head. My body ached to be sent anywhere but Twentynine Palms. I cringed at the thought of it. I dreaded that very moment when the words "Twentynine Palms," began forming on which ever Marine had the audacity to name my duty station.

There I was, a 19-year-old lance corporal dreading a duty station because of half-baked stories from Marines who spent their time in Twentynine Palms running through Combined Arms Exercise or Mojave Viper.

Little did I know the Combat Center had more to offer than anyone would have let me imagine.

I've been able to meet my share of the most interesting people in the world right here in our back yard. Royal Marines from the United Kingdom, Kiwi soldiers from New Zealand and United Arab Emirates have journeyed to the Combat Center because of the capabilities and assets we possess.

There was this one time last June, 36 Kiwi soldiers stepped foot on soil that was unlike anything in their Southwest Pacific area of operation. It was my first real interaction with anyone from New Zealand and their first time coming to the Combat Center, some of them even the U.S. It turned out to be the most fun I've ever had on a photo shoot.

There were these guys my age from a completely different part of the world, but we weren't very different. We joked about common American misconceptions, especially how everyone from the U.S. were like the guys from MTV's Jersey Shore. I got them back though, in my own nerdy way, and asked if their upbringing was anything like how the Lord of the Rings portrayed New Zealand.

A few hours went by and we got into topics about accents, sports and movies. They felt interested in American culture just like I was in theirs. My misconception of other nations dislike for Americans was falling apart little by little.

The experiences with the Kiwi soldiers surprisingly gave me a whole new outlook to the installation and how I treated the surroundings. When I spoke ignorantly about how boring it is here, they came at me loaded with their own duty station downers. I had to agree with them they only had a bowling alley and a movie theater as their entertainment. Bummer. The ocean they lived by was shark-infested. During the stories, they painted their city to be about half the size of Twentynine Palms, another bummer, but, they mentioned there were tons of beautiful women which never hurts.

I've seen a lot on and off duty at the Combat Center. I've ventured to Orange County over the past year, which became a second home. As a person who loves to explore, climb and hike, this place is more than meets the eye. I've scratched the surface of Joshua Tree National Park and Big Bear. Las Vegas has become a sullen wasteland to me partly because of lost memories from social debauchery but that's a whole thing in itself.

In reality, my back yard isn't a horror story anymore. Except the smell because I don't think I'll ever get over it.



Crystal Chatham

Oklahoma — Journalist, 34

> **My family moved to Twentynine Palms** when I was nine, so my earliest experiences were as a military kid aboard the Combat Center in the late 80s. I have fond memories of dances at the youth center, seeing movies at the base theater, swimming at the tank, and riding my bike all over town.

> **It's 20 years later now** and being on base as a journalist really just feels like being home. Most bases and military towns feel that way for me.

> **One of my earliest stories** at the Combat Center was to cover Mojave Viper in spring 2007, long before it was "enhanced." I was definitely excited to give our readers a first-hand look inside vital pre-deployment training. As a journalist, it was great to be in the field side-by-side with Marines and

CRYSTAL IS A SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA BASED PHOTOJOURNALIST AND ONE OF FIVE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHERS FOR THE DESERT SUN DAILY NEWSPAPER IN PALM SPRINGS. SHE HAS COVERED SEVERAL STORIES AND TRAINING EVENTS AT THE COMBAT CENTER THIS YEAR.

come out for multiple days to show different aspects of over one-month-long training.

> **I'm physically aboard** the Combat Center probably six or seven times a year. My newspaper's coverage is ongoing though so I strive to stay up to date with happenings on base and in town.

> **Over the last seven years** the experience has evolved as has my journalistic focus on military issues. I used to be excited about any chance to travel out to Twentynine Palms and the destination drove some of our coverage. Now, I'm more driven by the story. My travels to the Combat Center are based more on delivering depth and context for readers as opposed to a one-time daily story. An example is instead of coming out and shooting one event with a story "hey, this happened," I am more focused on, "hey, this happened, here's why it's important for the Corps, here's some background on the mission, and here are the future implications."

> **My travels to installations** have had to become more strategic over the last year and I can only deliver true depth and context by having time with my own boots on the ground. How much time I have on the ground directly shows in our coverage and I am more drawn to opportunities that can offer time with Marines.

> **I am passionate about** telling the story of the soldier, sailor, airman, and Marine. At the same time, I like being a bridge between military and civilians. In that respect, I enjoy covering stories at the Combat Center and other installations because it gives me an opportunity to shoot the stories and environment I love most.

> **I've been around** the military my entire life. I was born in a military hospital overseas, grew up at Fort Sill, Twentynine Palms MCAGCC, and Norton Air Force Base in the early 90s. My father is retired Army, so we always lived in a military community. As an adult I have spent quite a bit of time at military installations either as a journalist or as an Air Force Auxiliary member.

> **The most enjoyable** story I've covered at the Combat Center was multiple days at Mojave Viper in 2007 before it became EMV. I had incredible access to shoot the training and as a photojournalist: access and positioning is everything. That was one of the few times at the Combat Center where I've been able to just blend into the surroundings and shoot what was happening as it happened. Five years later and the six-page package we were able to produce for the paper is still my favorite set of images from the Combat Center.

> **Typically in the field**, I find that Marines have a sense of great caution when a reporter or photographer is around. All we want is to just blend in and be ignored so we can show readers what life is really like for service members. By spending a couple days shooting the Mojave Viper package and being there during key training evolutions, the Marines I photographed got used to us and did not even blink about my being there. In fact, I heard one Marine ask the coyotes if I was part of the "game" or not. The instructors' feedback to us was that having journalists out for the training only made it more realistic for the Marines who were soon to deploy and might have embeds on their patrols. That was a real win-win assignment and the images reflected it.

> **The most moving** story I've done at the Combat Center happened this year when my colleague Denise Goolsby and I followed the deployment of 3/7 to Sangin. I kept tabs on the unit through Google news alerts, DVIDS, and social media. While they were deployed we met with family members back at Twentynine Palms. Our goal was to show readers that deployment — particularly to Sangin — isn't easy for anyone: the Marine, the spouse, or the kids. The PA and family readiness teams were able to connect us to families and wounded warriors midway through the deployment. Everyone we met and interviewed shared their stories openly, honestly, and unguarded. We stayed in touch as the deployment continued and saw everyone again at Kilo Company's homecoming, and again at 3/7's remembrance ceremony in May. The wives, parents, and siblings of the seven Marines killed in action during the deployment were also amazing to meet and talk to. It was a true privilege to follow a single battalion for that many months after having followed news reports from the Sangin area for a couple years. We were welcomed by everyone we met with and I think the time we spent across many months resulted in the depth and context we were able to deliver to our civilian readers in a 3-part series.



CRYSTAL RECEIVED HER BACHELORS DEGREE IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES FROM CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY AT SAN BERNARDINO

Interviewed by Cpl. Sarah Dietz, January 8, 2013

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

THE UPDATE

Correspondents provide an update on 2012's two best *What I've Learned*

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

Megan Bishoff
Headquarters Battalion Family Readiness Officer
25, Starkville, Miss.

INTERVIEWED BY
CPL. WILLIAM JACKSON
January 6, 2013

- > **It's definitely not** for the money let me tell you!
- > **I wanna do it all myself** and I've learned my lesson. The first family day I thought I could be everywhere. You can't be everywhere.
- > **So I have a blackberry**, which I rarely use and for some reason it has an alarm on it.
- > **I have kids so** I'm a slave, a slave to the kids.
- > **Emma and Stella**, my two girls. Emma, I've wanted since fourth grade. I knew that's what was gonna be my girl's name. Stella, my husband named after we saw her.

- > **He was like**, "She looks like a Stella," and I said, "Alright, go for it."
- > **I'm a PR major** and I did broadcast meteorology for I while. I couldn't pass physics so I switched my major to PR.
- > **This gate guard in Quantico** reamed me out because I didn't have a decal and I didn't know where I was going. I was like, "Sir, I'm sorry this is my first time on a base." It was funny, I mean now. I didn't even have my marriage license yet!
- > **We came here from Hawaii** so it was quite a shock.
- > **I was looking** for a job and this popped up.
- > **So I got here and I didn't even** have an office. I was working in the hallway. That was fun.
- > **Our first thing** I think we did was e-Marine. The deadline was a month after I started. I love it...can you hear the underlying tone?
- > **Well when I got here** we were at two percent and when the deadline hit we were at 80 percent I think?
- > **I'm still learning** and everyone here has been awesome.
- > **I'm here**, we are here really getting this program started.
- > **Coming from Hawaii** we were so involved in family readiness. I just assumed everyone here would be like, "Yeah that's my FRO! We're tight!"
- > **Once you prove yourself** everyone's a little bit more helpful. The family day was big for me. There's a new FRO in town.
- > **This has been** a challenge and I love it.
- > **It's go big or go home**, you know? It's good in a lot of new aspects being here as a new FRO because I'm not dealing with deployments.
- > **You get a lot of interesting phone calls**, like, "How much is my baby-daddy gonna pay me?" I'm not trying to get into this.
- > **I still feel** like a new kid.



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

- > **I picked up on January 28, 2012** and checked in the next day. That's when I got here. It hasn't kicked in yet. The rank hasn't kicked in yet.
- > **When I was a gunnery sergeant**, and this is how the firecracker thing come up, I had no tact. I was very outspoken. It was the way I wanted. I was very boisterous and told it how it was. I realized as a first sergeant you can't be like that anymore.
- > **I don't know if** that's me, I didn't know what that meant.
- > **I just wanted** to be a sergeant and be a drill instructor.
- > **When you get put in specific** billets or specific rank you don't realize you're growing up.
- > **I didn't care** if they gave me master sergeant or if they gave me first sergeant. I just wanted to get promoted. I'm not regretting it but I did want to stay in my MOS.
- > **Becoming a** first sergeant I had to grow up.
- > **On my first fitness report** I put an 'F' and I got selected. It's good though, I cried and let it out but it's good.
- > **This is new and** there are things I don't know. It's gonna disappoint me because I think I know everything and I think I'm on my game all of the time. Coming into this I had to humble myself a lot.
- > **The honeymoon phase** is over. How bad can it be?
- > **I PCS in July**, I'm going to Marine Corps Base Hawaii. I'll hit 18 years this year and I think I'm just gonna take it day by day. I'm not complaining.
- > **MCCES, in itself**, is a beast. It's humongous.
- > **I sat down last week and thought** about it. I've been here for a whole year already. It flew by. Time flies by so much. If I could take anything from it? Just have fun.
- > **I've gotta be positive** this year. I'm going to Hawaii!
- > **There are days** when I just wanna smack Marines around, but overall, I'm still having fun.
- > **I'm from Los Angeles** the holidays were good but I hate the holidays, I'm such a bah-humbag haha. For the kids it was good, for me it was just another day.
- > **[My kids] don't really know** anything else. They're seven and five. Their dad's a first sergeant too so being juggled between two first sergeants they get it.
- > **They know structure**; at least we think they do. For them it's just their parent's being Marines. They've been doing it since they were babies.
- > **I graduated** with my bachelor's degree this year. My goal is to get my master's in environmental management. Like solar panels and turbines. That's where it's at now.
- > **I want to retire and be a mom**. It's my kids' turn now. But I don't know what else to do. I can't sit there and think about being a nurse or a teacher. All I've been is a Marine.

FIRECRACKER

1st Sgt. Christine Ramos
Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School
34, Paramount, Calif.

INTERVIEWED BY
CPL. WILLIAM JACKSON
January 7, 2013



Morongo Basin Alcoholics Anonymous
Hotline: 760-366-1183



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LANCE CPL. ALI AZIMI

Marines, sailors invest in their community

Cpl. Ali Azimi
Combat Correspondent

In its 60 years here, the Combat Center has become an integral part of the high desert community. Combat Center Marines volunteer their time with a countless number of community events year-round, reaching out as far as Palm Springs.

A few of the projects Combat Center personnel volunteer their time for are environmental clean-up, education programs and community ceremonies.

Local clean-up projects are one way the Corps gets involved in the community to help keep the local environment intact. Marines with the Combat Center's Wounded Warrior detachment volunteer in the community once a week, working with different national and local organizations.

"It gives Marines a chance to give back to the community," said Cpl. Norman Robinson, WWBn. West, during a clean-up project at the Big Morongo Valley Preserve in

June. "The United States supports Marines and this is how we show we appreciate it."

Around the high desert area, Marines take on mentorship roles serving as positive role models for kids with multiple programs partnering with local elementary schools.

The Adopt-a-School program is an ongoing year-round program that introduces kids from local elementary schools to the Combat Center. Marines from the Combat Center visit children at their schools to play with them and be a positive influence to the students year-round.

In addition to Adopt-a-School, dog handlers with the Combat Center's Provost Marshal's Office conducted multiple canine demonstrations for the schools' Red Ribbon Week in October, an entire week dedicated to encouraging kids to live a drug-free life.

Marines with the K-9 unit were committed to helping the schools in their cause last year and traveled to multiple schools every day of Red Ribbon Week to demonstrate the capabilities of their furry companions. Every demonstration left kids with their jaws dropped as they watched the

canines in action.

Marines aboard the Combat Center also take part in holiday community services, some involving nation-wide programs. In October, 4th Tank Battalion started their annual collection of toys for the Toys for Tots Program. The program first started in 1947 a purpose to spread the Christmas cheer to underprivileged kids around the nation.

"When you were a kid and you got a toy, man that was the best thing," said Petty Officer 2nd Class Jose Saenz, hospital corpsman, 4th Tanks, during a toy collection from a Toys R' Us in Palm Springs in November. "Just imagine a little kid that's not going to get a toy."

The Marines showed their support again when tragedy struck a nation. They watched over the candle-light vigil

"The United States supports Marines and this is how we show we appreciate it."

— Cpl. Norman Robinson

held at Oasis Elementary School Dec. 14 dedicated to the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Conn. They lit six purple candles and 20 white candles for 20 children who lost their lives that day and the six adults protecting them.

"It's probably the most devastating loss someone can suffer, the loss of a child, but the way that these kids died was beyond tragic," said Kimberly Savell, who coordinated the event in December. "The Marines being out here really shows the importance of doing things like this."