The Eagle & The Crescent

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Insurgents feel 'Quick Strike' of 3/2

Lance Cpl. Lucian Friel
2nd Marine Division

Lance Cpl. Lucian Friel

Lance Cpl. Chris L. LaFave, 19, from Arnold, Md., and a rifleman with 1st Squad, 3rd Platoon, K Company, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 2, 2nd Marine Division, clears the second floor of an Iraqi house during Operation Quick Strike.

HADITHA, Iraq -- Insurgents in the Haditha region of Al Anbar province were met by a group of unfamiliar faces Aug. 5 when the Marines of 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, arrived in support of Operation Quick Strike.

The Marines traveled about 100 miles southeast of their area of operation in Al Qa'im overnight to help 3rd Bn., 25th Marines, clear the towns of Haqliniyah, Bani Dahri and Barwanah just south of the city of Haditha.

The task force conducting Quick Strike included many different units task organized for the mission. Each unit, including those from Iraqi Security Forces, brought unique skills to the fight that helped ensure mission success.

Two buildings used as insurgent bases were destroyed by a coordinated air strike during the mission. The task force located large numbers of improvised explosive devices, including car bombs, and unearthed mines within the city limits.

While Marines with L Company, 3rd Bn., 2nd Marines cleared Haqliniyah, Sgt. Jeffrey J. Swartzentruber, the leader of 1st Squad, 3rd Platoon and his fellow Marines with K Company cleared the town of Bani Dahri.

"Our mission here was to gain a foothold in our sector of the city, establish a base and send out patrols to continue clearing other sectors," explained the 24-year-old Coral Springs, Fla., native.

For Swartzentruber and his Marines this mission was about more than clearing a city, it was about helping out their fellow Marines.

"It feels good to know that we're helping fellow Marines who are having a hard time right now," said the 2000 Tarravella High School graduate.

Swartzentruber and the Marines of 1st Squad did not have trouble clearing the sections of the city.

"We confiscated a few pistols here and there, but overall this area is pretty friendly," he said.

His Marines had no problem transitioning to this area of operations away from their own, said the squad leader.

"This is the most flexible group of Marines I've ever worked with, and we also had time to study the area and prepare to come down here," Swartzentruber said. "Their ability to easily transition from being in a firefight to talking to little kids is phenomenal."

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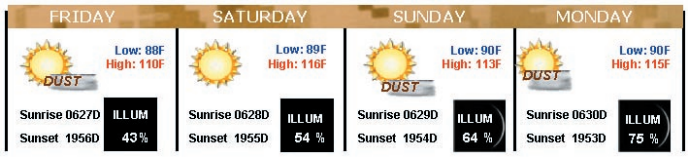

By Gunnery Sgt. Steven L. Saxton

Camp Fallujah

MWR events

Chess Tourney: Come out to the recreation center Wednesday and compete in the chess tournament starting at 8 p.m.

Board Game Night: Thursday at 8 p.m. come by the recreation center and play your favorite board game.

Movie Night: Every day at 3 and 7 p.m. a movie will be played in the recreation center back room.

For more information, contact the MWR supervisor: crystal.nadeau@halliburton.com

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A message to The Eagle & The Crescent readers

The Eagle & The Crescent is not just an "internal information" newsletter but a weekly compendium of stories and photos featuring the servicemen and women of Multi-National Force – West/II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward). These stories and photos give readers a glimpse into the personal and professional lives of Marines, Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen serving far from home in a challenging and often hostile environment. The stories you read here are the ones that go untold, or underreported, in the mainstream media. Regardless of one's opinion about Iraq today or the decision to send U.S. military forces to Iraq, there are sacrifices being made every day by the men and women whose stories appear on these pages, and their fellow service members. I may be a little biased but I believe these brave men and women deserve your support.

THANK YOU -- to those readers who have helped spread the reach of TE&TC by forwarding copies to family and friends; to those readers who have taken the time to send us feedback or notes of support and encouragement; and not least, to those Marines, Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen whose stories on the pages of our newsletter demonstrate to the world your commitment, dedication and sacrifice.

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Chaplain's Corner:

Restoration of a Dream

Chaplain (Lt. j.g.) Leslie Hatton
Naval Mobile Construction Bn. 1

What is it about a flag that is so precious? Is it that the colors of the flag are attractive to the individual? Is it that the design has an image that is powerful?

A flag is a simple rectangle of cloth. However, men and women are willing to carry it into battle with them every day. It is not the material, the color or even the design of the flag, but what it represents. It represents a dream of something, freedom for some and peace or happiness for others.

These heroes carry it to defend all that it means with the hope of sharing the dream with others who were not so fortunate to be born under their flag.

The value and justness of this war will be debated for years to come. Regardless of the outcome, some are always unhappy. There are positive changes that seem to be forgotten though. The relief seen on the faces of the people of Iraq is costly, but these young men and women pay it gladly every day. The fact they can choose how to live their lives is something they were never able to have on their own. The value of this freedom should be weighed in the balance.

There is another value overlooked and often not spoken of, the value of the restoration of a dream. This can be seen on the faces of our young military. Many came over as youths, go home as men and women understanding the freedoms they enjoy every day came at the cost of their brothers-in-arms' blood. Never again will the freedom of speech be a simple human right. Never again will the freedom of religion be a simple human right.

> 'The value of this freedom should be weighed in the balance.'
>
> Chaplain (Lt. j.g.) Leslie Hatton

These rights came at the cost of blood. And not just any blood, but the blood of their friends and their fellow warriors.

When this is all done, not only will Iraq be a better and stronger nation because of what we helped them do, but America will be a better place.

We have been given a chance to see the value of a flag. It is not the flag in itself that brings tears to a man's eyes. No, it is the cost of the freedom that stands behind that flag. It is the cost of lost friends that stands behind that flag. It is the cost of that dream that stands behind the flag.

Corpsman faces war, helps heal others

Cpl. Mike Escobar
2nd Marine Division

SAQLAWIYAH, Iraq -- The soft, even tone of his voice, and the caring, soulful look in 'Doc' Clarence Washington's eyes belie the atrocities this 26-year-old Sailor has witnessed during his past four months in Iraq.

The carnage of war touches every service member here somehow, but in this Caruthersville, Mo., native's case it is he who touches that carnage back.

Washington serves as a corpsman with Company A, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, a unit currently working beside Iraqi Security Forces to secure the rural township of Saqlawiyah on the outskirts of Fallujah. In these village streets and fields, the young Sailor has left behind parts of his soul.

"I'll never forget the events on June 10," said Washington, a former volunteer at St. Mary's Hospital in Jefferson City, Mo. "I'll never forget having to take their bodies out of the vehicle. It's something I still see in my mind every day."

Photos by Cpl. Mike Escobar

Seaman Clarence Washington, a corpsman with 4th Platoon, Company A, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, treats an Iraqi citizen's eye infection while patrolling the city streets alongside his Marines here July 27.

Seaman Clarence Washington, corpsman, 4th Platoon, A Company, 1/6, 2nd Marine Division, hands an Iraqi child some candy while conducting a mission alongside his Marines here July 27.

That sweltering late-spring day, Lance Corporals Mario Castillo and Andrew Kilpela were killed by a roadside bomb. These engineers were supporting Washington's unit by erecting signs along the road, warning the populace to beware of these bombs. It was Washington and a group of his Marines who were called upon to react to the explosion.

"They had told me there were two possible KIAs (Marines killed in action), but I didn't really believe anybody was actually dead," Washington recalled. "They told me to take body bags just in case."

"When I got there, I saw the destroyed vehicle," continued Washington as he cast his eyes down in solemn remembrance. "I walked to it, thinking to myself, 'I have to do this quickly, because I don't want my Marines to see this.'"

The events that day opened Washington's eyes to the realities of war, but no barbaric act of violence would deter him and his Marines' resolve to fight the terrorists who had claimed their friends' lives.

The troops continue conducting daily missions, raids and patrols to wrest the insurgents' grip off Saqlawiyah.

Washington, who is also a former University of Tennessee student of social work, hikes and walks the streets with the best of them.

"My job out here is to look out for my Marines, and provide them with an adequate amount of care," he explained. "I deal with first aid, preventive medicine and hygiene concerns."

"Sometimes, this job is kind of like being a mother," Washington said with a slight smile. "The Marines might not always listen to me, but when they have some problem they don't want to discuss in front of their friends, they come to me."

More than three years of naval service remain on Washington's contract.

"I plan to re-enlist if I get to attend [Basic] X-Ray technician school," he said. "If not, I'll probably go back to school to be a nurse's assistant.

The mission at hand remains foremost on Washington's mind for now.

"Being a corpsman is everything I've always liked doing, wrapped into one package: medicine, psychology, and counseling," he said. "I believe this to be one of the most rewarding experiences ever. There are lots of things I wish I hadn't seen out here, but they've helped me mature."

Overseer of ISF contributes to history

Cpl. Tom Sloan
2nd Marine Division

AR RAMADI, Iraq -- When Grant R. Birtcher reflects on his life's accomplishments, he can take pride knowing he was part of something special during his service in the Marine Corps.

Twenty-year-old Cpl. Birtcher from Window Rock, Ariz., is one of just a select few Marines of 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, who work with the Iraqi Security Forces.

According to military officials, a force of ISF capable of providing security in Iraq is the ticket home for Marines and coalition forces.

Cpl. Tom Sloan

Corporal Grant R. Birtcher, a rifleman with the Combine Action Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, and two members of the Iraqi Security Forces patrol a street in the city of Ramadi during a mission July 31.

Birtcher and other Marines with Company B's Combined Action Platoon are directly responsible for training several members of this force.

"I'm a handler," Birtcher, a rifleman with the platoon, said referring to the billet he holds. "I supervise the ISF."

Birtcher's comrades in the platoon provide training for new members of the ISF in how to conduct security and stabilization operations (SASO)at their base, Camp Ali, in the Al Anbar capital.

After his fellow Marines run the ISF through 12 days of intense training at the camp, Birtcher takes them out into the city and further hones their SASO skills by giving them "on the job training," he said. "I put them to work out here doing the real thing."

Birtcher and his Iraqi counterparts accompany 1st Battalion, 5th Marines' line companies and assist them on operations, which include foot patrols, house searches and vehicle check points. Their schedules are always full.

"We go out every day," he said, "sometimes twice. I correct them when they mess up, which helps make them better."

Birtcher and 12 ISF soldiers recently conducted a mission with Marines from Company A. The Marines and ISF traveled about the city in a convoy of 7-ton trucks and humvees performing random vehicle check points at different locations. The ISF executed the majority of the vehicle and personnel searches, and Birtcher was pleased with how they performed.

"They aggressively search and aren't afraid to work hard," he said, adding their other strong points are the fact that they're Iraqi and can speak the native language.

"They speak Arabic, which helps break the language barrier and they know how to deal with their own people," he said.

Birtcher said the ISF possess an uncanny ability to locate threats.

"We've been out searching houses before and they've found weapons in places where I and other Marines wouldn't think to look," he said. "They're also able to explain to the people what we're doing during missions. They get the point across and often make things run smoother."

Birtcher has filled his current role as warrior/mentor for more than three months now, and he's proud of what he's doing.

"I do feel a little excluded from the rest of the company, but I know I'm part of an important mission," he said. "The faster the ISF are trained and able to assume the role of securing Iraq,

See Corporal, Page 9

Marine lends artistic touch to war in Iraq

Cpl. C. Alex Herron
2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD)

AL ASAD, Iraq -- At 15 years old, Cpl. Douglas Brown got a summer job at an Atlanta area theme park as a cashier at an airbrush booth. Watching the artist create colorful designs sparked his own artistic talent. Little did he know eight years later he would be using the skills learned to show his appreciation to fellow Marines serving in Iraq.

An F/A-18 Hornet engine mechanic with Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 26, 2nd Marine Air Wing (FWD), and Mableton, Ga., native, Brown has spent a bulk of his free time turning unusable aircraft parts into works of art for Marines around Al Asad.

"At first it was just a summer job," Brown said. "Working there piqued my interest and I began trying it myself. In a few years I had worked my way up to lead artist."

Before his airbrush painting career had a chance to really take off, Brown enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve and left for recruit training a week after graduating Pebble Brook High School in 1999.

"I always had a general interest in the military," Brown said. "I decided I would join the reserves so I could go to college and still serve my country."

After Marine Corps training and a semester in school, Brown returned to his airbrush stand and retained his position as the lead artist in 2000.

Armed with the knowledge and drive to continue painting along with his skills as a jet aircraft mechanic, his two occupations came together for the first time in 2003. When a fellow Marine was transferred from MALS-42 to another unit aboard Naval Air Station, Atlanta, Brown painted his first aircraft part, a worn blade from the tail-rotor of an AH-1W Super Cobra as a parting gift.

"After that, word got around that I had a little bit of talent and I was being asked to paint on a more regular basis," Brown said. "I like being able to do something that is unique and different. I can make objects seem to jump off whatever the surface is. I can do things you could never do with a pencil or paintbrush."

Late last year, Brown, along with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 142 and a handful of MALS-42 Marines, received word of this deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I wanted to be here," Brown said. "I wanted to see a different culture. When I was stateside I felt like I was sitting on the sidelines. In the U.S. you don't really know how you contribute to the war. Here I can see how my work has a direct affect on the operations."

Brown's job is to perform intermediate maintenance to jet engines. He mostly repairs small malfunctions that could ground an aircraft.

"We play an important role in keeping the F/A-18s from two squadrons fully operational and mission ready," Brown said.

Brown's work hasn't gone unnoticed with his superiors. Doing whatever he can to accomplish the mission is a big part of his work ethic.

"Brown comes in early and stays late," said Sgt. Jerrami Jones, assistant noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the power plants division. "He does whatever needs to be done to help the entire shop accomplish its mission. He is one of my most experienced mechanics and is always willing to share his knowledge with the younger Marines."

Between repairing engines, Brown has found time to show off his talent to his fellow Leathernecks.

"I told everyone in my shop what I could do. After I did a couple murals and other projects, people just started asking to have different pieces done," Brown said.

Now Brown creates artwork for his squadron, fellow Marines and recently an outgoing commanding officer as a farewell gift. He is glad to be getting all the work. Being able to keep his skills sharp while deployed to Iraq isn't something he thought would have the opportunity to do here.

"I'm grateful for any work I get," Brown said. "I feel confident when I return home I will be able to step right back into my old job as an art director for a graphics company."

Although known for his artistic flare, Brown's first priority remains the maintenance of the engines used in the F/A-18 Hornets that are used to support the Marines on the ground and aid in making a brighter Iraq for all of its citizens. Without mechanics like Brown, the mission of 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD) could never be accomplished. Keeping aircraft operational and ready for another mission is what drives Brown to excel and strive to make a difference.

Cpl. C. Alex Herron

Corporal Douglas Brown, an F/A-18 Hornet mechanic with Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 26, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD), and Mableton, Ga., native, poses in front of some of his most recent work Aug. 8.

There are no admin movements.

All movements are Combat Ops.

5 25

STAY ALIVE

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IEDs KILL

Caught in the Spotlight

CAMP FALLUJAH, Iraq -- Becoming a sergeant of Marines is a prestigious occasion for those who claim the title, even more so when earned meritoriously. One Freedom, Wis., native, recently earned the rank meritoriously in a combat zone.

Sergeant David M. Burke, vehicle commander, Personal Security Detachment, II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward), was surprised by his commanders with a meritorious promotion in a ceremony held here Aug. 2.

"He regularly displays the qualities we look for in our noncommissioned officers," said Gunnery Sgt. John D. Crites, platoon sergeant, PSD, II MEF (FWD).

Before joining the Corps, the 27-year-old was working construction. Today, he is in charge of Marines and responsible for a tactical vehicle supporting operations here.

"As a vehicle commander, he is inherently responsible for the security and well being of the Marines that ride in his vehicle," said Crites.

Burke, who has served in the Marine Corps less than three years, became interested in the military after his younger brother returned from Marine Corps recruit training.

"My little brother came back pretty squared away, and that inspired me," he said. "I read a lot about the Marine Corps. I just wanted to go see the world."

Burke said he enjoys many aspects of the road he decided to travel in the Corps.

"The best thing about being in the Marine Corps is you get to meet people from all over the country," he said.

The job in Iraq differs from his work on Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C. There, he serves as a fire direct and control man, guiding artillery rounds to desired targets.

"I'll probably never get to do this ever again," he said, referring to his position as a vehicle commander.

In his spare time, Burke participates in many of the hobbies he was able to enjoy when not deployed.

"I like staying in shape," he said. "I like going running, going to the gym."

Burke's leadership, maturity and can-do attitude have definitely made an impression on his commanders at the PSD.

"He was a leader from day one," said Chief Warrant Officer Thomas A. Reconnu, platoon commander, PSD, II MEF (FWD). "He's an excellent combat leader. I've had the opportunity to see him in several engagements. Marines automatically look up to him; he's a source of motivation. His rank is just finally catching up to his performance."

Sgt. David M. Burke

Burke plans on pursuing a degree while fulfilling his duties as a Marine.

"Right now I'm looking at college," he said. "I definitely want to go to the officers side."

II MHG Marine realizes dream to serve

Lance Cpl. Evan M. Eagan
II Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD)

CAMP FALLUJAH, Iraq -- "I felt bad about the fact that there were Marines who have been over here two or three times and I had never been here once," said the II Marine Expeditionary Force, Headquarters Group, II MEF (FWD), Marine. "I wanted the chance to come out here and serve the Marine Corps and do what I was trained to do."

Corporal Daniel H. Williams, 21, the Marine Integrated Maintenance Management System noncommissioned officer-in-charge at the II MHG Motor Transportation Maintenance garage, was activated from his reserve unit, 4th Maintenance Battalion, 4th Force Service Support Group, based in his native city of Sacramento, Calif., in late February in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I was in Coronado, Calif., at the Marine Combat Instructor Water Survival School when I got a call from my commanding officer and he told me I was getting activated," he said. "After I graduated from the school I got the weekend off and I was activated two days later on February 25."

Williams' desire to serve his country has been a long held ambition instilled in him at a young age. Now, as he finds himself deployed here, he has realized a dream.

During his senior year in 2001 at Jesuit High School, in Carmichael, Calif., Williams decided to take a different path than most of his peers. Although he had a desire to become a Marine Corps officer he decided to first become an enlisted Marine while attending classes at California State University, Sacramento.

"I didn't really know much about the Marine Corps until my senior year of high school," said Williams, who has served in the Corps for more than four years. "Once I learned more about the traditions I realized they were the best. If I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it all the way. I wanted to be a part of the best."

Entering the Delayed Entry Program April 13, 2001, and shipping to boot camp three days after his high school graduation, Williams was in a hurry to become a Marine as soon as possible, he said.

Williams arrived at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., in March with a group of more than 100 reservists from around the country to conduct predeployment training.

Since arriving in Iraq April 1, Williams has played a vital role within II MHG's Motor Transportation Maintenance Office.

He tracks all vehicles inducted in the maintenance cycle, reconciles and validates with supply for all parts and tools that are on order for vechicles, and also tracks vehicles for the armoring program.

"We do the uparmoring for most of the vehicles on Camp Fallujah," said Williams. "We make sure the vehicles get the ballistic glass, hardened door and armored undercarriages. I think it's important because they help protect Marines from IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and small-arms fire."

Williams also goes on convoys to Baghdad International Airport for resupply runs and Camp Taqaddum for armor runs and to see how they operate their armoring program.

When Williams returns home he plans on spending a lot of time with family and friends, and returning to school to finish his degree in criminal justice.

Lance Cpl. Evan M. Eagan

Corporal Daniel H. Williams, Marine Integrated Maintenance Management System noncommissioned officer-in-charge, II Marine Expeditionary Force, Headquarters Group, II MEF (FWD), stands in front of a humvee at the II MHG Motor Transportation Maintenance garage.

Recon corpsman trades cold for heat

Lance Cpl. Evan M. Eagan
II Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD)

CAMP FALLUJAH, Iraq -- After coming to a crossroads in his life more than 18 years ago, Petty Officer 1st Class Bert Bath was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Bath found himself in trouble often as a teenager in Abbington, Pa., and was eventually faced with a decision that would change his life no matter what path he chose to follow.

"The Navy saved my life," said the corpsman with Iraqi Interdiction Force Platoon, Echo Company, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 2nd Marine Division. "It gave me a second chance and the opportunity to find out what all my problems had been, me. Once I figured that out, life seemed to be much easier."

As he nears 19 years of service, and retirement, Bath looks back on why he joined the Navy in December 1986.

"Basically I was given an ultimatum," Bath said while laughing. "I figured it would be the best choice considering the alternative. I raised my hand on a Friday and left on that Tuesday," he added, referring to his oath of enlistment and ship to boot camp.

Bath had a contract to become an aviation electrician, however, upon arriving to boot camp he found out he was not qualified for the job. He was then given the option of either choosing another job or voiding his contract and going home.

"I actually called a Marine Corps recruiter from Navy boot camp," he said. "I told the recruiter I wanted to be a Marine. He asked me where I was calling from and I told him that I was at Navy boot camp. He told me he couldn't talk to me until I got out of there."

Needless to say, Bath decided to stay in the Navy choosing to become a corpsman.

"I wanted to be a corpsman in the first place, but it wasn't available when I was talking with the recruiter," Bath said. "I ended up being a corpsman so I decided to stay in."

While serving in the fleet, Bath came across some Marines wearing "ropes" around their shoulders. Curious about their garb, he asked another Sailor who they were.

"I found out they were recon Marines," he said. "I thought they were so high-speed. I wanted to be doing what they were doing."

Soon after his encounter with the recon Marines, Bath attempted and passed the reconnaissance indoctrination.

He was then attached to 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., where he got his first taste of what it meant to be a recon corpsman.

"We carried a log around everywhere we went," Bath said. "When we did battalion PT [physical training] myself and another corpsman had to carry this big blue and gold log that said 2nd Recon Bn., BAS [Battalion Aid Station]."

Bath completed the Reconnaissance Indoctrination Program at Camp Lejeune's Onslow Beach before going to the Amphibious Reconnaissance School in Little Creek, Va., in 1991. In 1992, he went to Panama City, Fla., and completed the Combat Dive School as well as Advanced Dive Medicine, making him a fully trained reconnaissance corpsman.

Across his career, Bath has traveled to more than 15 countries worldwide and most recently to Iraq, where he is currently stationed at Camp Fallujah with the rest of his unit, which arrived in country in March.

Bath came from Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, where Echo Company, 4th Reconnaissance Battalion is based. His unit was attached to 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although he comes from a reserve unit, Bath is part of the inspector and instructor staff.

With more than 18 years in the Navy, 14 years have been spent attached to a reconnaissance unit.

"I've been in the community so long for the challenge," Bath said. "It's like no other. It's hard but it's very rewarding. We get to do a lot more and a lot more is expected of us. Plus, they pay us extra to jump out of perfectly good airplanes and dive underwater."

Bath plans on staying in Alaska and becoming a youth pastor at his church after completing his career in the Navy.

Lance Cpl. Evan M. Eagan

Petty Officer 1st Class Bert Bath, a corpsman with Iraqi Interdiction Force Platoon, Echo Company, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, hands out candy to a group of children during a recent operation in Al Anbar province. With more than 18 years in the Navy, Bath has spent 14 of them attached to a reconnaissance unit.

Corporal, from Page 4

the sooner I and the other Marines can leave."

Birtcher, who is half Navajo, is in Iraq for a second time with 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom and is accomplishing a childhood goal.

He graduated from Window Rock High School early his senior year in 2002 so he could join the Corps and fight in the war on terrorism.

"I always wanted to be a Marine from an early age," said Birtcher, whose parents are Esther and Norman Birtcher. "I thought it would be a good chance for me to see the world and make something of myself."

Birtcher immediately sought out the local Marine recruiter, who was in Gallup, N.M., about 40 miles from his hometown.

"I walked into his office and said, 'I want to be a Marine; I want to be in the infantry,'" he recalled.

Two weeks later he was attending Marine Corps Recruit Training in San Diego.

Birtcher said his time in the Corps "has been good. I learned leadership skills and how to deal with people from all different backgrounds, which will help me in the future."

Birtcher is currently undecided about whether to reenlist in the Marines or leave when his contract expires in 2007 to pursue a college education.

"I eventually want to got to college and study business," he said. "Getting out of Iraq and staying on American soil where it's safe sounds nice."

Michigan Marine continues family tradition

Sgt. Juan Vara
2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD)

AL ASAD, Iraq -- Ever since Cpl. Mickey Lovy's grandfather immigrated to the United States from Hungary, military service has been a family tradition. His grandfather served in the U.S. Army during World War II and his father was a U.S. Army doctor during the Vietnam War.

Lovy, the supply noncommissioned officer in the logistics department of Marine Wing Support Group 27, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD), picked a different service, but he's keeping the tradition alive.

A graduate of Holly High School in his native Holly, Mich., Lovy joined the Corps in September 2002. "After high school I worked odd jobs until I realized I needed a change and went full blast into it," he said. "I decided to go for the real deal and join the Marine Corps."

As the unit's supply NCO, his duties include ordering supplies for the squadrons in the group, dispersing the supplies and staying in contact with supply representatives in the squadrons here and Al Taqaddum to let them know their supplies are on the way or already here.

"I make sure that supplies the squadrons order from the United States get to them in a timely manner," he said. "I also check the reports that state what gear the squadrons have so I can figure out what they need. My job is to check the reports for inconsistencies and make sure they get the gear they rate."

Lovy orders everything from insect repellent to shields for gunner stations on the humvees that units in the group use to conduct convoy operations throughout the Al Anbar province. Though he served in Okinawa, Japan, for a year until March 2004 before reporting to MWSG-27 in Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, N.C., this is his first deployment in support of real-world operations.

Sgt. Juan Vara

Corporal Mickey Lovy, supply noncommissioned officer in the logistics department of Marine Wing Support Group 27, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD), continues a family tradition of military service dating back to World War II.

"I joined the Marine Corps to make my family proud," he said. "I wanted my life to go in a different positive direction and I knew the Marine Corps was the most extreme change I could do for the better."

According to Lovy, out of his parents' seven offspring, he is the youngest and only one to join the military. He said that his father, who left the Army's 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) as a captain after serving in Vietnam, is proud of him regardless of having joined a different service.

"The Marine Corps is not only associated with being an elite military service, it's also associated with values, honor and a level of discipline the other branches don't really offer," he said. "The Corps has done nothing but better myself. It helped me keep my good attributes and added and built on them. The leadership and mentors I've run into in the Corps have definitely made it worth it."

Lovy's plans after his return to North Carolina next year are to leave the Corps and pursue a career in accounting. During his stay here he's focused on getting the 'beans, bullets and band-aids' needed for the Marines in MWSG-27 to continue assisting the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD) forge a brighter future for the people of Iraq.