The Eagle & The Crescent

Vol. 1, Issue 17 | Transition to Self-Reliance | July 22, 2005

IIF Platoon wraps up Operation Scimitar

Lance Cpl. Evan M. Eagan

Marines and Iraqi soldiers of Iraqi Interdiction Force Platoon, Echo Company, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, patrol in the town of Muwaylihah during Operation Scimitar. The platoon conducted cordon and search operations in the town of 30-40 houses during phase three of the operation which ended July 14.

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

MUWAYLIHAH, Iraq -- After eight days of seeking out insurgents in Iraq's Al Anbar province, Operation Scimitar came to a close for the Marines and Iraqi soldiers of Iraqi Interdiction Force Platoon, Echo Company, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, July 14.

In the third and final phase of the operation, IIF Platoon was tasked with securing a small village approximately 18 miles southeast of Fallujah, called Muwaylihah.

Around 5 a.m. on July 12 the Marines and Iraqi soldiers of IIF platoon rolled into town and began cordon and search operations immediately. As the platoon arrived many of the local villagers took note, causing some of them to flee the area.

"We were looking for the bad guys--seeking out the enemy," said Sgt. Joseph Gonzalez, 30, platoon sergeant, IIF Platoon, Echo Co., 3rd Recon Bn., 2nd Marine Division. "We started searching as soon as we got here hoping to catch them off guard."

By noon the platoon had searched most of the 30-40 homes in the village, before setting up a firm base where they could established a headquarters and tactical operations center.

Having faced little resistance to their presence in the village, the operation was quick and effective; however, some did not get a good feeling about the area.

"This part of the operation went quicker than expected," said Gonzalez, a San Antonio native. "We accomplished the mission a lot sooner than anticipated, but the area just didn't seem right. There wasn't much here. There were no military aged males and no weapons. It just didn't seem right."

Three individuals were detained and questioned as a result of the cordon and search operations. Two were released later

The platoon also conducted foot patrols through the village, revisiting houses that were missed during the initial search and those that seemed suspicious.

A vital asset to the platoon was Cpl. Khanh Pham, 23, combat engineer, attached to 3rd Recon from Combat Logistics Battalion 8, 2nd Force Service Support Group (FWD), who conducted weapons cache and improvised explosive device sweeps throughout the operation.

As the platoon searched houses and patrolled the streets, the Marines also handed out candy and more than 50 coloring books to the local children, which were received with open arms.

With the conclusion of the latest operation, the platoon will rest and prepare for their next operation.

BECOME A SUBSCRIBER:

If you don't receive The Eagle & The Crescent directly, and would like to, please send an e-mail to EagleandCrescent@cemnf-wiraq.usmc.mil. Just put Subscribe in the subject line and we'll add you to our e-mail distribution list. Thank you for your support.

By Gunnery Sgt. Steven L. Saxton

Camp Fallujah

MWR events

Reggae Night: There will be a Reggae Night held at the MWR recreation center tonight from 9:30 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Kareoke Night: Come out to the recreation center for and sing your favorite song with your friends, Saturday night from 9:30 p.m. to 1 a.m.

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

---

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.

Lt. Col. Dave Lapan
Director, II MEF (FWD) Public Affairs
cepaowo@cemnf-wiraq.usmc.mil

II Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD)
Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson, Commanding General
Sgt. Maj. Gary W. Harris, Sergeant Major

Public Affairs Director...Lt. Col. David A. Lapan
Deputy Director.....Maj. Sean D. Gibson
Public Affairs Chief.....Master Gunnery Sgt. Constance S. Dillard
Media Officer.....Capt. Donald A. Caetano
Press Chief/Editor.....Staff Sgt. Ronna M. Weyland
Combat Correspondents..Sgt. Christi Prickett
Cpl. Ruben D. Maestre
Lance Cpl. Evan M. Eagan
Lance Cpl. Joshua C. Cox

The views and opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Department of Defense. It is for information only and is not considered directive in nature.

Chaplain's Corner:

What's an RP--"G"?

Lt. Cmdr. Phillip E. Lee
8th Communication Bn.

The answer to this question might be different than most would expect in a military context. If you ask around the 8th Communication Battalion, the 2nd Military Police Battalion or the II MEF (FWD) Chapel, the answer you will get may sound something like—"that is what they call the skinny Navy guy that follows Chaplain Lee around everywhere he goes."

The nickname RP—"G," or sometimes shortened to just "G," was hung on Religious Program Specialist Daniel F. Guiffreda shortly after we began working together. I realized quickly people were going to have a tough time remembering his Italian name pronounced with a Cajun accent. I thought we should try to simplify the situation since we would be spending so much time interacting with members of two battalions.

When I introduce him to groups on our journeys together, I tell them "This is RP—"G," and he is one of the most dangerous men in the AOR."

I first met "G" just before he deployed as a Marine during OIF I with an infantry unit from Louisiana. After his first deployment he returned home and began college at Leavell College in New Orleans where I was teaching. Within a short time he approached me, knowing I am a Navy chaplain, and indicated he would like to become an RP. He had observed an RP in action during his first deployment and thought if he had to go into combat again he would prefer to do it in the role of supporting a chaplain. We worked together on his inter-service transfer papers and within a few months he received his new designation. He was assigned to the unit were I was the officer-in-charge, training chaplains and RP's to deploy in support of active duty Marine units going into combat.

"G" and I got much better acquainted in the next eight months as we commuted together back and forth from New Orleans to Houston for drill weekends. He quickly began to grasp his new duties and fell in step quickly with the training demands. We were busy striving to ready ourselves for a call to action. The call for action came in October, 2004. I received a warning notice that orders were in process for me to mobilize after the first of the year. After discussing the matter of which RP would go with me, "G" volunteered again.

Since we departed New Orleans, I rarely have been out of his sight. He takes the business of being my "bodyguard" in a hostile environment very serious. In addition to having charge of my safety, he makes sure everyone has ready access to me for counseling and other ministry opportunities. One reason I can do my job better is because in the background "G" is constantly taking care of the things I need. In his spare time he has been working on earning his Fleet Marine Force (FMF) Pin and doing correspondence work on his college degree. His faithful service and devotion to duty recently earned him his first Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal.

Few will know all that this young man has really contributed in Iraq. Like many in this war, his daily sacrifices and service will not be marked by a "CNN Moment." But in my heart he will always stand out from the rest as the "best RP in the AOR." Not just because he is my RP and not just because he has traveled the AOR more than any other RP (and he hates flying in helicopters), but because he is a team player who never gets concerned about who gets the credit as long as God gets the glory!

Thanks RP—"G" for being my battle buddy and taking on the responsibilities required of you. May the Lord keep you safe and when the time comes grant you quick travel home for the best kind of reunion with your family and friends! My family is forever indebted to you for your willingness to take care of me here in Iraq.

P.S. This will be the last of the Chaplain's Corners I write from here at Camp Fallujah, if all goes according to plan. I would like to thank Staff Sgt. Weyland and Chief Warrant Officer Harris who encouraged me in this effort and have been patient with my feeble efforts. Please know that I will continue to pray for all of you as you serve our country and the cause of freedom. Thanks!

Algeria native bridges communication gap

Lance Cpl. Joshua C. Cox
II Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD)

CAMP FALLUJAH, Iraq -- Every service member has a significant role in the Global War on Terrorism, and one Marine is using the Arabic language to help fellow comrades communicate and accomplish missions here.

Corporal Rachid Ayouni, linguist-cultural advisor, G-3, II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward), joined the Marine Corps after moving to the United States to give back to the land of opportunity.

"I lived in Algeria until the age of 22," said Ayouni.

The North African native learned the Berber language (North African native language), several dialects of Arabic, and French in school while living with his parents in Algeria. He also attended college there, where he studied architecture.

"During my years in college, there was an Islamic insurgency taking place in Algeria, which resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Algerians," he said. "Basically there was no clear future, and of course, my folks encouraged me to leave the country after graduating from my university."

Ayouni applied for a visa and moved to the United States after obtaining his degree in architecture in 1997.

"There is no other country in the world that offers freedom and equal opportunities like the States, bar none," said Ayouni.

Ayouni arrived in northern California and found odd jobs to work while seeking a steady career in architecture.

"I came with little money, and very poor English," he said. "I had to work two back-to-back shifts."

A year after Ayouni arrived in California, he moved to Seattle to search for a position in an architecture firm.

"The job market was good," said the 29-year-old.

Ayouni was able to find jobs in architecture and took more college classes in Seattle. He also obtained citizenship in the United States, gaining eligibility to join the military.

"I received a few letters in the mail from recruiters," said Ayouni. "I was exploring the Army at first until a coworker of mine told me, 'Hey, why don't you join the Marine Corps, you look like a tough guy.'"

Ayouni set up an interview with a Marine recruiter and found a place in the Corps.

"When I was a kid, it was my dream to serve in the military," he said. "When I came to the States, it was a way for me to pay back the country. I wanted to contribute to the country. At the same time, it was a way for me to realize my dream."

Ayouni accepted the challenge and joined the Marine Corps Reserve as a tank crewman, and earned the secondary military occupational specialty as a linguist.

Since joining the Corps, Ayouni has been deployed to Senegal as a French linguist, and now he is supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom 04-06 as an Arabic linguist.

"I am very satisfied in what I am doing, fulfilling missions and helping others," he said.

Lance Cpl. Joshua C. Cox

Corporal Rachid Ayouni, linguist-cultural advisor, G-3, II Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD), helps interpret for a class during a seminar at the Babil Province Police Academy in Hillah, Iraq July 12. Ayouni joined the Marine Corps after moving to the United States to give back to the land of opportunity.

Camp guard no ordinary bunch

Sgt. Stephen D'Alessio
2nd Marine Division

CAMP BLUE DIAMOND, Iraq -- The Marines were waiting for their pre-patrol brief in their operations center – flak jackets and helmets bunched against the wall and rifles leaning against them. Some were drinking Mountain Dews and laughing and others were battling on the Sony Play Station. It was an average scene, save for the sergeant leaning in his chair practicing marching tunes on his clarinet. That's because this isn't any ordinary guard force the Marine Corps has trained for quick reaction emergencies, this is the 2nd Marine Division Band.

The Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based band, normally accustomed to the business of playing ceremonial military music for changes of command and the Marine Corps birthday ball, changed their focus more than a year ago when they found out they would become headquarters battalion's main defense against insurgent attacks.

"These guys adapted really well," said band master and staff non-commissioned officer of the guard force, Master Gunnery Sgt. Mark Michielsen. "And it all started with just a handful of them."

The Marines walked in a patrol formation out the main gate and through some of the farming pastures lying just beyond the camp's walls. They searched for possible insurgent fortifications, sniper positions and weapons caches.

As they waded through irrigations ditches and patrol neighborhoods, they also made a presence to let those who are watching know that the Marines have a close eye on everything around the camp.

About a year ago, five of the Marines were sent to specialized Security and Stabilization Operations training with the 1st Marine Division in California and the Enhanced Marksmanship Program. They learned how to shoot in close quarters combat style, maneuver in patrols and vehicle convoys and handle insurgent detainees. All of the training, according to Michielsen, has paid off.

"It provided a great foundation for the force as they were taught mission specific training for this area of operations," he said. "If we hadn't started well before we came out here, they would have been overwhelmed – especially since they had to come back and teach an entire battalion these skills."

Not all of the members of the force are from the band. Some are augments from other units like artillery, communications and administration sections. The Marines who attended the mission-specific training taught the newcomers the same tactics and even instructed the entire headquarters battalion prior to deployment here earlier this year.

"They're doing what they were recruited to do," said Michielsen. "When these Marines get back to their jobs, they'll be better prepared for what's going on outside the walls of this camp. And they'll have a better appreciation for who their jobs support – the infantry."

But for now, they are "riflemen," as they stride back to the camp with their automatic weapons. Their jobs as riflemen are as much a part of their lives as any of their original jobs were before; and though they may never step back into an active "rifleman's" role, they will be better aware of what it means to be a Marine.

"Regardless of where they came from, they are living side by side, working together and they're a family," said Michielsen. "Now, I can't remember who is a trombone player, who is a cannoneer and who worked behind a desk. They're all now basic riflemen and warriors."

Sgt. Stephen D'Alessio

A member of the camp's guard force scans the perimeter as his patrol formation walks back through the gate after a search outside the camp's walls, July 15, looking for insurgent weapons or encampments. The Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based 2nd Marine Division band, normally accustomed to the business of playing ceremonial military music for changes of command and the Marine Corps birthday ball, changed their focus more than a year ago when they found out they would become headquarters battalion's main defense against insurgent attacks.

Marines visit Iraqi school, discover way of life

Lance Cpl. Lucian Friel
2nd Marine Division

AL UBAYDI, Iraq -- The 5th Civil Affairs Group Marine wanted to give the local Iraqi children at a school in Old Ubaydi some candy, but they hung back at first.

"I had jelly beans in one cargo pocket and a handful of dimes in the other," said Lance Cpl. Christopher F. Tustin, a Philadelphia native and a civil affairs Marine in direct support of 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, after a school visit.

Many of the girls were frightened when they first encountered the Marines from the CAG and Weapons Company, who had traveled to the local, all-girls school in Old Ubaydi April 27.

"Some of them started to cry and most of them ran away from us screaming," said the 2000 Westchester University graduate. "I felt bad, but we had a mission to do."

Through the translators, the children began to realize that the Marines were not there to harm them, but to help them.

"After we explained that we're there for, the kids started to warm up to us," Tustin said. "You know they were typical little girls. They giggled and waved at us and truly enjoyed having us there."

Their mission was to assess the condition of the schools and gain an idea of what type of school supplies they needed.

This was the 1994 Cardinal-O'Hare High School graduate's first time visiting an Iraqi all-girl school.

"I've seen how the boys go to school, but we were never allowed to see the girls," said Tustin. "That's just how their society is. So this was the first time many of them saw Americans."

"We found out they didn't have a lot of supplies and the sanitation of the school was less than satisfactory," said the 28-year-old.

According to Tustin, seeing the conditions they go to school in humbled him.

"The schools here can't even compare to the schools in the United States. These schools would never pass in the states. I think the average American doesn't realize the level of poverty these people go through," he said.

Another Marine, Pfc. Christopher L. Parra, 25, agreed with Tustin on the quality of schools in this area of Iraq.

"Even some of the worst poverty areas in the U.S. don't compare to the poverty these kids face and most of these kids will never see anything better, but that's what we're here for; to help them build a better life," said the Long Beach, Calif., native and father of two. "I feel like giving them everything I have, and I want to let them know that we can give them a better life if they allow us to and help us rid this country of terrorists."

Tustin and Parra both explain how they are forever changed by the experience they had here.

"You realize that you have to sometimes put the "Warrior" aside, so to speak, and help the good people of Iraq that have suffered for so many years," Tustin said. "Today I am changed because seeing these kids has shown me the softer, innocent side of this place. It's not all of the violence that you see on television. I'll never forget this."

Lance Cpl. Lucian Friel

Staff Sgt. Lee D. Chartier (left) and Lance Cpl. Christopher F. Tustin, both Marines with 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team-2, make a joke about their drawing abilities to a class of Iraqi children during a school assessment here. Tustin, a Philadelphia native and 2000 Westchester University graduate, describes this experience as something he will never forget.

5
25
STAY ALIVE

Don't approach IEDs.

That's EODs job.

0064

IEDs KILL

Caught in the Spotlight

FALLUJAH, Iraq -- After watching the twin towers collapse from his college classroom in Tennessee, Andrew T. Ledbetter decided to join the fight, but first he had a lot of work to do.

Standing 6'2" and weighing approximately 300 pounds at the time, Ledbetter needed to lose almost 100 pounds to meet his goals.

"I wanted to do it for my health, my upcoming marriage, and after Sept. 11, happened, the Marine Corps became a motivation," said Cpl. Ledbetter, a native of Rickman, Tenn.

With only his personal motivations to help him along, Ledbetter set out to lose the weight through exercise and a strict diet.

He began running seven days a week, conducted high intensity workouts at the gym, and started a low fat diet.

"I had encouragement from family and friends," said Ledbetter, a graduate of Livingston Academy. "But I didn't use a personal trainer or anything like that."

After seven months of intense training and his strict diet of chicken, tuna, fruits and vegetables, Ledbetter had lost 125 pounds and was ten pounds below the maximum weight allowed to join the Marine Corps.

Ledbetter attributes most of this achievement to God, and a pact made before his journey to become healthier.

"Before I started, I prayed to God and said 'If I'm supposed to join the Marine Corps, you have to help me,'" said Ledbetter. "Obviously I'm supposed to be here."

Ledbetter is currently serving his first deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom in Fallujah as a team leader with 3rd platoon, Company D, 4th Combat Engineer Battalion, which is attached to 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division.

Although mentally and spiritually trying, Ledbetter feels his past difficulties have prepared him for the task at hand.

"I feel like I've matured more because of it," he said. "It definitely prepared me for the hardships of deployment."

Ledbetter continues to work diligently through the long hours and hot sun of the Iraqi desert, driven to keep the shape he worked so hard to attain.

"I still physically train every day."

Emboldened by his great accomplishment and laden with the natural confidence of a Marine, Ledbetter looks to meet all of his future challenges head on.

"I realized that if I can do what I did, I can do pretty much anything," he said.

Cpl. Andrew T. Ledbetter

Service members strive to win hearts, minds

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

AL ASAD, Iraq -- The Marines and Sailors in Marine Aircraft Group 26, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD), are going above and beyond when it comes to winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people.

Shortly after arriving at this former Iraqi air base, a few of the service members in the headquarters squadron began collecting toys, sports gear and kids' clothes to donate to those who need them most throughout western Iraq. The participation has increased and they've collected more than 15,000 items that they've donated to the Iraqi people with the help of members of the 5th Civil Affairs Group, 2nd Marine Division.

Lieutenant Col. William A. Tosick, MAG-26 executive officer, said the idea of collecting items came up after being introduced to the Web site www.anysoldier.com.

According to Tosick, something happened during his tour here last year as executive officer of Marine Light/Attack Helicopter Squadron 167 that brought out his sharing and caring side.

"I was out flying one day searching for bad guys and I was leading the section," said the AH-1W Super Cobra pilot who calls Jacksonville, N.C., home. "Whenever I fly I try real hard not to fly right over the houses, I try to be a good neighbor, but I flew over one house and standing in the courtyard was a little girl with a bright red dress on.

"She looked up, saw the helicopter and got scared. She ran to her mom and planted her face on her mother's leg. I continued the mission, but I wanted to land and apologize because that's not what we're here to do."

Tosick hasn't forgotten the girl in the red dress and now that he's back he wants to show the community that the service members here care about being good neighbors.

Assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Terry Eddinger, MAG-26 command chaplain who introduced him to the Web site where people offer to mail items for service members here, they've requested items the Iraqi children can use.

Eddinger, a reserve sailor from High Point, N.C., who's a seminary professor in his civilian life, has been overseeing the task of collecting items and coordinating with the members of the civil affairs group to take them to areas where there are needy children.

"[Lieutenant Commander Eddinger] has been doing a great job calling all his contacts and through the folks at anysoldier.com," said Tosick. "We provide them with some of the good photos the civil affairs guys have taken for us."

And it hasn't been easy; Eddinger said he had a difficult time tracking down the members of the civil affairs group because at that time the project started there were two groups here transitioning. Once he tracked down who would take the items out to the community he had to figure out what items he'd be asking for.

"I went to lunch once and ran into an Iraqi interpreter who I sat down with," said Eddinger. "He gave me a whole list of things the Iraqis would like and I sent it to all my friends back home. The list was distributed widely; people passed it on to other people and I started getting responses from folks who were sending stuff to us."

The types of items they've been collecting include shampoos and soaps, school supplies, soccer shoes, soccer jerseys, candy, dolls, and necklaces. Eddinger also sent an e-mail to the sergeants major in the squadrons letting them know that if they had any of those items and didn't know what to do with them he could put them to good use.

Several Marines and Sailors in the squadrons have taken up the project themselves and have gathered approximately 3,500 items to donate.

"Some of the items come from churches, businesses, civic

See Donate, Page 9

Sgt. Juan Vara

Petty Officer 3rd Class Daniel B. Wise, a religious programs specialist from Warrenton, Va., assigned to Marine Aircraft Group 26, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD) counts and sorts items donated by people in the U.S. for Iraqi children July 18. More than 15,000 items gathered by Marines and Sailors of MAG-26 have been delivered by members of the 5th Civil Affairs Group, 2nd Marine Division in Al Anbar province.

Armory accountability rests on two Marines

Cpl. C.J. Yard
2nd Force Service Support Group (FWD)

CAMP TAQADDUM, Iraq -- Behind a chain link fence with razor wire and a wooden gate laced with barbed wire, are two Marines who are responsible for Headquarters and Service Battalion armory, 2nd Force Service Support Group (FWD).

Lance Cpls. Joseph E. Gannon, a Willard, Wis., native, and Timothy W. Tidwell, a Monroe, La., native, ensure all rifles and gear within the armory are accounted for daily.

Also within the walls of the armory is the Naval Criminal Investigation Service evidence locker.

"If we lose something out here, we're going to jail," said Gannon, 2nd Force Service Support Group (Forward), armoror. "I think that's why they wanted the evidence locker in there. It's pretty strict (as far as) who can get in the armory.

"We have to do a sight count of everything twice a day," continued Gannon. "Out here, business is pretty slow because everybody has their weapons on them. Back at [Camp Lejeune, N.C.] though, it gets pretty busy because every week we have to issue out weapons because we always have rifle and pistol ranges."

Not only are the two Marines responsible for the accountability of the weapons, but they have also improved security around the containers which house the weapons.

"We added the fence and all the wire," said Gannon. "The battalion commander asked 'what about the gate?' and then climbed over it. So we fixed that by adding the barbed wire to the gate."

Though ranges in the desert sands of Iraq are not very common, the Marines issue out weapons, night vision goggles and thermal sights for the Marines who are continuously enduring the dangers of convoy operations.

"We give out the crew-served weapons and NVGs for convoys," said Tidwell. "Crew serves don't go out too much, but we give out the NVGs a lot."

Tidwell, a disburser by military occupational specialty, volunteered for the job as the Service Company representative and has been for more than a year.

"Each company from the battalion sends a representative," said Tidwell. "I've been 'in the armory' for the longest as far as representatives go. Gannon and I get along pretty well, so it is easy for us to work together."

The two keep each other entertained by telling stories of the "good old days," and the occasional squirt gun fight.

"We've been known to have squirt gun fights," said Gannon.

"Once in a while we'll load up the squirt guns and get each other," added Tidwell. "I've even shot people who were passing by. It's just a way to have fun when things are starting to lull."

Even though Tidwell has been an armory representative for more than a year, he is unable to fix broken rifles when they are brought to the armory because he is not an armoror.

"Yeah, if somebody brings a weapon to us that's broken, I'll say 'I'll see if I can find Gannon,'" said Tidwell, with a laugh.

According to Gannon, Tidwell would not be able to become MOS qualified with on-the-job training.

"Unfortunately, you have to go to the school to be an actual armoror," said Gannon. "You have to be schoolhouse trained. There's not a whole lot of weapons for us to work on out here either."

For Gannon, being an armoror was not his first choice, even though he was the self-proclaimed "kid always shooting something."

"I was originally supposed to be a machinist, but the armory school was on the same base and I ended up in that school," said Gannon.

Gannon said one of the benefits of being an armoror is hands-on training he gets with all the weapon systems.

"I'm a huge fan of the M-2 .50-caliber machine gun," said Gannon with a smile. "You can really feel the power of that thing."

Although Tidwell said he enjoys the experiences he's gained as Gannon's "assistant" with the different weapons, he revels in the opportunity to learn about the optics.

"I like the hands-on stuff with the weapons," said Tidwell. "But I would have to say the optics are the coolest things we've got. You can use the thermal imaging sights during the day, too. Those things are cool."

Due to mission requirements, after the deployment Tidwell will return to his original unit.

"As soon as we get back, I have to go back to dispersing," said Tidwell. "I would love to stay in the armory though, and I don't think Gannon would mind keeping me around."

Cpl. C.J. Yard

Lance Cpls. Timothy W. Tidwell (left) and Joseph E. Gannon stand behind the gate of the Headquarters and Service Battalion armory, 2nd Force Service Support Group (FWD). Tidwell and Gannon, are responsible for accountability of all weapons and gear stored inside the armory.

Donate, from Page 7

groups and individuals," said Eddinger. "There's also a lot of involvement from the squadrons, so this is not my project, this is a MAG-26 project. I oversee it and coordinate some things, but I couldn't do it alone."

In charge of counting, sorting and itemizing the hundreds of items that come in regularly are Petty Officer 3rd Class Daniel B. Wise and Petty Officer 1st Class Glen Christman. Wise, from Warrenton, Va., and Christman, a native of Valparaiso, Ind., are religious programs specialists in the group who serve as chaplains' assistants.

"We've been busy building up 'coalition forces,'" said Christman. "The Iraqis like seeing us not just with weapons in our hands chasing bad guys, but also giving them something they can use."

The sharing folks in the U.S. receive thank you notes from Eddinger and Christman as a token of appreciation. "We do it to let them know that if they ever want to send anything else we appreciate it," said Christman.

"It's really amazing," said Eddinger. "A lot of people, especially my students, appreciate that I came here and in some ways they would like to do something similar themselves, but they can't."

With a strong foundation and making a difference in the lives of many Iraqis, the program is going strong and there are no plans of terminating it.

"As a Cobra pilot I know that we're not going to win their hearts and minds by flying over their houses and scaring them," said Tosick. "If we can provide them with clothes and sports gear maybe we can do it then."

Gathering donated items for members of the 5th Civil Affairs Group to deliver to schools, hospitals and families throughout the Al Anbar province, the Marines and Sailors in MAG-26 are putting smiles on the faces of many local children, making brighter days for the people of Iraq.

Arkansas Marine moves up in the Corps

Gunnery Sgt. Shannon Arledge
2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD)

AL ASAD, Iraq -- As a young man, Matthew Aaron Wagner loved the outdoors. In his hometown of Fort Smith, Ark., Wagner enjoyed hunting, fishing, and simply, cruising the country roads. He was a good student growing up, but as he puts it, "I was always country, and did everything a country boy should do."

Wagner is a 2002 graduate of Southside High School, but it wasn't until December 2003 he made his decision to join the Marine Corps.

After graduating from boot camp in early 2004, he began training as an avionics technician for jet aircraft. The Arkansan specializes in the F/A-18 Hornet, and spends his days troubleshooting communication and navigation equipment. The young Marine is familiar with 36 different systems on the Hornet, and he considers his team the eyes, ears, and voice of the F/A-18. If something is wrong, he can find it and fix it.

When many people join the armed forces they join for the education benefits. Tensions today with the Global War on Terrorism require a stronger commitment to the military, and today's Marines understand they may deploy more than in the past. Just one week after joining his first Marine Corps unit, fresh from school, Matthew Wagner learned he was deploying to Iraq.

"It was a little crazy being thrown into the [fast paced] work schedule at first, but it helped me learn my job better and faster," said Wagner, a lance corporal with Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 224, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD).

His unit deployed from Beaufort, S.C., in January 2005. The squadron provides close air support for units fighting the enemy in Al Anbar province and also captures reconnaissance imagery for Marines and coalition forces.

"I have a great sense of pride in being part of this operation," said the Arkansas native. It has been tough at times, but it is worth it, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. There were four bombings recently in London and that basically shows the world that the war on terrorism is real, and it is going to take everyone to make things better."

The young Marine has done well in the military. Outstanding is a word commonly used when referring to Marines of his caliber. Wagner's performance has been recognized by his superiors, and he has reaped the benefits. He was nominated to go before several oral boards, competing with other Marines in various subjects such as Marine Corps history and current events to name a few. His confidence and pride took him to the top of not only his unit board, but of the entire deployed Marine Aircraft Wing. He was recently named the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (FWD) Marine of the Quarter.

"There was some tough competition at the board but I prepared about as much as possible," said Wagner. I know my performance shows a reflection of my squadron. We are some of the hardest working and best performing Marines around. It was a lot to uphold and I couldn't let them down."

Gunnery Sgt. Shannon Arledge

Lance Cpl. Matthew A. Wagner, avionics technician and native of Fort Smith, Ark., stands before an F/A-18 Hornet he helps maintain here.

The accolades for this young Marine just keep coming. After being the Marine of the Quarter, his squadron nominated him for a meritorious combat promotion board. Wagner seized the day, and will soon join the non-commissioned officer ranks when he is promoted to the rank of corporal.

Wagner plans to attend the Corporals' Leadership Course when he returns to South Carolina and later apply for a commissioning program. "Becoming a Marine Corps officer is a goal that I have had for a long time," said Wagner. "I am going to do everything it takes to make sure that I accomplish this goal."