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Magnificent 7th welcomes new commanding officer



Col. Randall P. Newman, former commanding officer of the 7th Marine Regiment, passes the regimental colors to Col. Austin E. Renforth, the commanding officer of 7th Marines, during a change-of-command ceremony at the Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Gray memorial field, March 17. Renforth previously served as the Chief of Staff for 1st Marine Division. Newman will transfer to the Marine Air Ground Task Force Staff Training Program in Quantico, Va.

Story and photos by Lance Cpl. Alfred Lopez

MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER TWENTYNINE PALMS, Calif. — Col. Austin E. Renforth relieved Col. Randall P. Newman as commanding officer of the 7th Marine Regiment during a change-of-command ceremony at the combat center's Lance Cpl. Torrey L. Gray memorial parade deck, March 17.

Newman assumed command of 7th Marines in 2008 and is moving onto the Marine Air Ground Task Force Staff training program in Quantico, Va.

"It's such an honor to be a part of 7th Marines. To me this is the premier regiment of the Marine Corps, and to be a part of it is truly special," Renforth said.

"I don't want to go, but I'm proud to be able to present the men today," said Newman, from Economy, Ind. "This is an opportunity to show the people the men that earned the reputation of the 7th Marines. It's a proud day to stand

them out in front of the guests today, give them a standing ovation to thank them for everything they do. It's a good day all the way around."

"It's a comforting feeling that a man much better than I is coming in to take over," said Newman. "He's a great Marine and I know that the 7th will only get better, so I feel great about it."

Renforth holds an outstanding record in the naval services that began in 1982 when he enlisted in the United States Navy. He was then commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps after graduating from the United States Naval Academy.

Renforth, held various assignments in his career, including battalion commander, platoon commander and executive officer. He has held tenure with 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, 5th Marines and as the Chief-of-Staff of 1st Marine Division, before assuming command of 7th Marines. Renforth served in Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Operation Provide Promise and Operation Iraqi Freedom II, including the

first assault of Fallujah.

Renforth's personal awards include the Bronze Star with combat distinguishing device and gold star in lieu of second award, Navy Commendation Medal and Combat Action Ribbon with gold star in lieu of second award.

"I'm very fortunate that Col. Renforth is taking over because he's a proven combat leader as I saw him do that in Iraq," said Maj. Gen. Michael R. Regner, commanding general of 1st Marine Division. "I've been very fortunate to work with him for about the first seven months of my command. He's been a very valuable resource and asset to me. He understands family readiness and he understand war-fighting. I believe he'll do a great job with 7th Marines."

"I want to continue the success they've set forth," said Renforth. "There was a great commander before me, and there will be great ones after me, but I just want to give them all I have and give them the commitment of making them better every day."

United Arab Emirates Presidential Guard visit 1st Marine Division



Col. Willard A. Buhl, the commanding officer of 5th Marine Regiment, presents a gift to senior officers of the United Arab Emirates Presidential Guard during their visit at the 62 Area mess hall, March 8. The visit to The Fighting Fifth is part of UAE's effort to build the foundation of their newly established Presidential Guards training regimen and military capabilities. UAE Presidential Guard officers also learned about weapon systems with 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment Marines and toured the infantry immersion trainer.

Story and photos by Lance Cpl. Alfred Lopez

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. – Officers of the United Arab Emirates Presidential Guard visited 1st Marine Division units at their respective areas, March 8.

The visit is part of UAE's effort to build the foundation of their newly established Presidential Guard's training regimen and military capabilities, said Maj. Randy G. Turner, Marine Forces Central Command liaison officer. Their trip began at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, March 7, where they observed how recruits are shaped into Marines.

"It's important to show them how a civilian goes through recruit training," said Turner, from Gilbert, Ariz. "One of the big things about Marine training is that you have to see it from the start."

The UAE Crown Prince specifically asked for U.S. Marine guidance in developing a warrior ethos for the Presidential Guard, said Turner.



Marines of 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, show senior officers of the United Arab Emirates Presidential Guard and talk about the capabilities of the 240 G medium machine gun during their visit at the 53 Area parade deck, March 8. The visit to "The China Marines" is part of UAE's effort to build the foundation of their newly established Presidential Guards training regimen and military capabilities. UAE Presidential Guard officers also learned about regimental organization.

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Secretary of Defense visits FOB Jackson

Story and photos by Staff Sgt. Ryan Smith

FORWARD OPERATING BASE JACKSON, Afghanistan – Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited the Marines and sailors of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, Regimental Combat Team 8, during a tour of Forward Operating Base Jackson, March 8. The tour included a brief by Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commanding officer of 3rd Bn., 5th Marines, an address to the Marines of FOB Jackson, a question and answer period and a lunch with a few of the battalion's non-commissioned officers.

Gates arrived via MV-22 Osprey and was promptly met by Brig. Gen. Joseph Osterman, the division commanding general as well as Morris.

They proceeded to a briefing given by the company commanders of 3rd Bn., 5th Marines. Throughout the brief, Gates posed questions to the staff concerning what was needed to help keep the momentum of the battle in their hands.

"Medivacs? MATVs? Stuff like that ... do you got what you need?" asked Gates.

"We do, sir," replied Capt. Matt Peterson, Company L commanding officer.

"Just time, sir," added Morris.

"You guys have done an astonishing job out here; I'm very, very proud of you," said Gates.

Following the brief, Gates was lead to the



Secretary of Defense Robert Gates addresses Marines and sailors at Forward Operating Base Jackson, Afghanistan, March 8. The Marines of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 8, crowded around to hear words of inspiration from the Defense Secretary. "Alongside your Afghan brothers, you've written a new chapter in the Marine Corps role of honor with your sweat and your blood; against the toughest odds and in the most difficult terrain," said Gates.

Combat Operations Center and addressed the Marines of 3rd Bn., 5th Marines on the work they have been doing in the Sangin District.

"Everyday I monitor how you're doing, and everyday you return to your FOB without a loss, I say a little prayer," said Gates, addressing the Marines in formation. "Alongside your Afghan brothers, you've written a new chapter in the Marine Corps role of honor with your sweat and your blood; against the toughest odds and in the most difficult terrain.

"Alongside the legend of Guadalcanal, Chosin Reservoir and Belleau Wood; you will forever be added in Marine Corps history as the legend of Sangin."

His speech took on a more personal tone at this moment.

"I'm the one who signed the orders that sent you all here," said Gates. "I visit your wounded brothers in Bethesda. I write condolence letters to the families of the fallen. So, I feel a tremendous personal responsibility to each and every one of you. I feel your hardship and your sacrifice, and for your families more than you can possibly imagine. But I also relish in your victories, take pride in your achievements, and take satisfaction as you strike fear into the hearts of the Taliban."

Gates then took time to answer questions the Marines had varying from intelligence gathering assets to special pay for Explosive Ordnance Disposal Marines. Gates then turned to lunch with the NCOs.

Discussion with the group included the Marine's perceptions of the Afghan National Security Forces, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle procurement, the use of military working dogs in the fight against improvised explosive devices and medical evacuation response.

"The response times are better now than in Iraq even though the country is larger and the terrain is far worse," said Gates. "The medics are doing an outstanding job in supporting the effort on the front lines."

The Marines certainly appreciated the visit and refocused on the task at hand; securing Sangin.

"It was motivating to see that he would take the time to visit us; not too many would do it," said Lance Cpl. Matthew Luera, an intelligence analyst for 3rd Bn., 5th Marines. "Now the Marines know someone understands what we're going through and the situation we're in. It's comforting to know, especially for the grunts out there taking the big hits."



Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is escorted by Lt. Col. Jason Morris, the commanding officer of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 8, to a briefing room during a tour of Forward Operating Base Jackson, Afghanistan, March 8. The tour included an address to the Marines of FOB Jackson, a question and answer period, and a lunch with a few of the battalion's non-commissioned officers.

Division licensing Marine named motor transport operations chief of the year

Story and photo by Lance Cpl. Alfred Lopez

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. – A Marine from the 1st Marine Division has been named the motor transport operations Chief of the Year by the United States Marine Corps' Motor Transport Association.

Staff Sgt. Lee R. Balderaz, former operations chief of division licensing, was named chief of the year for his tenure at division licensing. As the chief, Balderaz oversaw the operations for all tactical vehicle licensing in the division. Vehicles requiring licenses included High-Mobility, Multi-purpose, Wheeled Vehicle, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle, MRAP All-Terrain vehicle and Mine Roller System. Balderaz' team of 10 Marines also oversaw training hazardous material transport handling.

"Our focus was to support division, especially units that were heading out to deployment," said Balderaz, 33, originally from Freer, Texas. "We tried to facilitate them by finding out what they need, building a plan and then putting that plan in action."

Under Balderaz' leadership, division licensing ran an average of seven simultaneous courses at any given time. Each course



Staff Sgt. Lee R. Balderaz, former operations chief of 1st Marine Division licensing, was named the motor transport operations chief of the year by the United States Marine Corps' Motor Transport Association. As the chief, Balderaz oversaw the operations for all tactical vehicle licensing in the division. Vehicles requiring licenses included High-Mobility, Multi-purpose, Wheeled Vehicle, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle, MRAP All-Terrain vehicle and Mine Roller System. Balderaz, 33, from Freer, Texas, will receive the award during the upcoming Marine Corps Motor Transport Symposium.

3rd AABn. appoints new Sgt. Maj.



Photo by Lance Cpl. Alfred Lopez

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. – Sgt. Maj. Alberto Ruiz, sergeant major, 3rd Assault Amphibian Battalion, prepares to receive the sword of office from Lt. Col. Daryl G. Crane, the commanding officer of 3rd AABn., during a post-and-relief ceremony at the 21 Area parade deck, March 11. Ruiz relieved Sgt. Maj. Douglas L. Smith, former sergeant major of 3rd AABn., of his duties during the ceremony. Ruiz transferred from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 268. He deployed with MHS 268 "Red Dragons" in March 2009 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Ruiz's personal decorations include the Bronze Star with Combat Distinguished Device, Meritorious Service Medal and Combat Action Ribbon with Gold star in lieu of second award.

included anywhere between 40-80 Marines, depending on the vehicle. Balderaz' team licensed over 14,000 Marines by the end of the year, allowing those Marines to safely and proficiently operate tactical vehicles.

Balderaz credits his team for working long hours to ensure that Marines in the licensing courses received the proper attention.

Instructors concern themselves with quality of training, even with the short amount of time the course allows because the Marines receiving the licenses will be responsible for the passenger safety, vehicle maintenance and operational readiness, said Balderaz.

"Trying to fit quality training and producing quality operators in a short period of time was challenging," said Balderaz. "We were able to accomplish this by working extra hours, at times working 60 hours a week."

Sgt. Walfre Palacios, division licensing platoon sergeant during Balderaz' tenure, described him as a caring and understanding leader who helped his Marines better themselves.

"He's the type of leader who gave you space to develop yourself and he always had your back," said Palacios, 31, from San Diego. "He helped me work on how to conduct myself as an instructor and he helped me im-

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"It's important because the UAE is a critical partner to the United States and further because the US Marine Corps is committed to a long term relationship with the UAE's Presidential Guard. It was a great experience for our Marines and sailors to interact with such a professional force," said Lt. Col. Joseph R. Clearfield, commanding officer, 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment.

The Camp Pendleton portion of the trip began at the 62 Area, home of the 5th Marine Regiment, where Col. Willard A. Buhl, commanding officer, 5th Marines, and Sgt. Maj. Ernest K. Hoopii, regimental sergeant major, 5th Marines, gave a short overview of "The Fighting Fifth's" rich history and a presentation of how a Marine regiment is organized for deployment.

These visits are important to sustaining relationships with the Marine Corps' allies and

helping them develop capabilities that could also assist Marines around the world, said Buhl.

Marines and sailors of 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment also welcomed the Presidential Guard officers to their home at the 53 Area. 1/4 noncommissioned officers led a presentation of various weapon systems and demonstrated how they react to and lead their Marines during improvised explosive device attacks.

"To have the UAE come here and ask us questions and learn from us is a great experience," Clearfield said.

1/4 recently returned from a deployment with the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, where they participated with nine different theater security cooperation exercises.

The visit concluded with a tour of the Infantry Immersion Trainer, where the guests explored one of the Marine Corps' most valuable training tools. The Presidential Guard officers will continue touring various Marine Corps installations and gaining knowledge, valuable to their mission.



Lance Cpl. Joshua R. Henson, a mortar man with 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, briefs senior officers of the United Arab Emirates Presidential Guard about the capabilities of the 81mm mortar system during their visit at the 53 Area parade deck, March 8. The visit to "The China Marines" is part of UAE's effort to build the foundation of their newly established Presidential Guard training regimen and military capabilities.

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proved myself as a Marine."

Sgt. Jesus Pedraza, Balderaz' maintenance chief, says his work ethic is one of rare and resilient quality, dedicated primarily to mission accomplishment, quality and troop welfare.

"You don't see his kind of dedication every day," said Pedraza, 26, from Austin, Texas. "His favorite saying is 'Stay proactive, stay ahead.'"

Balderaz stayed at work late into the night until the job was done and until his Marines are taken care of, said Pedraza.



Staff Sgt. Lee R. Balderaz, former operations chief of 1st Marine Division licensing, poses with Sgt. Walfre Palacios, division licensing platoon sergeant during Balderaz' tenure, Sgt. Jesus Peraza, Balderaz' maintenance chief and Sgt. David Fredrigill, licensing instructor, at the division licensing motor pool, March 10. Balderaz, 33, from Freer, Texas, credits the hard work of his noncommissioned officers for being named the motor transport operations chief of the year by the United States Marine Corps' Motor Transport Association.

"We handled every adversity that we face with a strong plan," said Balderaz. "Knowing that my Marines are fully prepared for deployment and being able to give back to them pushes me."

Balderaz will receive the award during the upcoming Marine Corps' Motor Transport Symposium.

"I'm humbled. It's something that I know I couldn't have done by myself. Without my Marines doing the right things, I wouldn't be in this position," said Balderaz.

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