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Freedom's Warriors: Flying High, Semper Fi--Part II

With all the military in our area, there's a pretty good chance you know someone who serves, and all too often these days that means months away from home in far away places. Our Mike Manhatton spent some time in one of those places, al Asad, Iraq, where National Guard troops from Georgia and Beaufort Marines serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom. All those quoted here are Marines with VMFA 533.

Most of us can only imagine what life is like over there. And what you imagine is pretty much on the money if you've seen the desert on TV.

The pictures we often get from Iraq are bombs on the street in Baghdad, or that vast wasteland-looking sandbox. What you don't always see is what happens when our military personnel spend long months looking at the same landscape, and longing for a taste of home.

"It's hotter," said Lance Cpl. Travis Barker of the reality of Iraq. "I didn't think it was so flat out here. It's pretty flat. It's just a bunch of nothing."

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Part II**



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"I mean, something you come to expect seeing brown skies everywhere," Lance Cpl. Joseph Bless. "We're waiting for the scorpions and other critters to come, I'm not going to enjoy too much."

You know it's hot and dirty and dusty. But they have air conditioning in most places, and shade in others. Plenty of water, all bottled. But one of the biggest challenges for Marines at al Asad might surprise you.

"Boredom is a major issue here, especially with me being away from my family and kids and everything," said Sgt. Adrian Lynch.

"It's kind of like Christmas when you come out here," said Cpl. Clay Duplantis. "You see a present under the tree, and you don't know what it is, and when you finally open it, it's a thrill, and about three weeks later, you kind of get used to it and you become a little bored with it.

"But it takes discipline to actually overcome that mental fog, is what we would call it."

Gunnery Sgt. Shawn Dunn explained the challenge as, "Fighting off boredom for the Marines. Keeping them busy so that they don't lose focus of their efforts of what they're here for. Time. Making sure that we help pass the time as quick as possible. Keep them busy."

"We'll continue with the professional military education for the young Marines to build their minds and build them to become better leaders," said Sgt. Maj. Scott Mykoo. "That, again and the corporal course, the college courses."

College courses, and other, maybe more what you'd expect from Marines, such as martial arts instruction, in which they "focus on combat conditioning, along with physical, moral and character disciplines to make a well rounded warrior in each and every Marine."



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Mr. Food



This week's recipes and a link to the Mr. Food archives.

Cpl. Anthony Impastato works in an airframe shop. "Pretty much go to the gym after work, eat something and rack out," he said. "Go to sleep, come back, do it all over again."

"I throw myself either into my work, and when I'm home, I spend most of my time reading, until I go to sleep," said Sgt. Adrian Lynch.

"A little less to do out here," noted Cpl. Jeffrey Steinke. "Not a whole lot of night life here in Iraq."

Never mind the nightlife, the life back home is what they miss most. Capt. Shane Bursae read to us from a letter. "It says, 'I wish I could do more, but the very least I can say thank you. Thank you for sacrificing so much to protect the rest of us. We all owe our freedom to brave people like you. From the bottom of my heart, I hope you all know how appreciated you are.'"

It's not just the warm fuzzy feeling. There're goodies in that mail.

"I would say definitely the support we have from home, all the packages, we log on to anysoldier.com and we get packages from home, the businesses from Beaufort, support us all the time, that makes us feel really good," said Staff Sgt. Dhanmattie Singh.

They all miss the folks back home, but one young Marine found a surprise when he arrived at al Asad.

"Lance Cpl. Snell," said Staff Sgt. Scott Kargol. "He was actually at one of my high schools when I was a recruiter. I had actually left a month prior to him actually joining."

"When I checked in, he was my staff NCO," said Lance Cpl. Otto Snell. "Little shocking, but it's also kind of nice, to see him out here, somebody I recognize."

"His recruiter was actually a very good friend of mine, and I do know exactly where he lives, have some very good friends of mine that live just down the street from there," said Staff Sgt. Kargol. "So it's kind of interesting, running into the young men that I've had enlist through me, so it's kind of a shock when you run into them."

Something else that might shock, or at least surprise you. "I come from Palestinian descent," said Cpl. Fadi Abdelhalim. "I lived in Palestine eight years of my life. And to come here is just a godsend. I'm looking forward to one day when I get older and have a wife and kids and have grandkids and have my little grandchildren on my lap and say, 'Hey granddaddy,

were you in Iraq?' And I can say, 'Yes, and I made a better place for better people, and feel good about that.'"

Tomorrow night, we'll hear from the people on the front lines in the sky, the pilots, about their unusual view of the world from high above the battle, and what they think of the work they're doing.

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