

By JONATHAN BANKOFF, BA'96

# Letters from Camp FOX

*An alumnus takes up the pen to explore  
his experience in the Middle East*

*Editor's Note: Semper Fidelis. Forever faithful. With those words Lt. Jonathan Bankoff, BA'96, closes each letter as he chronicles his journey as a soldier, from initial rumors about war with Iraq to his return from service in Kuwait. About his correspondence Bankoff says, "Writing those letters was originally something that I chose to do to collect my thoughts, hoping to have something to remember 20 years from now about this difficult time. As it turned out, writing helped me face each day. It gave me an outlet to express my feelings and showcase some of my experiences for those supporters back home." Since the summer of 2001, he has been assigned to the 8th Communication Battalion, II Marine Expeditionary Force at Camp Lejeune, N.C., as the battalion medical officer.*



**2nd Lt. Tom O'Neil writes a letter during a bio-chemical drill in Kuwait.**

## **Jacksonville, N.C.—February 14, 2003**

My wife and I spent part of our Valentine's Day thumbing through books at the local bookstore. In an adjacent aisle, we overheard two young boys talking.

Their conversation was a mixture of current grade-school topics: candy, valentines and SpongeBob SquarePants. As they talked, a young man with a high and tight haircut motioned to one of the boys that it was time to go. The boy turned to his friend as they walked off and said, "That's my dad. He's a Marine. He's going to war. Is your dad going to war, too?"

The innocent exchange of these two young boys shed an unpleasant light on the situation that our nation is facing. Throughout the country, as the discussions intensify and the politicians lobby for support, this tiny Marine town prepares for war.

The local paper is dominated by articles and pictures of deploying forces, seemingly a different battalion every day. The streets are lined with banners and signs, messages of "God bless our troops"

and “Hurry home, Warriors.” The schoolchildren are writing Valentine’s Day cards and letters to their pen pals, young Marines and sailors who visited their classrooms before being called upon to carry out their missions.

While the possibility of war is still being debated in many parts of the country, in Jacksonville, N.C., it is reality.

I am a commissioned medical officer in the U.S. Navy. I have been stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C., since July 2001, assigned to a Marine Corps communication battalion. As the primary physician for these 1,200 Marines, my duty is to provide operational medical care in an expeditionary environment.

Essentially, this means keeping my Marines healthy enough to go to war and ensuring they remain healthy once they get there. To assist me in this effort, I have 11 enlisted Navy corpsmen, of varying ages and experience, trained in the fundamentals of medical diagnosis and treatment.

For the past several months, our battalion has been preparing for deployment to the Middle East. We have already sent a large number of troops to countries in that region and will shortly be sending the balance of the battalion forward to assist them. While the specifics of our mission, until recently, have been unclear, our pre-deployment training has been standard.

My direct role in this training has been to educate the Marines about potential medical threats they may encounter in the region and medically screen and immunize them against such threats. Some recent topics of interest have been lectures on proper autoinjector use to combat nerve agent exposure, and briefings on anthrax and smallpox shots.

As the window for deployment rapidly approaches, the initial feelings of excitement, once so visible among the Marines, have been replaced by the palpable, underlying feelings of fear and anxiety. Not every Marine has these feelings, and very few will admit to them, but you can see it in their eyes.

You can hear it in their voices as they ask questions about possible immunization side effects. You can sense it in their expressions as they stand in line to receive their desert camouflage uniforms and gas masks. Anxiety associated with a mission of unknown length or outcome. Concern for loved ones left behind. Fear of failure.

Marines are a unique breed, a special group of highly skilled warriors, trained specifically for combat. They are taught never to show fear, that pain is a sign of weakness leaving the body. Our recent pre-deployment training, however, has also revealed a side rarely seen on Marine Corps recruiting posters or television commercials: the human side. It will be of great interest to me to observe the interaction of these delicately balanced feelings in a potentially hostile environment.

“We will not tire. We will not falter. We will not fail.”

These paraphrased words spoken by our commander-in-chief,

shortly after Sept. 11, are written on a plaque above the entrance to our battalion. They are in clear view every time a Marine or sailor walks out the door. I have the utmost confidence in my ability and the abilities of the Marines and sailors around me. We wear our uniforms with honor and take great pride in being afforded the opportunity to serve our country.

We will be on foreign soil soon, our length of commitment uncertain. Our mission and orders are clear, though, and we intend to see them through.

The Marines and sailors of 8th Communication Battalion are going to war.

### **Cherry Point, N.C.—March 4, 2003**

Hurry up and wait.

Anyone in the military or anyone familiar with the armed forces has heard this phrase before. It is usually followed by a string of expletives and a long, frustrated sigh, as it likely signals another speed bump in the already bumpy road of military planning and logistics.

A specific example of one “hurry up and wait” episode came yesterday. I received a call on Sunday evening that we had two Marines scheduled to deploy on a commercial charter early Monday morning and a large number of Marines slated for a C-17 cargo transport later the same day. I instructed the two Marines to meet me at the Battalion Aid Station Monday morning at 0400 for their smallpox shot and final medical briefing.

So, there we were at 0400: two excited Marines, two unlucky corpsmen, and one bleary-eyed doctor. We had just received confirmation of an inbound plane with two open seats, so we proceeded with the shots and brief as planned. By 0430 the Marines were on their way to Cherry Point, and I was on my way home to sneak 30 more minutes of sleep.

When the executive officer, Maj. Green, and I arrived at Cherry Point at 1600 that afternoon to say goodbye to another group of our departing Marines, we noticed a hangar full of bodies and a tarmac with only one plane. We talked to officers in other battalions that had been waiting there for days. We quickly realized that our Marines were in for a long night.

The atmosphere was charged, but morale was high and the Marines kept busy. Some passed the time by studying their NBC (Nuclear, Biological, Chemical) training and chemical decontamination instructions. Others played cards or watched movies, while the majority slept curled up against their gear, seemingly oblivious to their surroundings. Some of the officers attempted to keep the mood light by buying Snickers bars for their troops, just to let them know that “they weren’t going anywhere for a while.”

Word finally came at 2100 that no more planes were departing until the following day. Needless to say, the humor quickly disap-

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peared. Many of those present were, by now, accustomed to it, having been there the better part of a week already. They quietly proceeded to their makeshift bunkers and settled in for the night.

The newest arrivals, though, including most of the 8th Comm Marines, were angry. Having just said goodbye to their spouses and children, they weren't happy that they would be sleeping so close to home, yet unable to go there.

As the XO (executive officer) and I headed out to the government van for the 90-minute ride back home, we walked past the two Marines who I had given shots to at "zero dark thirty" that morning. They informed us that their plane was still on the ground in Turkey and they were looking to hitch a ride with another battalion. We struggled to control our laughter as we wished them good luck, for we knew they would need all the luck they could get. We also realized that in a few days, when we were in their boots, waiting to board the last plane out of town, we'd better have a long book, a strong cup of coffee, and a good sense of humor.

### **Camp Fox, Kuwait—March 12, 2003**

"Welcome to Kuwait."

The big banner greeted us at Kuwait International Airport. It was a bittersweet greeting. The excitement and pride associated with being deployed to defend our country was still pulsing at the surface of everyone on our plane.

The reality of actually doing it, though, was also now apparent. No turning back now. No going home to Mama.

We arrived in Kuwait after a 25-hour trip from Cherry Point, N.C., via Frankfurt, Germany. Our 11-man team flew on a C-17 Globemaster aircraft, one of the Air Force's largest planes. It is configured primarily for cargo transport but on occasion can accommodate "passengers."

The usual stipulation for those passengers is that they are prepared to jump out once they reach 10,000 feet.

Passengers ride in jump seats, which are essentially cargo nets molded to the wall of the plane with a small cushioned support to sit on. The seats don't recline. They don't have a tray table or a place to put your carry-on. They face inboard, so you have to rest your feet on the cargo.

In my case, this turned out to be a big shelter filled with sandbags. Fortunately, there were only 11 of us on the flight, so once we reached cruise, we could spread out and lie on the ground. Nothing like trying to sleep on the cold metal ground at 35,000 feet with your 9 mm Beretta stuck in your ribcage and your gas mask strapped to your hip.

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All in all, the flights were pretty uneventful. The excitement started once we hit the ground. We had to take a bus from the tarmac to the gear staging area. We were instructed that we weren't allowed to

take pictures, talk to the Kuwaiti driver, or open the blinds on the bus.

We were escorted by two Humvees, manned by Marines with mounted .50-caliber machine guns. Once we entered the staging area, we were issued security rounds, one bullet each to protect us on

the drive to the camp, just in case we ran into trouble or the bus broke down. We loaded up the flatbeds with all of our gear and set off for the ride to Camp Fox.

Three hours later we arrived at our new home. Fox is a massive, 30-square-mile sandbox in central Kuwait. It is 45 minutes from the nearest gravel road and can only be reached by Humvee or SUV. It is home to more than 7,500 troops from the U.S. Marines, U.S. Navy and British Royal Marines. There are six battalions from the Marine Corps alone.

Some of the troops are just here temporarily, until the war kicks off, at which point they will move forward. Others

are permanently based here and may stay long after the war is over. Right now, my battalion falls somewhere in between, as the communication footprint for the war is always changing.

Although I wouldn't mind switching to another region (like maybe the Caribbean), this is pretty nice for my first deployment outside the United States. We have hot food twice a day and hot showers anytime we want. We get to sleep in 20-man tents with actual bunk beds and thin mattresses. We have e-mail access around the clock, as long as the server is working. I actually get to sleep in later here than I did at home.

There are some downsides as well. We have to use Port-a-Johns, which only get cleaned once a day. Now you would think that once a day would be outstanding, considering Marines often go to the field for a week without any cleaning. But when you have 1,000 troops sharing a block of six Port-a-Johns, once a day leaves much to be desired.

Additionally, the weather has been less than cooperative. Since I've been here, the average wind speed has been 30 knots (about 34 to 35 miles per hour). Not too bad if you're windsurfing, but not much fun when you're trying to set up a camp compound or keep communication gear running smoothly.

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The weather has contributed to our patient load at the Battalion Aid Station. We are only seeing a handful of patients each day, but the common complaints are beginning to form a pattern: irritated eyes, nasal congestion and cough.

We are quickly running low on Sudafed and saline eye drops. Even with goggles and neck scarves, the sand is impossible to keep out of your face. Conditions are not likely to improve as we move into spring and summer, when temperatures average above 90 degrees.

Morale is good, but the Marines are working long hours. Setting up camp in a combat environment means lots of busy work—digging bunkers, filling sandbags, running cable. The troops are staying busy, which helps keep their minds off their families and, more important, keeps them focused on why they're here.

**The other corpsmen here with me are reservists, activated for the sole purpose of war. They represent a wide range of geography and experience. One is a SWAT team paramedic in Charlotte. One is a nurse in Missouri. One builds baseball diamonds and RVs back home in South Bend. One, a retired sheriff, was a corpsman in Vietnam.**

We'll be ready for the increased patient load, and we'll get them back into the fight.

### **Camp Fox, Kuwait (No Date Written)**

The tents are staked and sandbagged. The bunkers are built and reinforced. The nerve-agent injectors have been distributed. Kevlar helmets and flak jackets are staged and at the ready. Now we're just waiting for the order. From the sound of it, we won't be waiting long.

A number of officers in my tent, or "hooch" as it's called in the military, woke up at 0400 this morning to hear President Bush address the nation. We weren't expecting any surprises, and we weren't disappointed. Word came last night that troops up north were preparing to roll forward. Air traffic overhead has been steady during the past 48 hours, as the number of sorties has increased. Phone lines have been temporarily disconnected, and Internet connections will be soon to follow. All indications are that war with Iraq is upon us.

The commanding general for the area has issued a directive that there will be no organized physical fitness or martial arts training until further notice. As a result, and as they are taught, Marines have had to adapt, improvise and overcome. At least for my tent, hooch 15, this has meant Poker Physical Fitness.



Each night six of us play cards, and the losers of each hand are subjected to a physical punishment of the dealer's choice. We've found this to build muscle as well as camaraderie. After two consecutive nights of more than 400 pushups and 1,000 crunches, though, I had better find a different way to make friends.

Medically, we've been busy with last-minute reminders for the Marines: Classes on how to drink out of your canteen while wearing your gas mask. Instruction on how and when to use your nerve-agent antidote injectors. Signs and symptoms of chemical exposure.

Back home it was difficult to keep the Marines focused and awake during these classes. Now I have a captive audience. Marines are asking questions. They are correctly answering my questions. I think they finally realize the importance of these lectures. I pray that this realization isn't coming too late.

My BAS (battalion aid station) is ready. The corpsmen spend their days preparing Artpacks—individually wrapped packs of gauze, tape,

battle dressings and IV bags to help quickly control arterial bleeding. They clean their weapons, in case they are called upon to do more than provide medical support. They send e-mails home to family and friends, assuming the connections will be shut down soon.

My complement of corpsmen is an interesting crew. They range in age from 23 to 52. Several of them are active-duty sailors, with me since I arrived at 8th Comm BN. They know me well and know what I expect of them. They have been preparing for this deployment since November of last year. They are primed and ready.

The other corpsmen here with me are reservists, activated for the sole purpose of war. They checked on board with 8th Comm in mid-February, only days after being told to pack their things and say goodbye to their families. They represent a wide range of geography and experience. One is a SWAT team paramedic in Charlotte. One is a nurse in Missouri. One builds baseball diamonds and RVs back home in South Bend. One, a retired sheriff, was a corpsman in Vietnam.

As reservists, they all drop what they are doing when duty calls. Often this means significant salary cuts, maybe even lost jobs. It means quick, tearful goodbyes to wives and children. It means living in a tent with guys you just met. It means flipping the medical switch back on.

For some of them, it's been a while since they took care of patients. As a result, the last month has consisted mostly of on-the-job training and refresher courses to get them back up to speed. Basics on physical examination skills. Recertification in CPR. Suturing classes and wound management lectures.

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There is a definite edge now to the Marines at Camp Fox. As the battalion sergeant major puts it, the Marines here are "harder than woodpecker lips." They are dialed in, ready for action. Morale remains high, but it requires quite an effort to keep from getting bored. Something tells me that we won't be bored for much longer. ...

### **Camp Fox, Kuwait—March 22, 2003**

Lightning! Lightning! Lightning!

Gas! Gas! Gas!

The call came out for the first time over the SABRE radio on Thursday at 0845. These dreaded words indicated that a Scud missile, possibly loaded with a chemical agent, was inbound and everyone was to drop what they were doing immediately, grab their MOPP gear, and head for the nearest bunker. We've trained for this contingency both in the rear and since relocating to the desert, but for some reason, Scud drills in rural North Carolina don't induce the same nausea or fear as those in Kuwait.

MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear is uncomfortable. It consists of heavy, weather-proof, charcoal-impregnated polyester jackets and trousers, as well as butyl gloves and boots. It is to be worn over your regular desert utilities and boots, to provide protection from chemical agents. It is carried in a pack on your back at all times, and must be donned fully within 10 minutes of the first warning sirens. Sounds easy enough, right?

Of course, I neglected to mention the gas mask. The gas mask is the first thing that we must put on when the alarms sound. It is to be

in place and functional within 10 seconds to prevent inhalation of a possible aerosolized agent. It is hot and sweaty and sucks the air right out of your face when cinched down tightly. It eliminates all hopes of peripheral vision. It makes even the toughest Marine claustrophobic.

It also makes the seemingly simple task of getting dressed quite difficult. Not only can you not see around you, you can't sit down either, for fear of unprotected body parts or clothing coming into contact with contaminated areas. Nothing like trying to keep your balance, blindly putting on your suit, and focusing on your breathing all at the same time when your brain is screaming at you to run like hell for the nearest bunker.

MOPP Level 4, which consists of full suit and mask, raises the ambient temperature by about 15 degrees. It restricts your work cycle to only 20 minutes per hour, in hopes of preventing heat illness and severe dehydration. It makes the 90-degree days here in Kuwait almost unbearable.

Fortunately, our first alarm Thursday lasted only 40 minutes. I can say "fortunately" now, because I'm typing this article with my mask and suit lying next to me on the deck. Those 40 minutes were the longest and scariest of my life.

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At a classified intelligence briefing with the colonel later that evening, we learned that Marines from the 1st Marine Division had breached the berm and were crossing the border as we spoke. We learned about stealth fighters and cruise missiles taking out a convoy of Iraqi Cabinet members and possibly Saddam and his sons. We also learned about the crash of a CH-46 helicopter with four Marines and eight British Royal Marines on board and the death of the first American warfighter on the ground, a Marine killed in action as his unit attempted to secure a forward position.

I had a particularly difficult time dealing with this. Knowing that while I was doing my laundry and complaining about not having a clean Port-a-John, there were Marines and soldiers fighting and dying for their country, my country. I'm not sure that I'll ever be able to accept that.

I sought out my commander, Col. Anderson, for some advice, to help me understand how to deal with what I was feeling. A former infantryman with almost 20 years in the Marine Corps, he told me simply: "You carry on. You have to."

These last two days have been the hardest of my life. Tougher than any decision I had to make as a teenager. More difficult than any test I took in medical school. I've watched people die before, knowing that even as a doctor, I couldn't help save them. But I've never been this close to the fire, never really had to face my own mortality.

### **Camp Fox, Kuwait—March 25, 2003**

I sent my first corpsman into Iraq last night. We had a Joint Task Force Enabler team of 26 communicators head north to provide satellite and radio capability for a transportation battalion. Any time a team of that size leaves the main body, they need to have medical support. It is my job to decide which corpsman goes with them.

I struggled with this decision for a few days. Should I send my most experienced, most independently capable corpsman? Should I send one of the reservists who, although rusty, has actually seen combat before? Should I send the corpsman who was a prior enlisted Marine

infantryman, even though he is the youngest and most inexperienced?

What about family considerations? Should I send one of the single guys? Should that even factor into my decision process?

I wrestled with these questions and discussed them with the guys. In the end, it turned out that the answer was simple: The youngest corpsman, all of age 23, volunteered. He was comfortable with an M-16 from his Marine Corps days and was an excellent marksman. He was in the best shape physically. He really wanted to go forward, as



he had been at Camp Fox since early January.

He and I sat down late last night, and I gave him a once-over reminder of what I thought he needed to be sharp on. We discussed basic life support and casualty care. We reviewed some fundamentals of field medicine: foot care, heat illness, snake bites, etc. I helped him pack his medical can of supplies, guiding him on what he would need the most and what he could do without. I gave him malaria medication and nerve-agent blister packs. I gave him a small supply of narcotics, in case he and his Marines ran into some real trouble.

It was tough. I didn't want to step on his toes by micromanaging, but I didn't want to send him forward unprepared. I felt like a father sending his son off to summer camp—letting him walk on his own two feet, but reminding him that help was only a tactical phone call away.

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As for me, I'm just trying to keep my chin up and my mind focused on the current mission. It's been really hard the past few days, as all I can think about is how scared those young men and women must be on the front lines. I think about our POWs constantly and pray for their safety and strength.

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Our morale has taken a beating these past few days, but our resolve is strong and our confidence remains high. Nothing has helped more than the kind words of support and encouragement from family and friends back home. I have shared the dozens of e-mails that I have received from readers of this column with all of my corpsmen and close friends. That support, coupled with my firm belief in my leaders and our mission, has helped me get through these difficult times. I will depend on it to get me through the difficult times still ahead.

### Camp Fox, Kuwait—April 22, 2003

Our days here have changed over the past week or so. As the emphasis up north has shifted from combat to peacekeeping, the rules and restrictions on base have softened somewhat.

We are no longer required to carry our gas masks or MOPP suits with us at all times. We are still required, though, to be able to get to our masks within 10 minutes. This change is a huge break for our backs and our psyches.

We can now exercise and work out as a unit. This means we can go running in small platoon-size groups (10 to 15 Marines) or play football. The general even authorized the construction of a basketball hoop, complete with a concrete half court.

Not all the changes, though, have been so well received. The hopes of AT&T phone installation, as was originally promised, have been dashed. Instead, a government morale line was connected.

Five such phone lines are spread throughout Camp Fox, providing service to the States for the 7,500-plus Marines and sailors here. The phones are open only from midnight to 6 a.m., and the time limit per call is 10 minutes. The phone line designated for our Marines is shared with two other battalions, so access is a nightmare. Although the calls are free, you pay for them with lost sleep and often unfulfilled wishes.

I made my first attempt to call my wife from the morale line early this morning. I had heard that some Marines had waited for hours on previous nights to make a call, only to get to the front of the line and be cut off by the 6 a.m. disconnect. I figured that I would avoid that by going at the most objectionable time.

So, I woke up at 4 a.m. to make the quarter-mile walk to the phone tent. I braved the rain and gusting wind to join the short line of excited troops, all with hopes similar to mine. With only four Marines in front of me, I assumed that I was set. I had a cup of coffee and a good book, so I parked it in the sand and waited my turn.

What I was unprepared for, however, was the lag time between calls. Apparently, it takes eight or nine minutes even to get a direct line through our switchboard back to the States. Once that connection is made, each Marine has 10 minutes to talk to their loved ones. I didn't need a calculator to determine that I would be cutting it close when my turn finally came.

After the first three Marines completed their calls, it was 5:18 a.m. I still figured that I was in good shape. Even if the last Marine took 30 minutes to get connected and complete his call, I would still have almost 15 minutes for my call.

Well, as luck would have it, it took him 23 minutes to get connected. He then talked for eight minutes, bringing us to 5:49 a.m. As I cradled the receiver, I openly cursed the dinosaur phone that had no

redial option, thus requiring manual redial of the 11-digit number.

At the same time, I silently prayed for a quick connection, even just for two minutes, so that I could hear my wife's voice and tell her that I loved her.

It didn't happen, and 6 a.m. came and went. I was still frantically trying to dial a number that wasn't working. I quietly gathered my belongings and trudged back down the hill, resigned to the fact that I would have to e-mail my wife and tell her to go to sleep, as the phone call would not be coming tonight.

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I have been chosen to go north next week. Coalition forces have established an Iraqi POW camp and hospital in Umm Qasr, the southernmost port city of Iraq. The hospital is desperately in need of physicians and medical supplies, so the general here at Fox asked for volunteers to temporarily fill the void. My colonel knew how badly I wanted to be involved in the humanitarian mission, so he offered up my name. I'll only be there for a short time, but I hope I can make a difference in the care being offered to the more than 6,000 Iraqi POWs. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I plan to take full advantage of it.

### Camp Fox, Kuwait—April 29, 2003

Camp is abuzz with talks of retrograde. That's the fancy military term for going home. Convoys from up north roll in daily, bringing back Marines and gear from the front lines. The daily meeting focus has shifted from communication support to plans for debarkation and personnel movement. The challenge now is finding enough seats for all the troops.

Realistically, most of us will still be here for several months. Although the combat operations have ceased and the commander-in-chief will likely soon declare the war over, the need for a Marine presence in the region will remain for some time.

The Marines are not an occupying force. They pride themselves on striking with quick and deadly precision, accomplishing the mission, and then turning things over to the Army for maintenance and long-term occupation.

While this tradition may be true for the grunts, the Marine infantry, it isn't so readily applicable to the cooks, communicators and corpsmen. Although these support-element Marines and sailors understand the reasoning behind this progression, they certainly don't like it.

Not coincidentally, in my opinion, we are starting to see some different patient presentations in the battalion aid station (BAS). We still see the standard, run-of-the-mill ankle sprains and stuffy noses, but we are also now evaluating Marines for more significant complaints.

In the past week, I have evaluated and examined Marines for

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**\$1.25 Billion Question** *continued from p. 41*  
were involved in that previous campaign.

Every bit of that combined experience is needed, given the troubling economic climate. The slump in the U.S. economy since 2000 has had an effect on fund-raising in general. In February the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* John Pulley reported that a number of colleges currently in the midst of campaigns are "tempering their campaign goals, extending the 'quiet phases' of those campaigns, and putting off completion dates." *The Chronicle* noted campaign problems at several universities, ranging from reduced campaign dollar goals to defaults on pledged gifts.

In general, says Burr Gibson, the state of the economy "has slowed down commitments, especially at the higher levels. For the larger commitments, many times they're made with appreciated stock. And when the market is down, there's obviously a hesitation to make the commitments. Everyone has been in a difficult period because of the impact of the market on the largest gifts."

Carell admits that the slump in the economy "has had some impact." But he points out that "we had our momentum under way before the economic downturn hit. We had a very compelling story, and it's had some impact. I think we had some pledges that might have been filled earlier or completed, but people are still being very generous with their pledges, and most are looking at the five-year payout and making significant gifts. People want to be part of a successful team."

When asked about managing this campaign in light of the current economy, Early responds with a story. "I remember in the last campaign, in the very beginning of it, someone stood up in one of our initial steering committee meetings and said, 'We're getting ready to go into a recession. Now is no time to do this.' This was a big business person, someone who knew where the economy was going. Bronson Ingram was our chair, a great chair of the campaign. His response was: This campaign's going to last basically 10 years—five to solicit and five to pay out. In any 10-

year period, this country's going to go through a recession or have an economically challenging time. He said, 'We've just got to keep going.' And so that's been my philosophy: You've just got to keep going."

Provost Nicholas Zeppos has a ready answer for those who question the wisdom of such an ambitious plan during an economic downturn. "I tell people, Listen, I would much rather have a great university like Vanderbilt is—thriving, growing, revealing this incredible potential—and a bit of a weak economy in the stock market, than a jumping stock market and a university that really doesn't know where it's going. I know the economy will turn around. It's very difficult to change a university." ▼

*Nashville freelance writer Paul Kingsbury, A'80, is author of books about the Grand Ole Opry and Nashville's historic Hatch Show Print poster shop. His articles have appeared in Entertainment Weekly, US, Nashville Life and other magazines.*

### **Camp Fox** *continued from page 61*

depression, anxiety, sleepwalking and bulimia. Although in each case the Marines were found to be healthy and returned to duty, the work-ups were often confrontational. On several occasions, Marines left my hooch in tears and without their weapons (for personal and command safety).

Unfortunately, the reasoning behind this is simple. Marines are smart, especially communications Marines. They know what "illnesses" it takes to get Medevac-ed and what buttons to push to raise the colonel's blood pressure. This knowledge, in turn, makes even a simple diagnosis a logistical nightmare. Oftentimes, these Marines become such a headache to the command that they are sent home just to resolve the situation. While this is certainly an exception to the norm, it leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of those Marines left behind. They are the ones who have to pick up the slack, work the extra shifts, and stand the additional duty. Understandably, this has not helped the overall morale of the battalion.

### **Jacksonville, N.C. (No Date Written)**

Home sweet home.

I arrived back in North Carolina on the afternoon of June 4, 89 days after leaving.

We flew home in style: a United Airlines 747 charter with all the trimmings. Being a company grade officer entitled me to a business-class seat, which I took full advantage of. The crew served us food every hour, and we had in-seat TVs to choose one of eight movies.

We stopped in Frankfurt, Germany, for a refueling layover and a crew change. Although it was 3 a.m. on the East Coast, I made a quick call to my wife to let her know that I was halfway home and out of harm's way. She was very excited, but needless to say, I got a friendly little lecture later that day about 3 a.m. phone calls.

We landed in Cherry Point, N.C., at 12:35 p.m. EST. As the wheels touched down, the back of the plane erupted in cheering and clapping, as the young Marines celebrated the end of their deployment. The pilot came on the intercom and proudly welcomed us back to the United States "on behalf of a grate-

ful nation." It was a sweet feeling.

We stepped off the plane into an early summer rain shower. It was so beautiful to see trees and green grass again that everyone just stood in the rain, too excited to move. As the last Marine deplaned, we gathered up our bags and loaded the buses for Camp Lejeune. Driving back to base, we passed miles of signs welcoming us and other Marines home. Signs of "Welcome Home Daddy" and "Good Job Warriors" flanked both sides of the highway, leading all the way to the front gate.

As we pulled into the battalion parking lot, the rain stopped and families began pouring out of the welcome tent to greet us. Children reunited with their parents, and some babies met their fathers for the first time. It's really something that can only be appreciated in person.

As my wife and I drove home, I thought about how lucky I was. This was my first deployment, but it was also Heather's first deployment. Not every Marine or sailor who deployed

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in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom came back to a happy environment. Many relationships don't make it through deployment. Many spouses can't handle the stress and responsibility associated with it. Many troops can't readjust to their normal pre-deployment routine after being in and around combat for several months.

With Heather (BA'98), there was never any doubt. She was so strong throughout my deployment that it surprised even me. She worked full time, took care of the house and all the animals, and maintained a strong front to keep my mind at ease. She is a remarkable woman, and I'm very lucky to have her in my life.

Although Heather and I picked up as though I'd only been gone for a few days, not everything has been so easy to resume. Much to my surprise, it's been difficult readjusting to routine things. My first few days back, I found myself reaching to check the safety of my weapon, which for the past 89 days had been literally attached to my hip 24/7. I felt a little uncomfortable without it.

Returning to work at the battalion aid station has been hard. I am finding that I have less patience for things than I did before, less

tolerance for whiners and complainers. I guess part of me is bothered by the lack of toughness in some of the non-deployed Marines, when I was so impressed with the Marines whom I treated and heard about in Kuwait and Iraq. I don't know how long some of these Marines would have lasted in the desert.

Eating all those things I missed while deployed has been a challenge, too. Despite knowing better, I've found out the hard way that you can't just load up on ice cream and dairy products when you haven't really eaten them in three months. My system is slowly returning to normal, but it hasn't been a pretty five days.

I have also noticed that I've lost more weight than I first realized. Yesterday, for the first time in three months, I put on civilian clothes, and my pants kept falling down. I left for Kuwait weighing an already lean 165 pounds, but I weighed myself this morning and was shocked to find that I had lost 11 pounds. Now I have to deal with my wife *and* my mother trying to fatten me up. Oh, well, there are worse fates to face.

Most important, despite my attempted resistance, I'm slowly finding out that this deployment has changed me mentally. I can't place a finger on what exactly has changed,

or what caused the change for that matter. I just don't feel the same.

I have found it hard to talk about the things I saw or experienced over there, even with my wife and closest family, despite the fact that I was never involved in direct combat. Maybe it is the realization of how fragile life can be, or how easily it could have been me staring down death in An Nasiriyah or Al Kut. I think the question of "Why not me?" will be one I struggle with for some time. I'm hoping that these feelings are only temporary and, as I get settled back in here, that everything will return to normal. I imagine only time will tell.

I ate dinner last night with my wife and our friend Jimmy, the Marine lieutenant injured in the fighting at An Nasiriyah. He is doing remarkably well and is expected to make a full recovery, allowing him to stay in the Marine Corps. It was great to see him, and I am looking forward to sitting down with him sometime and hearing all about his unique experiences. I just don't think that either of us is ready yet. ▼

*Jonathan Bankoff's letters first appeared in the South Bend (Ind.) Tribune.*

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ment or spiritual transformation. What was God if not perfection or power? Even more perverse, what was God if not male or American? The emptiness left me searching. I would like to say I was searching for a way to confront and begin living into the emptiness I felt inside; however, I searched for a replacement checklist, a new inventory of "dos and don'ts" to define who and what I should be.

I still longed to be the ideal, virtuous woman. I got married. Check. I got religious. Check. I started graduate school. Check. I decorated my house for every national and religious holiday. Check. I bought shoes to match every individual outfit. Check. After all, a virtuous woman has all her boxes checked off, for only then is she "far more precious than jewels" (Proverbs 31:10). Check. For the ideal woman, perfection is not just the destination; it is her way of travel.

While fulfilling the criteria of the checklist, I was "getting religious" and at the same time working toward my first master's degree in the field of counseling. During my studies I discovered a book by Murray Bodo titled *Clare: A Light in the Garden*. Neither biographical nor a spiritual meditation on the life of Saint Clare of Assisi, the story tells of Clare's relationship with Francis of Assisi.

Reading the book proved to be a transformative experience. I was not comforted by the story; I was angered. I became furious. I questioned. In the middle of my anger and questions, my idolatrous belief system and fettered spirit were exposed. Just as Clare's life was defined and understood through her relationship with a man, I realized this pattern was how I valued and understood my own life—through a male definition of perfection. In the middle of my questions and through my relationship with another woman's

story, 700 years removed, I experienced the holy. In a rush of emotion from anger to feelings of solidarity with a woman such as Clare, I questioned "destination perfection."

Clare's commitment to peace, her ability to recognize the Beloved in all creation, her understanding of the connectedness in the world, her contemplative heart, her courage to walk away from wealth and 12th-century expectations of the virtuous woman, inspired me to begin delving beneath the surface of my own reality. What or whom would I find beneath the mask of Shelli Yoder, second runner-up to Miss America? Where would my questions lead?

The path of seeking is more circular than linear. I began noticing the endless shades of green found in creation; the unique shape of each individual eye, mouth and nose; the different ways children laugh and the many ways we experience silence; my bare feet touching