



Photo by Andre Ranieri

While serving with the U.S. Marines during the Persian Gulf War, University student Andy Harris learned more about the cultural misunderstandings between the West and Middle East.

War service changes student's perspective on differing cultures

By Carrie Dennett
Emerald Reporter

Andy Harris thought he would be able to make it through the last year of his six-year commitment to the Marine Corps Reserves without incident.

Then, on Dec. 8, 1990, he found himself heading to Camp Pendleton in California for a month of intensive basic training to prepare for a tour of duty in the Persian Gulf.

Harris, a University political science major, was given 10 days notice, leaving little time to wrap up his life in Eugene.

Students in his position were given the option of taking finals early or withdrawing from school. Harris took the middle road, taking a few finals early and withdrawing from other classes he wasn't doing as well in.

Harris said his reserves training did a fair job of preparing him for duty, but it was the training at Camp Pendleton that made it clear he was going to war.

"The training was pretty intense," he said. "At that point, we knew we were headed for Saudi Arabia."

The full days of training began with a 5 a.m. wake-up and included training in demolitions, weapons, urban combat and mine detection and removal.

Knowing they were heading for the fighting brought home the realities of war and military service to many of his co-trainees, Harris said.

"I think there were a lot of scared people," he said. "Morale was pretty low."

"We had heard all about 'the mother of all battles,' the chemical weapons, the Scuds and the Republican Guard," he said. "A lot of us didn't know for sure if we were coming back."

When his unit arrived in Saudi Arabia, they immediately went to work building fortifications and setting up helicopter landing pads.

At the same time, training continued for their expected mission of taking out mines when U.S.-led forces eventually entered Kuwait.

The mission was never realized, however. "When we finally did go into Kuwait, we found almost no resistance," he said.

Harris said his unit also served as a reserve force in case of a high casualty rate — a scenario that never materialized.

Harris' unit experienced very little danger, he said. A few people in his unit were shot at, but he was nowhere near at the time.

"The only Iraqis I saw were either captured or dead," he said.

One reason his unit saw little action, Harris said, was because the allies' technology exceeded expectations as successful air strikes eliminated the need for heavy ground action.

Harris said his unit did have a scare the night that the Iraqis came across the Saudi border and took the town of Khafji.

His unit was relaxing when they got word that

the Iraqis were heading toward them, and they quickly put on chemical protective gear.

The Iraqi forces instead headed for Khafji, about seven miles away from where the unit was camped, yet Harris' unit remained on alert for much of the next two days.

"We were very close to them, and we could see them fighting in the distance," he said. "We could see the flashes from the artillery in the night sky."

Harris said his gulf experience increased his desire to leave the military and his cultural knowledge of Persian Gulf nations.

"It made me realize even more how little understanding the vast majority of people have about the rest of the world," he said.

"I think that until we learn to be more open-minded about other ways of thought, we will continue to get into these kinds of conflicts."

Harris said prior visits to Third World countries gave him a different perspective.

"I think I learned not to be so critical of other cultures," he said. "We weren't brought up with the only way of doing things."

Harris said his opinions on cultural differences go against the military's attitudes, and that many of the soldiers believed the United States was completely in the right.

"They naively felt that it was a black-and-white situation — right against wrong," he said.

Harris said the Marines do encourage soldiers to think for themselves, but they also "try to drum into our heads the military line."

He said if the U.S. military had more respect for Islamic culture, it may have projected a better image to the civilian population in the gulf region.

"Maybe more people would have realized that war is not just about statistics," he said. "It's about real people just like themselves."

Harris said he is not sure if his experience in the gulf has had a major impact on him.

"It has made me aware of the fact that I should make the most of my own life and opportunities," he said.

Harris returned home on May 1. He still had a place to live, but it was too late to register for classes, and he found he no longer had a job.

He has taken the opportunity to speak to a few classes about his experience.

"I was somewhat concerned about how I would be received," he said. "While I am a Marine, I'm not the Marine Corps."

Nonetheless, Harris said he has been received well by friends and fellow students alike.

"The people that know I was there, even the ones who were against the war, respected my decision," he said.

Oregon DAILY EMERALD

P.O. Box 3159, Eugene, Oregon 97403

The Oregon Daily Emerald is published Monday through Friday except during exam week and vacations by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

The Emerald is operated independently of the University with offices on the third floor of the Erb Memorial Union and is a member of the Associated Press.

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THE FAR SIDE

By GARY LARSON

"We can't go this way either, Simmons. ... See those lines? That's the international cartoon symbol for glass! ... He's got us good, the dirty bugger."