

Young Marines prepare for war

By Karen Brandon
Chicago Tribune

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. (KRT) — The young men, so young one wants to call them boys, are Marines, meaning they are not the type to wear their emotions on their starched-stiff, precisely rolled camouflage sleeves.

But a range of feelings is surfacing here — a degree of apprehension, a new sense of determination, even a glimmer of exhilaration — as this generation of soldiers who enlisted in peacetime, at a time when soldiers were often called peacekeepers, for the first time confronts the prospect of their nation at war.

Officers insist that it's business as usual on this vast 125,000-acre base, and for the 33,000 Marines stationed here.

No one really believes that, though, what with motorists cheering the Marines whenever they drive their tanks along Southern California freeways and the phones ringing constantly with worried mothers and fathers from across the country asking the same question: Are you going to war?

A balmy Pacific breeze in his face, Lance Cpl. Teodoro Barajas, a 21-year-old from Chicago's Southwest Side, nervously puffed a cigarette as he stood near an orderly line of 16 light armored vehicles, or LAVs in Marine shorthand. These vehicles each carry a 25-millimeter cannon, two 7.62-caliber machine guns and radio equipment and are operated by some 100 men who make up Charlie Company of the 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion.

This is a moment Barajas hadn't counted on when he signed up to join the Marines on the heels of his graduation from Farragut High

School three years ago. Of course he knew he could face war, but he never really gave it a serious thought.

"This is kind of like a rude awakening," he said. "This came up. This is my job, and my country calls."

From the beginning, Barajas said, he knew that his four-year enlistment "was all I was going to do." With three years behind him, he had begun looking forward to leaving the military, to enrolling in college, probably the University of Southern California.

But his plans changed with the Sept. 11 terrorist attack that came while he and his company were training in remote Southern California mountains.

That afternoon he returned to the three-story barracks, whose bland exterior is broken up only by a painting of Charlie Company's "Warpig" mascot, a theatrically muscular wild boar holding a dagger.

Seventeen messages were waiting for him, all from his mother.

"She just says to pray to God every day, to stay close to God," he said. His father? "He says to be brave."

He cannot answer his parents' questions about whether he is going to war, for he does not know. He asks himself other questions. "Did I do everything to be ready? Am I ready?" and the answer he gives is, "I think I am ready."

Cpl. Matthew Moore, a 22-year-old from Rockford, Ill., said his father told him the other day that he had had a premonition of war ahead and that his son, an only child whom he raised alone, would be participating in it.

Moore joined the Marines after spending a year or so working as as-

sistant manager of a restaurant. He wanted to get out of Rockford, he said. He also wanted the money to attend culinary school, to train to become a chef.

All that is in the back of his mind now. "I'm prepared to go," Moore said. "That's what I've been training for here for the past three years."

His fiancé, however, is not prepared. An aunt of hers who lived in New York City is missing and presumed dead after the Sept. 11 attack, Moore said.

"She doesn't want to see me go because she's already experienced a loss from this."

What Charlie Company's future will hold, no one can say. At present, they are training normally ahead of a scheduled deployment to the Persian Gulf in January. But by their very role in reconnaissance, responsible for gathering information on the enemy for U.S. forces to their rear, they could be on the leading edge of any combat.

"We consider ourselves the tip of the spear," explained Capt. Robert Rice, the 30-year-old company commander from Seattle who also faces the prospect of his first combat experience.

Rice, whose wife is also a Marine and is soon to be deployed to Egypt for a previously scheduled mission, said the training is the same, but he acknowledged that something else has changed.

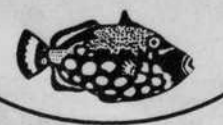
Looking over the recruits and thinking of the many times he had struggled to keep his young Marines motivated, he said, "This whole context of being on the brink of war does give a different understanding to these recruits of just why they are here."

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