

# Oneida Dispatch

## Marines in Iraq talk to middle schoolers

By: LEAH McDONALD  
03/20/2008

WAMPSVILLE - Halfway around the world and hours into the future, Marines stationed in Al Asad, Iraq took time out of their day to meet with seventh graders from Otto Shortell Middle School so the students could learn more about the men and women whose job it is to protect them from threats abroad.

"I really like how we get to see these guys from Iraq and we just get to talk to them," said Kaleigh Nish, 13. "And it's cool, because they're our heroes, so it's good and I'm really thankful for them doing this for us."

"I thought it was really cool we got to talk to them when they're halfway around the world," added Meghan Blair, 12.

Several Marines from the 314 Lima Company, 2nd Platoon spent an hour Wednesday morning answering questions as varied from "What's your favorite sport?" to "Who inspired you to sign up for service?"

Several of the men said family members were their main influences in joining the military, from grandfathers who fought in World War II to fathers who served in Vietnam. Some credited teachers who had served as influences for joining and even the memory of "G.I. Joe" from childhood. Considerations such as benefits and health care were also facets of the soldiers' decision.

"This is my family now," said Lance Cpl. Luke McDonell.

He and his company explained how Iraq is different than the United States and New York, specifically, in that it's much flatter and almost all desert - there's little to no farmland, something many of them who came from southern and western states lamented.

For the most part, however, people are polite over there, they said, even if they don't like the soldiers, and the majority of the population is appreciative of what the military is doing to protect them.

They also like to give different things to the children, who love "anything American," McDonell said. Candy, soccer balls, pens and pencils tend to be popular gifts the soldiers give out. Mayjon Ghrrayeb, 12, asked the soldiers if they had to learn Arabic before going to Iraq. "I had to learn Arabic before I went to Jordan, and I was just wondering if they had to learn it to

speak to the children and other people there," she said, explaining how her mother and father have been teaching her the language.

The Marines said they've been working on learning the language during their stay and that they're always picking up something new, even after being in service in Iraq for a handful of years.

They demonstrated their knowledge when she thanked them with the Arabic "shukran" by responding in turn with "afwan," or "you're welcome."

While in Iraq, the soldiers said they still celebrate the bigger holidays like Christmas and Hanukkah, but smaller celebrations, such as the recent St. Patrick's Day or Halloween, are usually passed over. And while they do get a holiday dinner from the company, most of them miss a nice, homemade meal.

"You learn to appreciate what you have back home," McDonell said. More than that, he said, you realize how "cool" it is here in the states, where people have the freedom to choose what they want to do.

"Be happy," he said. "Be proud you're from the U.S."

The teleconference with the Marines in Al Asad is the second one history teacher Matt Schneider has had in conjunction with a unit he teaches on Iraq.

"It's unfortunate that they're still over there, but I thought I'd take advantage of it," he said. "It offers the kids a chance to meet somebody over there."

He has students compare the types of uniforms, weapons and food soldiers use now to the ones used in the Revolutionary War, which his kids also study. Having them compare and contrast between the two gives the students a model to work from and something concrete to build their understanding on.

The conference was facilitated by the help of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a privately-funded organization that connects soldiers abroad with their families and schools, free of charge. The Foundation is currently facing the possibility of having to shut down its operations because of lack of funding, which it receives only through donations.

The Foundation's help, however, helped make the Marines of the Lima Co.'s day. "Being able to talk to kids back home reminds me of why we're over here fighting," McDonell said. "You kids made our day."