

## Marines talk to their college contemporaries

From Iraq. A frank discussion on military life, the war, the need for Easy Mac.

Wednesday, September 27, 2006

By MICHELLE PITTMAN

The Express-Times

BETHLEHEM | A dozen Marines stationed in Al Asad, Iraq, flirted with the female Lehigh University students Tuesday in the audience of Whitaker Lab.

The American soldiers goofed off for the camera, but turned serious when they discussed the war effort.

"I really don't think we've bonded with the Iraq community," one said. "But we have good guys here. We deal with Iraqis on a daily basis. They're becoming friendlier. They're more likely to identify insurgents and weapon caches."

"They have a different lifestyle. They don't know about Xbox," another soldier pointed out. "We have to have a certain level of tolerance. When's the last time you had to drive completely around a city because a million people had gone there to pray? I think they see that we're trying to respect them."

Lehigh University students and staff had the rare opportunity to talk with the soldiers in Iraq as part of a live videoconference. For more than an hour, the Marines fielded previously submitted questions about day-to-day life in Iraq and their feelings about the war.

Economics professor Frank Gunter spent 13 months in Baghdad as a military economic consultant. The Marine reservist returned to the States in May.

"The thing that surprises me is how much these men are just like the students I have here," he said. "They're the same age. They have the same interests and goals."

The soldiers did not give their first names. They hail from New Jersey, Wisconsin, Florida, New York, Washington, South Carolina and Alabama.

When asked if they felt the media fairly portrays the war in Iraq, the Marines gave a resounding "no," but they pointed out that much of the good work they do is off-limits to media outlets.

"We can't tell them everything we're doing," one corporal said. "We can't tell you what we do day to day because of security. But every day you see small differences. There are buses running in the cities. You see people walking to work. There's more normal activity. But I guess bad news, deaths and bombs, sells more."

The soldiers said military life has its ups and downs. They get to meet celebrities and enjoy some major monetary bonuses, and they never have to worry about what to wear. But they also live with the threat of violence and poor communication with friends and family.

"So you have a paper due in a few days. So what? At least you're not getting shot at," one said. "You have to learn how to deal with that stress or you end up taking it home with you. Violence just becomes part of your day, like waking up and hopping in the shower."



Lehigh Students video Conference with Marines on the Front Lines in Iraq

"I feel safer here than I do in Camden or Center City Philadelphia," another corporal said. "I have two weapons with me all the time here, and I know that the guy next to me and the guy behind me is here for the same reason -- to make this a better place, to improve a bad situation."

"The hardest thing to get used to is the heat. It gets up to 140 degrees," said a lance corporal from Middletown, N.J. "I don't know that you can get used to it. There's no way to describe it. We're in full uniforms all the time. There are no shorts, T-shirts or air conditioning. Then at night it drops down to 70 degrees and you'd think we were freezing. Everyone's wearing gloves and hats and hoodies."

Graduate student Kate Meinan asked the Marines when they thought they'd be coming home and when American troops might get pulled from the Middle East. The answer she got was that they'd be there while she was collecting Social Security.

"There's not going to be a time frame, and I think they've made peace with that, and they've moved on from it, maybe more than a lot of people here have," she said.

The Marines said they've seen enough yellow ribbon magnets and they'd like people to step up their efforts in supporting the troops.

"Send Easy Mac," they said. "Send care packages or get a pen pal. Write letters. Ninety-nine percent of those people with magnets on their cars haven't done anything for the troops. They just gave \$2 to some guy. We don't like being here anymore than you like us being here. Send packages and calling cards. Tell us what you have to say. Show us that you care."

Reporter Michelle Pittman can be reached at 610-258-7171 or by e-mail at [mpittman@express-times.com](mailto:mpittman@express-times.com).