

Camp Pendleton regiment honors 100 members killed in Iraq

by Alex Roth

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. - It took roughly 20 minutes to read the names of the 100 service members from the 5th Regimental Combat Team who died in Iraq the past year. A Marine called out each name in a somber voice, followed each time by the single chime of a giant bell.

SALUTE - K'Ann Hines, of Ventura and the mother of U. S. Marine Corps Lance Corporal Joshua Michael Hines, one of the 101 Marines, Navy and Army service members attached to Marine Corps Regimental Combat Team 5 based at Camp Pendleton killed between February 2006 and January 2007 in support of the war in IRAQ weeps as she kisses his dog tags after the conclusion of the memorial service honoring the fallen. Photo by Howard Lipin.

SALUTE - With a giant American flag as a backdrop, U.S. Marines salute their fallen comrades who died in Iraq this past year. Photo by Howard Lipin. Thursday's memorial service for fallen members of the "Fighting Fifth" was, by Camp Pendleton standards, a fairly large affair. The base usually conducts such services for a battalion rather than an entire combat regiment.

But the commanding officer of the 5th Marines, Col. Larry Nicholson - wounded during a rocket attack in Iraq - wanted to do something a bit bigger, not just for the sake of the fallen but for their loved ones, too.

And so, on an asphalt parade deck the size of a schoolyard playground, several dozen Marines in desert camouflage stood at attention under a cloudless sky, listening to the names of the dead. Under a canopy sat a dozen or so grieving families.

The fallen were from 13 battalions attached to the regiment at one time or another in the past 12 months. They came from large cities such as San Diego, San Antonio and Cincinnati and from small towns in Alabama, Louisiana, Florida and Maryland. Most were Marines, but a few were soldiers and sailors.

As is Marine tradition during such services, each service member's dog tag hung from the pistol grip of a ceremonial rifle. After a Scripture reading, Nicholson addressed the crowd of about 200, explaining that the dead were "part of a warrior culture that few who haven't been in combat can understand."

At the age of 50, with 27 years of military service, Nicholson told the crowd he finds it "numbing" every time a Marine is killed.

"It's like losing a son," he said.

"The fact of the matter is Iraq is a better place" because of the efforts of the 5th Marines, he continued, adding that the U.S. military has done much "to improve the lives of the people of this ancient and troubled land."

The service concluded with another tradition: a three-volley rifle salute and the playing of taps.

Among those who attended were the parents of Lance Cpl. Richard Buerstetta, 20, of Franklin, Tenn., who was killed by an improvised explosive device on Oct. 23, 2006.

Paul Buerstetta, 52, a health care consultant, wept quietly as he described his frustrations with the American public, which he believes has largely tuned out the war.

"I see people laughing and having a good time, and I don't think they understand there's people dying for them," he said.

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