

MARINES HELPING MARINES THE BETHESDA NAVAL HOSPITAL PROJECT

By: Ron Short – Department of Maryland

In the spring of 2003 the United States entered Iraq with the intention of toppling the dictatorial/tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein. All of America sat glued to their TV sets, as the assault unfolded. Many of us felt that twinge of guilt that we weren't there. All of us wondered what we could do to support the troops, especially the Marines.

Shortly after the war began, the Commandant of the Department of Maryland, Marine Corps League received an e-mail from LtCol. Wayne Morris, USMC (Retired) telling of a Marine from the Jacksonville area who had been wounded in Iraq and was now in Bethesda Naval Hospital. LtCol. Morris asked if there were any Marine Corps League members in the area who could look in on this Marine and let him know that we were there for him. It immediately became clear exactly what we could do to support our Marines.

Within twenty-four hours, the Department of Maryland Commandant, Chaplain, a Detachment Commandant and two uniformed Marines from 4th Combat Engineer Battalion in Baltimore were at Bethesda Naval Hospital, meeting the Marine Corps Liaison Officer and SNCOIC. They came with "goody bags" to be distributed to the wounded Marines and they were mentally prepared for the worst.

The Liaison office welcomed them with open arms and expressed their gratitude for the support. There were six wounded Marines on the ward that day, including a Sergeant and a Corporal who had been in an armored personnel carrier and were both hit by the same RPG round.

The Leaguers left the hospital that day with many mixed emotions; sad at seeing our young Marines with such severe injuries, but proud of their attitudes, esprit de corps and intestinal fortitude. With that visit, an idea became a commitment and a program was born that fulfils all that the Marines Corps League is about.

After the invasion was over, the Marines stepped back and let the Army take over most of the action on the ground. The number of wounded Marines dwindled to a trickle. In November 2003, it became evident that the Marines were going to take on a greater roll in the spring of 2004. At that time, the Department of Maryland decided to formalize a plan and policy for organized weekly visitations to Bethesda in support of the injured and wounded Marines being cared for there.

What began as an effort to provide emotional support to these wounded Marines quickly expanded into a need to provide material support in the form of needed health and comfort items. The injured Marines arrive at the hospital with no more than the hospital gowns on their backs. While the hospital provides the basic toilet items, very often more is needed. Those with wounds to the face or those without the use of both hands needed electric razors. Other items, such as tear-away sweat pants were needed for those with leg injuries.

The current Department Commandant Ron Short assigned the Department Chaplain with the task of developing a plan and written policy that would establish guidelines acceptable to the Naval Hospital Command as well as the Marine Corps Liaison Office. The group met with the Liaison Office and the program was formalized into what is now the “Marines Helping Marines” program.

The formal program was established “to provide extensive support for injured Marine Corps personnel at the National Naval Medical Center from the State of Maryland Marine Corps League Detachments.”

The guiding policy is: “the Department of Maryland Marine Corps League will direct Marine Corps League Detachments in their efforts to support injured Marine Corps Personnel located at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. The scope of support will encompass; financial, on site visits, off site day trips to include family outings, dinners, short trips in support of the individual Marines’ needs and professional sporting events as tickets and opportunities present themselves.”

Since April of this year, we have seen an average of 18 Marines on the wards at any given time, 7 Marines at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (for prosthesis support) 7 Marines in ICU and 36 in Out-Patient. In early August, the League began supporting those Marines at Walter Reed as there was an apparent need there also.

Currently, in addition to personal comfort items, the League provides; financial assistance to the families who are visiting their Marines (taxi vouchers, restaurant vouchers, phone cards and limited housing funding), outings to Baltimore Orioles baseball games for “outpatient” Marines (they are recognized by the stadium PA announcer), C-D Players, C-D’s, DVD movies, combination television sets/DVD players for the rooms (due to a shortage of TV’s in the hospital), C-D players for the airplanes bringing the wounded Marines from Germany, clothing items, rolling duffle bags for Marines leaving Bethesda Hospital, airline tickets and travel money to wounded Marines for emergency leave and weekly pizza parties on the ward for hospital staff and visiting families.

Due to the fact that Bethesda Naval Hospital is located in Maryland, the Department of Maryland has been tasked by the National Commandant to represent the National Marine Corps League in this major undertaking. A power point presentation was given at National Convention in Dallas in August, outlining the program and soliciting support and involvement from all the Marine Corps League Departments and Detachments throughout the country.

For the past year and a half, the funding for this program has come from the members of the League and Auxiliary in the Department of Maryland, along with a generous donation from the New England Division. Clearly, the Marines who are being served by the program are from homes all over the country. Perhaps some from your own hometown.

How can you get involved? Donations in support of the “Marines Helping Marines” program can be sent to:

**Marines Helping Marines
c/o Department of Maryland
P. O. Box 141
Westminster, MD 21158**

Be sure to indicate “Marines Helping Marines” on the “memo” line of your check.

Corporate and individual donations can also be made through the Marine Corps League Foundation, a 501(c) 3 organization. Those donations can be sent to:

**Marine Corps League Foundation
c/o Marine Corps League National Headquarters
P. O. Box 3060
Merrifield, VA.**

Again, please be sure to designate “Marines Helping Marines” on the “memo” line of your check. All donations will be gratefully acknowledged.

You can be assured that your donation will be used for the various activities designed to support hospitalized Marines during their treatment and recuperation period at Bethesda Naval Hospital and Walter Reed Army Hospital.

You can make a difference in the lives of Marines who have volunteered to go in harms way to support and defend America.

**For more information about the program please visit the website at:
www.DeptofMDMCL.org**