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A NATION AT WAR: IN THE FIELD | 24th MARINE EXPEDITIONARY UNIT; Troops Heading Home Are Redirected to the Gulf

By CHARLIE LeDUFF

CAMP PATRIOT, Kuwait, March 31— Fresh-faced and itching for the fight, soldiers of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit made a beach landing here early this morning as part of the 100,000 additional troops being sent by the Pentagon.

Though American officials maintain there has been no change in deployment plans in the face of stiff Iraqi resistance and guerrilla attacks on supply lines, these marines were scheduled to go home after a six-month tour abroad when the word came down five days ago.

The men said that while their mothers, wives and girlfriends wept at the news, they were elated.

"We were on the way home when we got word to turn around," said Capt. Dan McSweeney, who calls the Upper West Side of Manhattan home. "We're happy about it. This is what we're trained to do. We thought we were being left out."

The 2,300-member amphibious unit specializes in house-to-house combat, as well as peacekeeping and aid missions. The unit recently did a peacekeeping stint in Kosovo and joint maneuvers in Djibouti.

Its equipment includes Harrier jets, Cobra attack helicopters and three ships. The unit is trained to operate for at least two weeks without resupply.

Most of the marines who arrived this morning via landing craft or by helicopter were children when the first Persian Gulf war was fought in 1991 and say they remember the images from television. They promised to finish the job this time.

The marines said they needed no other motivation than Sept. 11 to fight this battle. Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, they said, were nothing more than loose strings in a world of disorder.

"People back home should stop protesting and start supporting this effort," said Sgt. Jason Franco, 26. "Did everybody forget the twin towers already? I think there's Al Qaeda in there, so

here we go."

There is a New York contingent here. The commanding officer, Col. Richard Mills, is from Huntington, Long Island. Captain McSweeney is from Manhattan and Sergeant Franco is from Astoria, Queens. The unit is carrying the banner of the Port Authority Police Department, which lost 38 officers in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11.

These young marines have every intention of coming home. They have already made plans. A perch fry on the sands of Lake Michigan. A motorcycle ride through the desert of Arizona. A big beer party in Oklahoma. A slice of Koronet Pizza in New York. Marry a pretty girl.

"Me and every guy out here's coming home," said Pvt. Wally Washlow, 21, of Edison, Ill. "But before all that, we're going to prove that what we're doing is worth doing,"

The unit has not received specific orders, but according to reports from the BBC, about 5,000 reinforcements are being sent to the south central town of Nasiriya, where fighting has been particularly intense.

It matters little what the orders are, said Cpl. Terry Beadles, 22, of Phoenix. His unit will fulfill them, he has no doubt, though he did admit to a little nervousness, never having experienced combat. A picture of his girlfriend is taped to the dashboard of his assault vehicle. He scribbled out a message to be sent to her. It reads:

Katie,

I love & miss you. I'll be home soon. Be safe and don't worry.

Love, Terry