

## Back from Iraq, safe and sound

By Elizabeth W. Sobel

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Janene Gentile of Miller Place beams with the pride reflected on her shirt — which reads, "The Few, the Proud, Marine Moms" — as her son, Lance Corporal Robert Shilling, and 30 other Marines are welcomed home by the North Shore Youth Council. Legislator Dan Losquadro, left, and other residents who helped supply the Marines were also there. (Photo by Elizabeth W. Sobel)

Welcome Home signs plastered the outside walls and front door of North Shore Youth Council (NSYC) headquarters at the Joseph A. Edgar Elementary School Monday afternoon to greet 30 United States Marines of the Sixth Communication Battalion sent home from Iraq just one month ago. The venue may seem odd, but it's not. The children who attend the programs there have sent over 2,000 pounds of supplies to fighting men and women stationed in the Middle East, according to the North Shore Youth Council's executive director, Janene Gentile. The effort is appreciated.

"We were all very happy to receive the supplies," said Lance Corporal Raymond Wong, who like the others just completed a tour of duty in Fallujah and is stationed in Amityville. Wong recently started taking classes at Stony Brook University again to complete a degree in electrical engineering. "The packages sent by the kids really boosted the morale. I distributed a lot of the supplies to some of the other battalions who didn't receive anything. They appreciated it as much as I did."

Sergeant Omar Saei was also thankful for the children's efforts and the work of all the community organizations that helped collect and send supplies and hosted the welcome home party, even presenting a certificate of appreciation to Gentile and the youth council for their "mobilization efforts." The Council of Dedicated Merchants, the Mercury Detachment of the Marine Corps League, Rocky Point Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6249, the Marine Key Volunteers, area school districts and more all participated in the effort. McCarrick's Dairy in Rocky Point provided the food for the party.

It was an afternoon where family members were able to finally breathe a sigh of relief for the safe return of their son or daughter, children got to mingle with men in uniform, some for the first time, and the Marines got to pal around with pizza and sandwiches in hand, finally able to talk about their experiences of coming home. All were upbeat, and none complained about their experiences in Iraq. Lance Corporal Angela Mannino of East Islip said her tour of duty made her a better person. "We were there to get a job done, and we are getting it done," Mannino explained. "It gives all of us gratification. When we came home, though, we all started to look at this country like we never have before."

Corporal Denise Natal said it has taken the whole month to get back into the swing of things, like being able to party in New York City. Lance Corporal Joyce Lai of Queens said there were positive things about being in Iraq, like the sunsets — which she claimed are some of the most beautiful in the world. She also said that she was generally not afraid of fighting in Iraq, even though the threat of death was very real. "I don't think about an hour from now or even five minutes from now, or what can happen in that time," Lai said. "I just think about the job now."

Wong said he had a little more difficulty adjusting to home — and he really enjoyed serving in Iraq. "When I came back it struck me that everyone was walking around with normal lives," Wong said. "And I had problems with nerves every time I would stop at a red light. In Fallujah, that is where the most danger is. But I've adjusted now, and will probably be called back. I have four years on my contract left and Marines are being rotated every six months. The government needs bodies, too." Bill Shilling of Miller Place, Gentile's husband, spoke about the relief of having their son, Robert, home.

"You know, no one is aware of the stress that it puts on a family to have your child at war," Shilling said. "We can finally breathe. Robert went on over 20 convoys because he was bored being at the base. The only communication we had was through Marine blogs. But Robert often had a friend send one to us through Robert, so we wouldn't know that he was on a convoy. He didn't want us to worry." The event was also very exciting for the children. Nine-year-old Emily Oeffner and 10-year-old Kian Gilardi, both of Rocky Point, said they had never seen a real Marine before.

"It's cool and a little weird," Gilardi said.

World War II veteran John Gorley, a Mercury Marine, gave words of advice to the young Marines and briefly talked about his own experiences as a young man at war. "I enjoyed every minute of it," Gorley said. "But now I want you to enjoy your stay home." County Legislator Dan Losquadro (R-Shoreham) gave the fighters a great big thank you and some historic words of wisdom.

"Like the words of Thomas Jefferson say, 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance,'" Losquadro said. "Our soldiers are eternally vigilant for us."