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Stories of the proud Woman runs Web site on Marines

Web publisher moved by dead Marines' stories

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Marines killed in action have found a place of honor on a page created on the Internet by a local woman to tell stories of the extraordinary lives of ordinary members of the Corps.

Meriwether Ball of Fitchburg started CorpsStories.com last Memorial Day as a way of publishing stories of inspiring retired or active-duty Marines. A former Navy 3rd Class petty officer with a designation of journalist, she served with a public affairs unit based in Newport, R.I. When she left the service because of a family crisis, she continued interviewing Marines as part of her duties as a correspondent with several local newspapers.

Earlier this month, when the fighting began in Iraq, her project took a new turn. Watching some of the daily 24-hour coverage of the war, she felt deep sorrow as more and more Marines were killed. Not wanting their sacrifice to be forgotten, she created a news section in CorpsStories.com.

"When I first started hearing about the casualties, I felt immense sadness, but I also felt I had to get my emotions under control and somehow honor them," she said.

Ms. Ball said it was almost prophetic that she chose Memorial Day to start CorpsStories.com, because an important part of the Web site is now dedicated to honoring Marines killed in the war.

RESPONSES

"It's the part of it I've been getting the most responses from generals, colonels, majors," she said.

The responses have all been positive.

Ms. Ball said the reception from senior Marine officers is no surprise to her.

"It is horrible for us as civilians to know that these young men are dying, but it is a greater horror for these officers to hold a dying Marine in their arms knowing that they sent him into harm's way," she said.

Ms. Ball said CorpsStories.com was created when she found that while researching and writing news stories, she met many people whose life stories were interesting but did not fit into what would be considered news. She decided to set up a Web page to tell the stories.

Her knowledge only went so far, but when she got stuck she searched the Internet for help and found it with Zubeco, a Web-page design company owned by Joseph Zube. Mr. Zube, an Ohio resident, is what she refers to as an inactive Marine.

"I was told there are no former Marines,' she said.

Ms. Ball said he charged her only \$50 for the work because he appreciated what she was doing.

MORE TIME

CorpsStories.com was taking up about two hours per day of her time, but it has been more since the war began. Not only does she spend time looking up stories about the Marines killed in the fighting, but she interviews people such as Sally Davis of Templeton, whose son, Matthew, is with the Marines in Iraq.

Since the war began, Mrs. Davis has been visible around her hometown passing out yellow ribbons and planning a rally for the troops. Ms. Ball met Mrs. Davis before Christmas in Toys "R" Us. Ms. Ball was wearing a Marine Devil Dog coat given her by her former editor, Barney Cummings of the Athol Daily News. Mrs. Davis struck up a conversation with her and they talked about doing a story.

"I didn't hear from her for a while and then she called up and said she was ready to do a story,' she said.

HOME OFFICE

Ms. Ball works out of a tiny office in her home. All around her are photographs of Marines, including a photograph of the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima autographed by photographer Joe Rosenthal. Marines also share space on her refrigerator with photographs of her son.

The stories of CorpsStories.com are of ordinary people whose dedication to their country took them from cities and towns in America into the challenging and rigid world of the United States Marine Corps.

The stories are of Marines such as Harvey Kietel, who won fame as an actor but is most proud of his service in the Marines, or Thomas Nerny, a retired Marine who retired recently from the New York Police Department, where he served as a hostage negotiator and detective.

There are also stories about non-Marines such as Army Lt. Col. John M. Otto, commander of the Devens Reserve Forces Training Area, who works with the Marines based there and has trained at the Marine officer training center in Quantico, Va.

On Thursday, Ms. Ball spent part of the morning interviewing Mrs. Davis. The stories are all posted on CorpsStories.com as she completes them. The site is free and free of advertising, a gift to a branch of the service she has admired since she was a child.

"I come from a Marine family and was particularly influenced by an aunt and uncle,' she said.

FIGHTER PILOT

Her uncle David Eden of San Diego was a Marine fighter pilot in the 1950s who served in the Carter administration and later as a high-level manager for General Motors. She grew up with his tales of the Marine Corps and the code of ethics he learned as a Marine. He helped her through a divorce with daily telephone calls encouraging and challenging her about what she planned to do with the rest of her life.

Mr. Eden's wife, Betty, encouraged her to follow her heart. It was heeding that advice, she said, that led her to creating a Web page to honor Marines.

But the main focus on the page at present is the Marines killed in the war. When the fighting began, the Marines were among the first to fight and the first to die. The sorrow Ms. Ball felt in reading about the deaths made her want to know more about their lives.

As the names of the dead were posted on the Fox News Web site and Defenselink.com, she searched for stories about them, especially stories from newspapers near the Marines who have died.

"I want people to know these Marines,' Ms. Ball said. "One crossed Mexico from Central America to get to America' when he was a teenager.

MOVING STORY

She said she was deeply moved by the story of Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez.

According to a story in the Los Angeles Times, Lance Cpl. Gutierrez, a rifleman in the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, was killed in battle near the southern Iraqi city of Umm Qasr a week ago. His story reflects the melting pot nature of the Marine Corps, where people of many backgrounds come together to become Marines.

When he was 16, Lance Cpl. Gutierrez traveled from his home in Guatemala across Mexico to get to the United States. There he found a home, learned English and dreamed of someday being an architect. At age 22, he gave his life fighting for his adopted country.

Ms. Ball said that, like every Marine, Lance Cpl. Gutierrez knew the dangers of his job.

"It is a loss, but from the day they go to boot camp, they know the risk,' she said.

Quoting another Marine, she said they believe in what they are doing and are proud of who they are.

"He said, "If I die, I'm going to die with honor. I'm going to die an American Marine," she said.

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