

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

## Marine returns home after tour in Iraq



Marine Cpl. Joshua Harris recently returned home after a seven-month tour of duty in Iraq. Harris, of Dyers Store, is shown above with a banner created to welcome him back.

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By PAUL COLLINS - Bulletin Staff Writer

Marine Cpl. Joshua Harris is modest about his military service.

So the Patriot Guard Riders made sure everyone knows about it.

On Saturday, members of a group of patriotic motorcyclists called Patriot Guard Riders (PGR) rode in procession to a church where they honored and thanked Harris for his service.

In an interview Friday, rather than making himself sound like a hero, Harris said: "I'm just going to show up and thank them (PGR) for what they've

done." He added, "When I get out (of the Marines), I want to be part of the group."

Joshua's mother, Susie Harris, said the ride by Patriot Guard Riders was scheduled to begin Saturday morning at Sheetz in Ridgeway, proceed on U.S. 220 to Mica Road and end at New Life Community Church at 415 Micah Road.

Most PGR members are veterans, including Harris' husband, who has taken part in a number of PGR rides, she said.

The Harrises said they think it's wonderful that PGR honors or memorializes military personnel who put their lives on the line for this country.

Harris, 20, is visiting his parents in the Dyers Store area for about three weeks after serving about 7 1/2 months in Iraq.

He doesn't blow his horn about his service in Iraq or the potential dangers he faced, according to his father, Mike Harris. In fact, Mike and Susie Harris were not aware of all the dangers, said Mike Harris. "When my son decided to join the Marine Corps, it was a very stressful time for me," said Mike, who served in the Navy in the late 1970s, including duty in Sardinia, Italy.

Since Joshua has been visiting with his parents, he has opened up a bit about some of his experiences and dangers he was in, his dad said.

"I can't thank the Lord enough," Mike Harris said of his son's safe return. "It's been a burden lifted off me."

Mike Harris said Joshua was stationed at Al Asad Air Base, northwest of Ramadi and Baghdad. Sometimes at night his son heard enemy mortar fire, and on one occasion a nearby mosque was destroyed.

Joshua admitted that "mortar fire was coming" sometimes as his unit slept. "It would wake you up. It was shaking," he said. But "I never felt I was in that much danger. I trusted all the guys I was with. It wasn't too scary."

Mike Harris said that Joshua told him that sometimes his unit was shot at when it was on patrol. Joshua said that his main job was as a mechanic, repairing Humvees that had broken down, had other mechanical problems or had been shelled. Humvee is the U.S. military's all-purpose, modern-day jeep. But "when they needed us real bad out there," he would go with a group of about 35 personnel in six or seven Humvees to make sure insurgents might not be approaching the base with weapons. First, aircraft would fly overhead, and then Humvees would patrol on the ground. They looked for such things as rocket-propelled grenade launchers, improvised explosive devices (IED), other weapons caches or people using or preparing those weapons sources.

Joshua said that no Humvee he was riding ever hit an IED, but some Humvees in his group did, though no one was injured.

Whenever Joshua and a group would go out on a patrol, he said, he would pray that "God would keep us safe. None of us ever got hurt."

Joshua and the former Brittany Shelton of Horsepasture were married about three months before Joshua was deployed to Iraq. She said Friday that she didn't worry as much about Joshua's safety in Iraq on the occasions when she got to communicate with him frequently on the phone or by Internet. However, she worried constantly when he was on patrol and she didn't hear from him for several days, she said.

Brittany also faced the loneliness of being away from Joshua, she said, noting she has greatly enjoyed his return to the United States. "I wake up and he's right there," she said. His parents also are delighted. He is visiting them from Oct. 7 until Oct. 25, when he will return to Cherry Point, N.C.

Joshua was home-schooled, studied general studies at Patrick Henry Community College for a year, earned a black belt in karate, and was a champion motorcross (dirt bike) racer before he enlisted in the Marines, his father said.

Joshua said he enlisted in August 2006 for several reasons, including his patriotism and desire to give something back to his country. "I felt like to fight for what I believe is right," he said. Why did he choose the Marine Corps? "I always thought they were the baddest. My grandfather was a Marine (Wayne Conner of Collinsville, his mother's stepfather)," Joshua said.

Joshua said that when he returns to Cherry Point, where he is assigned to Marine Wing Support Squadron 274, he does not know if he will be redeployed. If he is, he thinks it will be to Afghanistan. Marine deployments are normally for seven to eight months, but they can be increased. His four-year term of enlistment in the Marines is scheduled end in August 2010, but after that he has four years of Reservist status, in which he could be called up to active duty, he said.

Whenever his active duty ends with the Marines, he would like to become a law enforcement officer locally or work as a welder for his father, who has a machine shop, Absolute Machine Enterprises in the Dyers Store community.

Joshua's father said he thinks Joshua's military service has helped him, increasing his maturity, his ability to prioritize, his responsibility and increasing the care he has in relationships. Joshua's father noted that Joshua has received a number of awards during his military service, including a meritorious advancement the day he graduated from boot camp and a leadership award from his peers.