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## Camp Pendleton Marines win highest Navy honor

By: DARRIN MORTENSON - Staff Writer

CAMP PENDLETON ---- Tens of thousands of Camp Pendleton Marines who are preparing to return to Iraq next spring got a big morale boost Thursday when Navy Secretary Gordon England bestowed the Presidential Unit Citation on the I Marine Expeditionary Force for the troops' recent deeds during the invasion of Iraq.

 **The Presidential Unit Citation** ---- the highest Navy unit award and equivalent of a Navy Cross given to an individual for valor ---- was one of only 40 such awards ever given to a military unit. It was the first one awarded to the U.S. Marine Corps since Camp Pendleton's 1st Marine Division received it in 1968 for valor during the Vietnam conflict.

England awarded the citation to I Marine Expeditionary Force commander Lt. Gen. James Conway at a simple ceremony on an athletic field where about 1,500 veterans of the invasion stood tall for the honor.

The award, which coincided with the celebration of the Marine Corps' 228th birthday, comes as 40,000 Marines from the expeditionary force begin preparing to return to Iraq next spring to help fight the growing anti-American insurgency there.



After draping the citation ribbon on the unit's flag, England thanked the Marines for continuing the "unrelenting fight against world terrorism" and read a message from President Bush.

"For 228 years, members of the Marine Corps have sacrificed in defense of freedom," England said, reciting the commander in chief. "In Iraq, you continued that tradition, demonstrating courage in the face of danger. Your heroic actions freed millions from tyranny and furthered the cause of liberty. Our nation is grateful for your service."

### Thirty-three days of combat

On March 21, after a three-month buildup in the Kuwaiti desert, the 69,000 Marines and sailors and 20,000 British troops under the command of the I Marine Expeditionary Force ---- or "One MEF" ---- rolled over the border into Iraq.



The force, which included 45,000 Southern California-based troops attacking from air, land and sea, destroyed or dispersed nine Iraq army divisions on the 800-kilometer course to Baghdad. They fought through ambushes and guerrilla attacks from all sides along the way.

After a final assault on Baghdad from April 4 through 6, the Marines crossed the Diyala River into the capital and helped secure key parts of the city as the Iraqi regime crumbled.

For nearly two weeks snipers, ambushes and suicide bombers attacked them as they patrolled the city for guerrillas and helped secure arms caches, aid hospitals and provide security. Some of them also bounded north to help Army soldiers take Tikrit ---- the hometown of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

On April 24, when the Army's 4th Infantry Division took control of Baghdad, the I Marine Expeditionary Force pulled back to occupy several provinces in southern and central Iraq.

While occupying southern Iraq, the Marines helped restore order and basic services until they turned the last five provinces under their control to a Polish-led International Division in early September and returned home.

The last units of the I Marine Expeditionary Force returned to Camp Pendleton and their other home bases in October.

By the time their combat operations were over, 58 Marines from the expeditionary force had been killed in combat, and 27 died in accidents or from other causes.

England said receiving the Presidential Unit Citation will immortalize their deeds and sacrifices.

### **Force soon to return**

While the invasion was a traditional mission for Marines, Marine commandant Gen. Michael Hagee said Thursday that commanders and Marines will train and arm themselves for a less conventional mission ---- the occupation and growing guerrilla war in Iraq.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced last week that 40,000 Marines and sailors of I Marine Expeditionary Force will begin deploying to Iraq to take over for the Army's 82nd Airborne Division as early as February or March.

The first wave of 20,000 is scheduled to spend a year deployed, including a month of leave and seven months on the ground in Iraq. The second wave of 20,000 is set to replace the first.

Hagee, who attended the award ceremony and Marine Corps birthday celebration Thursday, said the mission would not stump the Marines.



"We're prepared to do anything," Hagee said. "This is one of the most important things this country is doing right now. And we are prepared to play our part in this great effort over there."

Hagee said the Marines would bone up on what he called "cultural intelligence," which he said consisted of learning about local customs and about differences between the Shiite and Sunni sects of Islam.

### **Training for new mission**

"It's important that we understand the Iraqi people," he said, adding that some Marines would get a month long course of instruction in Arabic before they deploy in the spring.

Maj. Gen. Keith Stalder, the deputy commander of the I Marine Expeditionary Force, said he and Conway are still planning the exact size and composition of the force.

"We're going to learn from everything we know from our experience there, as well as everything we can learn from the Army there now," he said. "We'll go and do it right."

He and Conway said the individual units that will deploy in the first wave will be announced in the next couple of weeks.

Stalder said the award Thursday will bolster confidence and help focus those Marines for what they could face in Iraq.

"I have no doubt this is going to be a positive thing (for the troops)," Stalder said after the ceremony. "This is only the 40th award ever given. That says a lot. They will go back (to Iraq) proud knowing that."

