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USMC Captain Shares Experiences

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In Pettengill Hall, a building where students and professors alike often debate and discuss the war in Iraq, the voice of experience weighed in on the conflict last Thursday night. United States Marine Corps Captain Tony King presented a slideshow of personal photos and spoke candidly of his experiences during two tours in Iraq.

The presentation was offered by the Bates College Republicans and constituted the only acknowledgement of Veteran's Day on campus.

Captain King's presentation began with a video produced by the Department of the Navy entitled "Enduring Freedom" but soon after shifted to a collection of photos personally taken by Captain King during the two times he "got to go to Iraq." He explained that soldiers often see deployment as an opportunity to finally do what they were trained to do.

The photos covered a great spectrum: a crushed box of Goldfish being pulled from a care package by a grinning Marine, a blinding sandstorm that limited visibility to three feet, Iraqi vehicles destroyed by aerial strikes while the invading Marines were still hundreds of miles away, Marines playing with Iraqi children and American medical personnel treating wounded Iraqi soldiers.

Many of the photos captured the unexpected boredom that comes from being in a convoy trailing the front-line expeditionary force. Captain King agreed with a quotation he shared: "war is endless hours of boredom punctuated by moments of terror."

The interactions Captain King had with Iraqi soldiers were a focal point. He explained that many Iraqi soldiers had been left at their outposts for weeks without any food, water or other support from their commanders. Many Iraqi soldiers were shocked to see Americans reach their defensive position because Iraqi leadership had been constantly insisting that they were winning the war.

One Iraqi soldier told the Marines that he knew they had lost when he saw an American tank float across a river. He was referring to amphibious tanks that Captain King's convoy utilized.

Interactions with civilians were also continuously referenced in the presentation. Captain King explained that humanitarian food packages necessarily contain fewer nutrients than the Marines' own meals because the Iraqis are so accustomed to nutrient deficiency that the richness of a standard Marine meal would make them sick.

Captain King shared a highly-detailed analysis of the American invasion of Fallujah due to its prominent

position in the news. His explanation included maps detailing weapons caches, sniper positions and variously strengthened defensive positions. He noted that most of the civilians escaped the town before the invasion, a fact that eliminated the insurgents' greatest advantage. The Marines knew that "99.9 percent" of the occupants were insurgents and could fight a very different battle as a result.

He discussed the massive stashes of PCP, cocaine and other drugs found within defensive positions in Fallujah, and explained that some insurgents were so "hopped up" on the drugs that they would take five or six shots to finally go down.

In the end, there were 130 to 140 Americans killed in comparison to 8,000 to 9,000 insurgents killed, according to Captain King.

Captain King spoke of the patience and commitment required to defeat an insurgent force, emphasizing the importance of gaining the trust and support of the non-insurgent population.

He answered a number of questions following his presentation, covering topics from the role of Blackwater and other professional security forces to how the Marines interact with the press and how Marines, an expeditionary force, have adjusted to their role as an occupying force in Iraq.

He explained that the Marines plan to grow from 179,000 to 202,000 by the year 2010, and that reaching such a goal will be difficult. The Marines are maintaining active duty tours of seven months, while the Army has extended tours to as long as 14 and 15 months.

A 2001 graduate of the University of Maine, Orono, Captain King currently serves as an Officer Selection Officer based out of Durham, NH, and lives in Berwick, Maine.

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