

Chino Champion

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After 3 tours in Iraq, Marine opts for home

By Richard Block

His plane had landed just a day before, but Arthur Alvarado looked comfortably settled at home. He wore baggy jean shorts, a T-shirt and soccer sandals. Maybe because he was a little jet-lagged, maybe to avoid waking his newborn daughter, he spoke quietly.

The crowd that had welcomed him home was larger by one than that which saw him off in January. A month and a half earlier, his wife, Veronica, had given birth to Elisa.

Lance Cpl. Alvarado's introduction to Elisa had been delayed by the war in Iraq.

As the bus pulled up, Lance Cpl. Alvarado looked out for pink balloons, as his wife had advised him. He walked around the bus and hugged his family. The baby woke up and looked at him, but it was so hot she was tired, and she closed her eyes again.

"It was amazing just to see her," he said. "She's so beautiful. It was just - I was so happy."

In Iraq, he had a printout of ultrasound images. After Elisa was born, Veronica sent her husband pictures of the baby via e-mail, and he put them on the iPod he carried with him. After 3 tours in Iraq, Marine opts for home

Those pictures are no longer needed, now that he has returned from his third tour of duty.

The word that perfectly describes his feeling after three tours, he said, is "spent."

When the planes hit the World Trade Center, the

Pentagon and the Pennsylvania field, Arthur Alvarado wanted to fight those behind the attack.

"After Sept. 11 happened, I was like, 'I want to do something,'" he said.

He signed his enlistment papers and took the oath of the U.S. Marine Corps on Sept. 13, 2001. He went to boot camp one year later, the autumn after he graduated from high school. The first day was a bad day, he said; from the moment recruits stepped off the bus, they were made to stand at attention and absorb the yelling of a drill sergeant. And it got more grueling from there.

The United States was not yet at war in Iraq. Back then, the battlefield was Afghanistan. But Lance Cpl. Alvarado knew when he signed up that he might end up somewhere he didn't expect.

He returned home from Iraq, where he served as a machine gunner, on July 20. It was his third tour of duty. Of the last four years, he has spent nearly two in Iraq and about a year and a half at home, he said.

"I actually turned 19 and 22 in Iraq," he said.

"I could understand two times, but three times?" he said. After his second tour, he had attempted to transfer to another unit that would not be deployed, he said, but that fell through.

"Now I can definitely say I'm not going back because I'm getting out of the Marine Corps," he said.

Lance Cpl. Alvarado first arrived in the Persian Gulf just before the U.S. liberation of Iraq.

He said it really sunk in that he was in Iraq when Saddam Hussein's military fired a Scud missile at U.S. troops, and he feared it was a chemical weapon.

He arrived in Iraq March 17, 2003, and the bombing in advance of the invasion began that night or the next day, he said. Then, ground forces went in.

It was open fighting, he said, and was easier than anticipated to get to Baghdad.

"If anyone posed a threat, you just neutralize a threat," he said. "That's how easy it was." Besides, he said, "most of the Iraqi people wanted Saddam out."

In the Marines, he met a lot of good friends with whom he hopes to keep in touch. One of his Marine friends even introduced him to Veronica, in January 2004. After four months, they married at a San Diego courthouse.

"It was love at first sight," he said.

"The only bad thing was he's always - he has to go to Iraq," Mrs. Alvarado added. But, "he comes home, and that's the best part."

Now, the couple lives in Chino, where Mrs. Alvarado grew up, with her parents. They moved in when they found out that Lance Cpl. Alvarado was to go to Iraq a third time. Veronica did not want to live alone in their San Juan Capistrano apartment as she prepared to have her child.

Lance Cpl. Alvarado was raised in East Los Angeles, and his family lives in Pico Rivera, but he likes Chino, and he and his wife hope to find a home nearby in a few months when he goes into his brother's asphalt business. Perhaps in Brea, perhaps in Diamond Bar. In the future, he plans to join a police department, maybe in Santa Ana, where he has connections.

But Chino is nice, the Alvarados said, because everything they want is here - including the giant S.C. Village paintball park for Lance Cpl. Alvarado, a paintball lover.

Outside the Chino house, it was about 105 degrees, and sticky. Lance Cpl. Alvarado said it was nothing like the heat in Iraq. He poured glasses of sweet Italian iced tea from the base store in Iraq. He then drank from the bottle, looking forward to his welcome-home dinner at Chili's. His brother was going to bring his child, as were the Alvarados; the brother has another child on the way in October.

"We're giving my mother a lot of grandchildren," he said.