Passing the Word
Edited by Sara W. Bock

Combat Center Hosts CAX for Kids

Children from Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center Twenty-nine Palms, Calif., could be heard running and playfully laughing across Felix Field during the Lifestyle, Insights, Networking, Knowledge, and Skills' (L.I.N.K.S.) Combined Arms Exercise (CAX) for Kids, Nov. 25, 2014.

“The goal of the L.I.N.K.S. CAX for Kids is to show the children what their parents do on a day-to-day basis,” said Amber Bilderain, L.I.N.K.S. program manager. “All of the children here understand their parents are Marines, but they might not understand the things they do as Marines.”

This was the eighth L.I.N.K.S. CAX for Kids at MCAGCC Twenty-nine Palms—the event is held twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. More than 80 children attended the November event, which taught them about different aspects of the Marine Corps. Those included learning the enlisted and commissioned grades; participating in a close-order drill and a modified combat fitness test; navigating an inflatable bounce house obstacle course; trying samples from meals, ready to eat; and viewing a static display of military vehicles.

“I think this program is great; it’s the second year that my son participated in it,” said Staff Sergeant Adam Gamber, a section chief with 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment. “These kids get a hint of what I do and what their parents do.”

During the event, Marines from the Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School acted as squad leaders and mentors for the children and answered their questions throughout the day.

Lcpl Julio McGraw, USMC
PMO, MCAGCC Twenty-nine Palms, Calif.

Writing Project Seminar Helps Veterans Share Their Stories

A diverse group of military veterans gathered in Winchester, Va., Nov. 8-9, 2014, for a two-day seminar led by the nonprofit Veterans Writing Project and hosted by Shenandoah University’s Center for Public Service and Scholarship.

The veterans differed in age, gender and background, but they all had one thing in common. Each had a story to tell and wanted to learn how to tell it. Some attendees simply wanted to write down their stories to pass on to their children and grandchildren but didn’t know where to begin. Others had their sights set on having their memoirs or other writings published for a wider audience. Whatever their goals, the Veterans Writing Project seminar was designed to give them the tools to write about their experiences.

The workshop was led by Lieutenant Commander Jerri Bell, USN (Ret), a former intelligence officer and published author with a master’s degree in writing from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. She conducted the class with a contagious enthusiasm, encouraging participation from all attendees. The veterans expressed their need to get their stories on paper—to “get it off their chests,” as one participant described it. They each seemed to have specific experiences that drove their desire to write—being profoundly impacted by war, either mentally or physically; the loss of a comrade in combat or to suicide; and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), among others.

“I just want to write down my feelings. … Many of my memories are fragmented as well,” said Marine veteran Todd Golding, a workshop attendee who suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) during his service in the Corps. “I am ever hopeful that by writing them down, they become more of a jigsaw puzzle that can be put into order.”

Bell spoke to her students about the military-civilian divide, emphasizing that when writing about military service, it’s important to “bridge the gap” in order to properly convey experiences to those who have never been in combat. She encouraged them, saying that telling their stories, particularly by putting them down on paper, can have a therapeutic effect. To cover topics like setting, point of view and narrative structure, Bell used numerous writing samples written by veterans to help attendees understand the literary
terms, as well as the unique challenges faced when writing about the military experience.

“Everyone here is a writer,” she told the room full of veterans after they completed their first writing exercise, which she encouraged, but did not require them to read aloud to the rest of the class.

“I think what was really powerful was being with the students in the room and hearing their stories and their struggles with putting pen to paper,” said Colonel John Lesinski, USMCR (Ret), a trustee on the board of The Center for Public Service and Scholarship at Shenandoah University, who attended the seminar.

“The exercises were really great—you started forcing yourself to write things down. Hearing that from an instructor with a military background really put it into great context,” he added.

The Veterans Writing Project is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization founded by Army veteran Ron Capps, whose book, “Seriously Not All Right: Five Wars in Ten Years, A Memoir,” details his struggle with PTSD following his experiences in five different combat zones. He found writing about his experiences to be the best therapy for his PTSD and started the nonprofit organization to help other veterans who have similar struggles.

“I’ve seen a kind of unique pleasure and relief on the part of many of our seminar participants when they realize that someone does want to hear their stories, when fellow participants compliment them on something they wrote during an in-class exercise, or when they write something and realize—often with surprise—that they enjoyed writing,” said Bell.

In addition to holding workshops at various universities and other venues, the Veterans Writing Project leads a creative writing program at National Intrepid Center of Excellence, the Department of Defense’s premier research and treatment facility for PTSD and TBI, which is located on the campus of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Since 2012, instructors from the program have taught weekly writing classes to wounded warriors at Walter Reed.

The core curriculum for the program is based on another of Capps’ books, “Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story,” which is distributed to each attendee at the beginning of the workshop. All instructors are military veterans and have M.A. or M.F.A. writing degrees. The organization also publishes a quarterly literary journal, “O-Dark-Thirty,” which features writing by active-duty and veteran servicemembers. For more information about the Veterans Writing Project, visit http://veteranswriting.org.

Sara W. Beck

A WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE—During a visit to Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., 91-year-old Jeanne Black Burke, left, reviews early maps of the base with Col Blake M. Wilson, base inspector general; visit coordinator John DeBeery; and Patrice Pascual, Burke's daughter, at Lejeune Hall, Nov. 21, 2014. Burke was born at the base hospital on Nov. 4, 1923. Her father, Glenn Wright Black, was a veteran of both World Wars and served in the Corps for 42 years, working his way up to gunnery sergeant before being commissioned and retiring as a lieutenant colonel. During her visit, Burke shared her father's diary from WWII with staff from the archives branch at the USMC Research Library. Among many items of interest, the diary contained her father's firsthand account from the June 1918 Battle of Belleau Wood.

Left: Attendees at the Veterans Writing Project seminar at Shenandoah University, Winchester, Va., work on a writing exercise during the two-day event.

Above: Ron Capps’ book “Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story” serves as the basis for the course, and a copy is distributed to each participant.