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## A salute to the fallen from Marine Air Group 39

By: MARK WALKER - Staff Writer

CAMP PENDLETON ---- Sgt. Jessica Pfister has a new spot to visit when she takes a break from her duties in maintenance administration for Marine Aircraft Group 39 to spend some time alone in quiet reflection.

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The place is a new, black granite memorial to the fallen from the 10 squadrons that make up the 3rd Aircraft Wing unit assigned to Camp Pendleton's I Marine Expeditionary Force.

Etched on the 9,000-pound stone edifice donated by United Memorial Products of Whittier are the names of the men and women the air group has lost since 1980, and among the 88 names is that of her husband, Sgt. Travis D. Pfister, a crew chief who perished in the shutdown of his CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter just north of Baghdad on Feb. 7.

"It's really heartbreaking, but I am very, very proud of him," she said moments after wiping away the tears shed when she spent several minutes in front of the 5-foot tall, 10-foot wide memorial. "I can come here and have lunch ---- it feels like he is home here."

Pfister's comments came shortly after the Friday morning dedication of the memorial, an event attended by dozens of Marines and family members of the lost conducted in front of the air group's headquarters where the base's helicopters are stationed.

For Pfister, it was the second memorial this week for her husband and six other troops aboard her husband's chopper who lost their lives last month. On Monday's fourth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, more than 500 people gathered for a memorial service on the base for the four Marines and three Navy men killed in action that day.

Pfister said her fellow Marines and sailors have provided loving support and tenderness since the loss of her husband of more than five years.

"The Marine Corps is really one big family," she said, adding she plans to stay in the service that she joined nine years ago.

Her late husband had left the Marines but re-enlisted at her urging.

"I was his recruiter," she said, laughing at the memory. "Before that, he wanted me to do all the work."

The air group's commanding officer, Col. Patrick Gough, said that while the loss of any Marine or sailor attached to his unit is heartbreaking, it is their loved ones such as Pfister who suffer most.

"Family members bear the ever-present burden of loss," he said. "More than the rest of us, they truly know the cost."

The memorial, which came with three granite benches, carries this sentence atop the names it holds: "Time Will Not Diminish the Glory of Their Deeds."

That message was true for Michelle Moore, who lost her brother, Lance Cpl. Jason W. Moore, in a May 2003 helicopter crash in Iraq. She said the granite that now holds his name is a fitting way to honor his sacrifice.

"It's a nice tribute and a nice way to keep his memory alive," she said of her brother, who was only 15 months her junior. "I'll always remember his hard work and the way he lived."

One of the youngest children gathered for the dedication was 4-year-old Brianna White, whose father, Staff Sgt. Aaron White, died in the same crash that killed Moore.

Shortly after the service concluded, Brianna went to a row of nine rifles planted in the ground with an air helmet atop and empty boots in front of each. Groups of dog tags for the men and women being memorialized hung on each of the rifles, prompting the child to grab one set and clutch them in her hand.

"It was the right thing to do," Michele White, Brianna's mother, said of the memorial service.

Gough concluded his remarks by saying there is only one fitting way for the 3,500 Marines and sailors who make up his unit to honor those who have died.

"We dedicate ourselves to excellence," he said. "And we always remember that freedom is never free."

After two solemn ceremonies for lost air crews this week, the nearby Miramar Marine Corps Air Station that is home to other elements of the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing will celebrate the recent return of its members from Iraq.

Next Friday, a homecoming celebration will take place at the base in north San Diego featuring live music, comedians and others.

The II Marine Expeditionary Force from North Carolina's Camp Lejeune recently replaced the Camp Pendleton force in Iraq's turbulent Anbar province. Selected Camp Pendleton units remain on duty in Iraq.

Continued...



*88 names from fallen Marines and Navy personnel are etched on a memorial that was dedicated Friday on Camp Pendleton.  
**JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE** Staff Photographer*

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