

A day when death is on the minds of many at base

A memorial for eight Marines follows final arguments in a hearing on alleged murders.

June 16, 2007

By: Tony Perry

CAMP PENDLETON — On a parade deck and in a courtroom on opposite sides of this sprawling base, the discussion Friday was of violent death in Iraq.

Eight Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment who were killed during a recent deployment in Iraq were remembered at a memorial service as "truly Magnificent Bastards," a reference to the battalion's nickname.

They were killed in various assaults by insurgents — small-arms fire, roadside bombings and suicide car attacks — in the Al Anbar province towns of Rutbah, Ramadi and Barwana.

"None of them died alone," said battalion commander Lt. Col. James Glynn to the family members, friends and Marines who attended the service. "None of them feared their fate. Day after day, they understood the risks of the mission."

The several hundred people at the service included 42 relatives of Lance Cpl. Emilian D. Sanchez, 20, who was killed during a firefight in Rutbah. They had traveled to Camp Pendleton in 10 vehicles from two Indian reservations in New Mexico: Santa Ana Pueblo and Sandia Pueblo.

"He was so full of life," said Berna Sanchez, the lance corporal's sister, her voice broken with sobbing. "He had so much love, especially for his nieces and nephews. When he joined the Marine Corps, he said he wanted to make the world a better place for them."

Also killed in Iraq were Cpl. Dustin Libby, Lance Cpl. Andrew Matus, Lance Cpl. Anthony Melia, Cpl. Richard Quill III, Sgt. Maj. Joseph Ellis, Sgt. Clinton Ahlquist and Lance Cpl. Steven M. Chavez.

In the hours before the memorial service, prosecutors and defense attorneys made their final arguments in the Article 32 preliminary hearing of Lance Cpl. Justin L. Sharratt, who is accused of murdering three Iraqi brothers in Haditha in late 2005.

The accusations against Sharratt are part of the largest case of alleged war atrocities levied against U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan: Four officers and three enlisted Marines, all from the 3rd Battalion, 1st Regiment, are accused in the killings of 24 civilians in Haditha.

After prosecutors made their final pitch to have the case against Sharratt go to court-martial, hearing officer Lt. Col. Paul Ware said he was strongly leaning against making such a recommendation.

He peppered the prosecutors with questions and comments that suggested the charges did not fit the evidence and that the prosecution would have a case only if Iraqi witnesses traveled to Camp Pendleton and testified — which so far they have been unwilling to do.

"You have no trial if none of these people will come to this country to testify," Ware told the prosecutors.

The Iraqis, in a group interview with Naval Criminal Investigative Service agents who went to Haditha, alleged that Sharratt and another Marine forced four brothers into a back bedroom at gunpoint and executed them.

Sharratt insisted that he acted in self-defense — that he was searching the house for insurgents when two of the brothers, hiding in a bedroom, confronted him with AK47s, which forced him to use his 9-millimeter gun.

Ware will forward his recommendation to Lt. Gen. James N. Mattis, commanding general of the Marine Forces Central Command.

The five-day Article 32 hearing was rife with disagreements about forensic evidence, various witnesses' credibility and the thoroughness of the investigators' work.

But there was one point that prosecutors, defense attorneys and the hearing officer agreed on. No one at the memorial service would have argued about it either.

"Sir," defense attorney James Culp told Ware, "people die in war."