

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The mission of the National Guard ChalleNGe Program is to provide at-risk youth with the tools and experience to succeed, and to turn those youth into productive, employed, law-abiding, and taxpaying citizens. Programs may celebrate successes along the way such as the educational or physical achievements of their cadets, but the true test of any program is its long-term impact on the lives of its graduates.

In this section we will profile a number of ChalleNGe graduates and answer the question, “Where are they now?” This month we take a look at USMC Lance Cpl. Eric Garrett, a graduate of Thunderbird Youth Academy, who is now serving in Iraq.

Thunderbird Youth Academy Graduate Serves in Iraq

USMC Lance Cpl. Eric Garrett has journeyed a long way since he graduated from the Thunderbird Youth Academy, a ChalleNGe program in Pryor, Oklahoma. He has since left Oklahoma to serve in the United States Marines throughout the war in Iraq and in the post-war clean-up efforts.



His life was not always so focused. As a high school freshman, he found himself expelled from school for a year. His stepfather suggested Thunderbird, and the juvenile justice system agreed that it would be a good alternative.

Eric’s mother, Gretchen Wieland, recalls, “Eric understood that this was totally his choice. I was very proud that he stepped up to take responsibility to straighten out his life. Before ChalleNGe, Eric would ‘go with the flow’—whatever the crowd was doing was fine with him.

“After ChalleNGe, he became more assertive and showed leadership qualities. His attitude changed completely. He became more outgoing and began working for a future instead of settling for the present.

“If it were not for the encouragement, training, and faith provided to Eric by the staff and his mentor, I don’t believe he would be the brave man he has become.”

At ChalleNGe, Eric received the education and discipline he was seeking. His long-term goal was to join the Marines and become a Special Ops Sniper. He graduated from Thunderbird Alpha Company on December 16, 2000.

One indication of Eric’s dedication, tenacity, and growing maturity was his determination to get his GED. At Thunderbird, he had narrowly missed passing the exam. After graduation, he took the GED test three times before passing it.

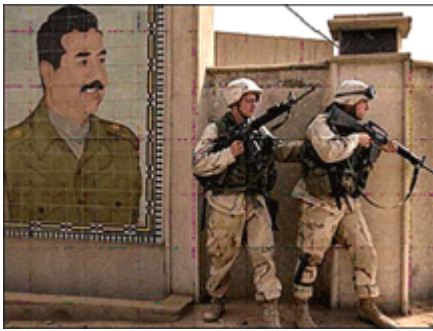
While at Thunderbird, Eric began talking to his mother about the Marines. Because he wanted to continue his education there, his mother gave the 17-year-old permission to join. At that time, May 22, 2001, there was no talk of, or thought of, war.

Stationed at Camp Pendleton in California, Eric took on more responsibility by getting married. Wife Melissa, says, "In fifth grade, I and two friends made a pact that we would marry Marines. As I grew older, however, I never dreamed it would come true."

Their joy seemed complete when they learned a son would be born in April 2003, but that happiness was diminished when Eric was deployed on January 13, 2003, going first to Kuwait, then to Iraq. He left to do his duty, leaving behind an anxious mother and pregnant wife.

Tulsa Marine in Baghdad

Lance Cpl. Eric Garrett, left, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Pfc. Kurt Gellert of Atlantic City, N.J., who are combat engineers attached to 3rd Batt., 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division,



prepare to fire after a military compound that U.S. Marines had recently taken in southeast Baghdad came under a counter attack, April 8, 2003.

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After the war started, there was no news of Eric. During those stressful weeks, Melissa and Gretchen were glued to the TV news. They grew more and more frightened each day, knowing Eric was in grave danger.

Then on April 8, 2003, Eric's photo and story were featured on KOTV news, Tulsa, Oklahoma. The news showed 19-year-old Eric in Baghdad, a combat engineer exchanging fire with snipers. The military compound that the U.S. Marines had recently taken in southeast Baghdad had come under counter attack.

Gretchen remembers, "I felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. Even though still in danger, my only child was still alive."

Just a few days before, on April 3, Melissa had given birth to Seth Darrell Garrett. Despite repeated messages sent, it was 10 days before Eric learned the good news about his son.

Both women believe that the war was something that had to happen to free the people of Iraq, that Eric is doing his job and protecting our country.

Gretchen says, "I am so very proud of my son and love him so much, for now he is a brave and proud Marine. And you should see Eric's stepfather light up when he tells his friends about Eric and how he is serving his country."

Although the past months have been difficult and at times terrifying for Melissa, she declares, "I love him being a Marine, and he loves it." However, she is quick to add, "But now, I just want my husband and Seth's dad home!"

According to the last information received from Eric, he is now helping to restore the city of Karbala in Iraq. Each company has adopted a school to rebuild. He says that the Americans are treated like celebrities, with residents often giving them hugs and candy to show appreciation for their liberation. And, he adds that it is great to finally be getting hot meals and showers.

Eric expects to be reunited with his family by August 2003. What a homecoming that will be for a brave young man and the equally brave ones he left behind!