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Winning Hearts, Minds in Djibouti

By **Bella Silverstein**
For The Signal

Sunday September 24, 2006

Marine Gunnery Sgt. Martin Lopez recently returned home to his wife and three children after a six-month tour of duty in Djibouti, Africa.

"It's funny to see Marianna missing teeth," Lopez said about his 7-year-old daughter. "And it's amazing to hear my 3-year-old talking up a storm," he added. Lopez was also surprised to see Vanessa, his 9-year-old, sporting an elbow-to-knuckles cast for an arm she broke in a fall at school.

"It's hard having him gone," said his wife, Lucy Lopez, a secretary at Presbyterian Hospital in Van Nuys. "I'm doing everything when he's gone. But it's harder on the girls."

Lucy Lopez worries when she doesn't hear from her husband, but says she worried more in 2003, when he spent six months in Iraq. At that time, she suffered through a month-and-a-half stretch with no contact from him.

Martin Lopez, 32, was born in Santa Monica and grew up in Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. He and his wife have been married 10 years and have lived in Santa Clarita for the past three years. He was inspired to join the United States Marine Corps when a recruiter visited his class, and thinks of the Marines as a protective "blanket of freedom" for the country.

Lopez was part of the United States Marine Corps' 4th Light Armor Reconnaissance Battalion

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stationed in Camp Lemonier, Djibouti (ji-BOO'-tee), a port city in the Gulf of Aden, on the inside angle of the Horn of Africa.

There, he and his fellow Marines provided port security for the capital city of the Republic of Djibouti, a major transit hub and refueling center for all of Africa, where French, Arabic, Somali and Afar are spoken.

The Marines also conducted anti-terrorism operations jointly with the army and air force of Djibouti, and helped combat anti-American sentiment with a myriad of good deeds.

In his six-month stay Lopez and his battalion built soccer fields, supported and supplied an orphanage and painted 18 classrooms for local children.

They repaired, spackled and painted schools and collected and distributed toys, diapers and school supplies.

Most of the supplies were donated by Americans back home, through the Web site www.anymarine.com, in which Lopez and his men posted profiles of what was needed. That Web site is still in operation.

Lopez and his battalion helped win hearts and minds in Africa by playing basketball and soccer with teenage orphans.

They also helped support the Children's Orphanage of Djibouti, where Lopez - who speaks French - became attached to a little girl named Ayane.

He wanted to adopt her and even got his wife's OK to proceed, but he discovered that only French nationals are eligible to adopt. Djibouti, a former colony of France, became independent in 1977.

Ayane went to an adoptive family in France.

Lopez and his brothers in arms also built a ship - after a fashion, that is.

"We found the hull of an old boat in a junkyard and decided to turn it into a playground for local schools," he said.

The boat was spiffed up, partially buried and given sails. The Marines built swings, a large sandbox and monkey bars for the playground effort, called the Boat Project.

They solicited donations of rocking horses on springs for use in the playground, which is now complete and being enjoyed by Djibouti children ages 2 to 14. "It was very rewarding to see the playground being used," Lopez said.

Lopez doesn't miss the 90 percent humidity and blistering heat of Djibouti, where he said the mercury climbed to 137.5 degrees Fahrenheit last Fourth of July.

Camp Lemonier has water stations every 50 meters, and all of Djibouti simply shuts down from noon to 5 p.m. daily, so people can sleep in the shade on sidewalks and patios during the brunt of the heat, Lopez said.

Vanessa Lopez, a fourth-grader at Pinetree Community School, is glad to have her father back.

"'Welcome home, Daddy' was the first thing I said to him," she said when her father returned home Sept. 15. "I don't remember what he looked like when he left."

Gunnery Sgt. Lopez has already resumed his civilian job doing maintenance for the apartment complex where he lives, though he still keeps in touch with men from his unit.

During his interview, Sean Biggio, a friend now back in Michigan, called to tell Lopez that his wife had just went into labor.

"It's exciting (being deployed), but you worry about your family back home," Lopez said. "It's great to be back."

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