THE JERSEY LEATHERNECKS OF FALLUJAH

Fallujah, Iraq. The Marines of 1st Platoon, Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines - many from New Jersey - aren't living large, but they're making a huge difference. Bunking in a police precinct headquarters in Fallujah, they're at the forward edge of our current successes in Iraq.

It's summertime, but the living ain't easy. The work's tough, the heat's wicked, the "facilities" conjure the old line about what bears do in the woods, and only goodie boxes from home liven up a diet of field rations (great for two or three days, nasty after two or three months).

You'd expect complaints. I didn't hear one. And talking to three Jersey boys, I was surprised to hear just how positive they felt about the mission.

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat," Lance Cpl. Justin Blitzstein of West Milford told me. Self-assured and ready for anything, he added, "Anybody who doesn't think we should be here should see the difference we've made in the way these people live. And everybody here's a volunteer. We want to be here."

Lance Cpl. Jason Hetherington of Cape May County leapt in, "The progress from us being here [in the police precinct] less than six months is unbelievable. People who don't think we're making a difference should just see what we do."

A thoughtful man, Hetherington paused to choose his next words. "We were surprised that it wasn't a combat situation in Fallujah anymore. It's rewarding to see the kids out in the streets and the shops open."

Blitzstein nodded. "We were amazed at how easy it was when we moved in. We were the first Marines thrown into the meat grinder, right in the middle of Fallujah, but it worked out. It was good planning on somebody's part."

How do they cope with the tough living conditions and cramped quarters? The Marines built themselves a workout room, and at night, they run up and down the stairs. (It's still hot after dark, but not as deadly.) And the mission's demands keep them focused.

"The more work, the better," Blitzstein said. "It makes the time go faster. Better six busy months than one month doing nothing."

Cpl. Jonathan Rudolph of South Brunswick had come to the platoon on a special mission. Rudolph looks like a young broker with a personal trainer. Except for the Marine uniform. He agrees with what his fellow Jersey boys told me, "We're really helping out. We can't pull out now."

In fact, Rudolph wouldn't mind if U.S. forces stayed in Iraq for 10 years.

The unanimity of outlook and the high morale among all the Marines I talked to was impressive. I expected at least a few voices of dissent and remarks about the futility of working with the Iraqis. But I didn't hear a single let's-just-get-out remark. And no, the Marines with whom I spoke weren't supervised by officers or NCOs acting as commissars.

Even with leading questions, the closest I could get to drawing complaints from those Jersey Leathernecks came when I asked them what they missed most about home.

Hetherington: "The freedom to just get in a car and go." Sounds like one of Bruce Springsteen's homeboys, indeed.

Blitzstein: "Just being in America."

Rudolph: "Waking up in my own bed."

If you're sleeping safely in your own bed tonight, thank those Marines from "Joisey."

Ralph Peters' latest book is Wars of Blood and Faith: The Conflicts That Will Shape the 21st Century