



It all started with Maj Chris Phelps sending his photo by e-mail from Iraq to his Stateside father, MGySgt Kendall Phelps, with a friendly challenge. It took two years, but Dad made it to Iraq and appropriately answered his son's e-mail.

# The Phelps Family— An American Marine Family Tradition

Story by R. R. Keene • Photos courtesy of the Phelps family

**I**t's a man thing: a son challenging his father under the thin veneer of humor. Nonetheless, there it was in an e-mailed photo.

It was 2003 when Major Christopher Phelps, in desert utilities, posed in front of a gutted Baghdad building, proudly holding up what used to be a cardboard container for Meals, Ready to Eat, now advertising a handwritten friendly taunt: "Dad, Wish you were here! Semper Fi, Mac."

Bold talk when you consider Chris Phelps is the son of a Marine master gunnery sergeant who 10 hash marks ago in 1966 left Rock Island, Ill., for Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego. MGySgt Kendall Phelps, 6 foot 1, lean and athletic at age 59, is not the type to let a son's challenge go unanswered. "Papa Gunns," as he is known in his e-mail, is the senior master gunnery sergeant in the Corps, or at least he was until he went over the side this month ending a career that spanned 40 years.

"Master Guns" Phelps is a Vietnam veteran. Seven months off the grinder

at San Diego, he was in Southeast Asia with the First Marine Aircraft Wing moving cargo—supplies, troops and medical evacuations—on and off KC-130 Hercules prop jobs in and out of Da Nang and later, Dong Ha.

By 1968, he was back in Illinois and back to wearing civvies with a gal by the name of Sherma Meek on his arm. He loved Sherma, but he also still loved being around Marines. Consequently, he married Sherma and joined the Marine Corps Reserve.

Enter Chris. He showed up two years later as the first of five children. Kendall, in the meantime, had earned his college degree through the G.I. Bill and landed a job as a teacher and coach at a school just west of Topeka in the small Kansas town of Silver Lake, populated with approximately 1,300 neighbors. In between work and raising his family, he squeezed in his Reserve drills with Company L, 3d Battalion, 24th Marine Regiment.

Not always, but in most cases, Marine families will tell you that your children more than likely represent

how well you raised them. Being in the Midwest helped: good schooling. Of course, the fact that both parents were teachers at various times in their children's education was also an influence.

There was one "other" influence. "It began around age 2," said Chris. "I wanted to be like my dad. He was my hero." And that meant being a Marine.

Looking back, MGySgt Kendall says: "I have never pushed my sons to join the Marine Corps. I have always taught them to think for themselves and not be influenced by others. Of course, they would have been taken out of the will if they showed up in any other uniform."

Chris was ready to enlist at age 17. His dad, however, was not ready to sign the parental consent form. He did not want his son to take such a decision lightly. The elder Phelps wanted his son to make the decision for himself when he turned 18. He told Chris, "The pride and respect that you will receive once you earn the title of Marine comes with a price.

You will be away from your family many times. There will be times when you ask yourself: 'Why did I do this?' There will be times when your life could be, and more than likely will be, put in danger. This is not a high school football game. When someone loses here, it can be for keeps."

Consequently, Chris left in 1988 for San Diego after his 18th birthday. After graduation he returned to the same Kansas Marine Reserve unit where his father was the company gunnery sergeant. It was while he attended the University of Kansas that he told his dad he wanted to be a Marine officer. Chris recalled, "Dad said, 'Your experience as an enlisted Marine will give you the opportunity to become a better officer because you'll have more experience.'"

The elder Phelps explained, "Being a Marine officer is an honor and a responsibility. The decisions you make will influence and change the lives of those you lead. You owe it to the Marines you command to give your best."

Former Sergeant Chris Phelps was commissioned in 1994. His dad, as he had been for every major event in his son's life—high school sports, becoming an Eagle Scout, graduation from boot camp, and when Chris married his wife, Lisa—was there. He pinned on one gold bar and Chris' wife pinned on the other. MGySgt Phelps smartly rendered his son, a freshly minted second lieutenant, his first salute. Second Lieutenant Phelps presented his father with a specially made silver dollar dated 1899, the year Kendall's dad, Chris' grandfather, was born.

Kendall was with his son again in 2003 when Chris left for his first tour in Iraq. Going to war is never a reason to celebrate. Never mind the fact that now Captain Chris Phelps commanded his father's Reserve unit, which was being mobilized as an ammo-resupply platoon. There was no solace. Kendall's son was not only leaving his parents, brothers and sisters, but his own three young sons and his wife who was expecting a fourth child.

For a Marine to see his offspring sent to combat can be a biting and bitter contrast. The pride of seeing them in uniform, hearing them talk and seeing them act as you and your fellow Marines is one thing, but the reality of them going to war is quite another. It's a check stamped "Payment due" no parent wants to receive. Might this be a less-than-fair trade? It puts patriotic words, and more importantly, one's beliefs about Corps and country to the test. Such are the thoughts of most parents.

Kendall, the wizened Marine master gunnery sergeant, looked to his wife and

realized, "She feared for us, she worried for us, and she prayed for us. I don't think a mother or wife ever feels good about her loved ones going into harm's way, but supports them in every way possible and stands by their decisions." This is what it means to be a Marine family.

As a master gunnery sergeant, Kendall started to call in markers and favors. He knew there had to be a way for him to be "ordered" to Iraq. It didn't happen. His

Corps perseverance and determination seldom go unrewarded. Still, it was a long shot.

He answered those who questioned him by saying it was his duty as a Marine. Besides, he reasoned, it wasn't anything any other Marine wouldn't do.

He kept calling and writing everyone and anyone who might even remotely assist in his quest. Rejection and disapproval also are well known in the Marine Corps.

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son went to Iraq, sent his dad the picture meant to be a joke, did his duty and returned home.

Remember, Kendall was a Vietnam veteran, and he knew from experience that wars such as this latest one have a tendency to last a lot longer than predicted. Marine reservists were being recalled almost on a regular basis, and often more than once. He reasoned his son would more than likely be sent back. Thus, he continued his efforts to be recalled to active duty and sent to Iraq.

His friends, the residents of Silver Lake, pointed to the "Retired Marine" bumper sticker that was pasted to the family van and asked, "Why do you want to do this?"

Kendall knew on paper his age was a big obstacle. He was quickly approaching 60, a time to begin drawing checks as a retired Marine reservist. He knew that while the U.S. military does not normally send fathers and sons together into combat zones, there is no policy prohibiting it. He also knew that in the Marine

But, things were changing.

In October 2004, the 5th Civil Affairs Group needed Marine reservists with skills, not necessarily related to combat—people versed in government, law and order, environmental issues and education—to help rebuild the Iraqi infrastructure.

One of the Marines canvassing the Reserve rolls for possible candidates was newly promoted Maj Chris Phelps. The need for educators naturally caught his eye. He also learned that most of those selected to serve with 5th CAG were experienced, seasoned and tended to be older Marines, with four in their 50s.

He told 5th CAG's commanding officer, Colonel Steve McKinley, about a certain master gunnery sergeant with 29 years as a teacher. McKinley knew the Phelps family. As a Marine officer McKinley did not make such decisions without considering what was best for his unit and all the Marines in it.

A month later, McKinley sent Kendall an e-mail that said in part, "Plan on an

**Although assigned to the same unit, their in-country missions allowed the Phelps duo to get together only once while deployed to Iraq. They managed to take time for a mess-hall meal in Fallujah and to pose for this photo. They did, however, communicate via the Internet and telephone.**





Chris' branch of the Phelps family posed for this picture when he returned from Iraq the second time. While Chris and his younger brother Joshua have committed to continuing the family tradition of being Marines, it remains to be seen if Chris and his wife Lisa's children, (back row) Taigan, (front row, from left) Tristen, Dalton and Preston, will keep the tradition going. The children's father, uncle and grandfather have, nonetheless, set a solid example for them.

extended stay in the desert." Maj Phelps also would be going for a seven-month deployment in 2005.

Both father and son now had the task of telling their families. Kendall not only would be leaving Sherma, but also his sons, three daughters and six grandchildren. Chris said goodbye to his wife, Lisa; and sons, Tristen, 7; Dalton, 5; Preston, 3; and Taigan, 23 months.

Both Sherma and Lisa now shared the burdens of women sending their loved ones to war. With unwavering support, they said goodbye to their men and then quietly shed tears and stood behind their Marines' decisions. In the meantime, there were two families to look after, manage and run. "Just pray they get back here together safely," Sherma said.

Maj and MGySgt Phelps were in Iraq's Al Anbar province by March 2005. One may want to think the Marine Corps or perhaps Col McKinley was behind the Phelps' in-country assignments. More than likely, however, as in much of life, it was just the way things worked out.

"We were never really together while in Iraq," said MGySgt Phelps. "My son was in Fallujah, and I was in Ramadi.

"Civil affairs work broke up the unit as soon as we arrived. It was by accident that we did run into each other. I was returning from Baghdad and had to stop at Fallujah. I had gone to the mess hall to eat and my son and his team had just arrived. It was totally by accident. We had dinner together, then he had to roll out with his team, and I caught a helo.

"Being in civil affairs we had access to e-mail and would correspond at least every few weeks. Periodically, we would be able to talk on the phone, but such calls were few and far between. I would be working outside the wire five to 13 days at a time, and Chris was always on

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**—MGySgt Kendall Phelps**

the move with his team."

The father did, however, spend enough time with his son to make a few keen observations. "First, being with my son was an honor. He has turned into a fine officer and has never forgotten his roots. I gave him a hard time about his path in the Marine Corps, but I am proud as hell of him."

The tour of duty with civil affairs proved to be rewarding for both Phelps. Maj Phelps told friends, "It is gratifying to work to get a grid system up and water pumping." He added, "I'd be less than truthful if I didn't say there was some comfort in going over with my dad."

And they came home.

It is conceivable that Maj Phelps could pull another tour in Iraq. Not so for MGySgt Phelps who retired this month

and this time for real. Not that there isn't another Phelps ready to take his place. Phelps' younger son, Joshua, 23, is scheduled to graduate from Officer Candidates School at Quantico, Va., in August.

Papa Gunns is reflective: "I do think that they [his sons] saw me for years preparing for my drill weekends or getting ready to go to training somewhere, and it made an impression on them. I also joked with them that the Marine Corps uniform would get them the best-looking women. I told them, 'Just look at your mom!'"

Asked what he wanted to teach his sons, he turned serious: "There are so many things that a father wants to teach his children. You want them to grow up honest, have integrity, be responsible for their actions and treat people as you would want to be treated.

"Probably one of the most important things to teach them is not to take for granted the freedoms that we have in America. It [freedom] is because of the men and women who are willing to put their lives on the line. Both Chris and I, while in Iraq, carried a saying by Edmund Burke, which we live by: "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

How well did his sons learn? Before leaving to deploy again to Iraq, Chris left this note to his sons, which their mother reads aloud to them often:

*Boys,*

*I want you to know that I am a Marine, and I do what I do for you. We live in the greatest country in the world, and because of that your options throughout your life will be limitless. You have those options because there are hundreds of thousands of servicemen and service-women willing to protect America and our way of life. I am no different than any of them.*

*I am so very proud of each and every one of you. You all have special God-given talents and you are destined for great things in the future. Remember to always keep honest, keep your integrity, speak your mind and fight for what you believe. I love you all very much!*

*Semper Fidelis,  
Dad*

