



Until Every One Comes Home.®

MOM'S IN THE MILITARY

It takes an impressive person to be plugged into the offensive line as a rookie and become a Pro Bowl selection, but San Diego Chargers second-year tackle **MARCUS MC NEILL** may not be the most impressive person in his family. His mother **LEOLA** is a colonel in the U.S. Air Force, stationed at Dobbins Air Force Base in Marietta, Georgia.

"She has always been really easy going and we have a great relationship," says Marcus of his mother. "It was tough because I had to see her go away sometimes and she'd be away for a while." That relationship has given Marcus a valuable perspective.

"I always let our servicemen know how much I appreciate them," he says, "because I have a little understanding of what they go through."

A lot of NFL players showed their appreciation to the military this offseason.

ALGE CRUMPLER, SHELTON QUARLES, WILL SHIELDS, and **BENJAMIN WATSON**, for instance, were among the many NFL players to visit troops throughout the world as they participated in the NFL-USO tour of the Middle East for almost two weeks this spring. The prevailing theme among these four players as they made their trip and when they returned is that the experience was an eye-opener, and that they have enormous appreciation for the young men and women protecting our country. Watson's sentiments were no different.

"We went to places all over Iraq," said Watson. "It's tough out there for them. I have great respect for anyone in the armed forces. It's definitely surreal. Going there was sobering."

While soldiers must brave the extreme heat in the Middle East, there are U.S. soldiers facing extreme weather conditions more than 5,600 miles away, at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks, Alaska.

"As soon as we stepped off the plane in Alaska, it was 20-30 degrees below zero," said New York Jets tackle **D'BRICKASHAW FERGUSON**. "That was a shock to the system."

Ferguson joined a group of five other NFL players -- **KEVIN BARRY, JOSH BOURKE, NOAH HERRON, DAVE RAYNER,** and **BEN STEELE** -- to visit troops at Fort Wainwright who were on their way home after serving a tour of duty in Iraq. The players ran a clinic geared towards the younger children on the base. The players didn't shy away from new experiences, going dog-sledding and flying a Black Hawk simulator. The lasting impression, however, was awe at the valor and sacrifice of the troops.

"I am amazed by everything," said Ferguson. "As hard as they train and the friendships they develop, they know somebody might lose their life. Despite all of it, they still go there."

Back on the mainland, several members of the Tennessee Titans made a visit to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division, the only Air Assault Division in the world. Linebackers **KEITH BULLUCK** and **ROBERT REYNOLDS**, safety **DONNIE NICKEY** and offensive lineman **JACOB BELL** made the trip to the base which is situated on the border of Tennessee and Kentucky, roughly 50 miles northwest of Nashville. Bulluck and the rest of the Titans presented **COLONEL MARK RITTER**, the commanding officer of the 101st Airborne Division, with a Titans gameball, something they feel was the least they could do to express their gratitude.

"We think we have it rough when we have to come in, work out, and sweat for a couple of hours in the offseason," says Bulluck. "These guys put their lives on the line every day. It really helps put our lives in perspective."

PATRIOT BOWL DEBUTS

The University of Akron will play Army this September 1 at Cleveland Browns Stadium in a game dubbed the **PATRIOT BOWL** by the Greater Cleveland Sports Commission. The Patriot Bowl will be an annual event featuring a Mid-American Conference school from Ohio playing against the Army, Navy or Air Force academies during Labor Day weekend at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

"There isn't anything else in the country like this that is centered around football," says the sports commission's **DAVID GILBERT**.