

The Original Java

by Lucille Anne Newman

Paraglide

If you combined the TV shows "Friends" and "M*A*S*H," you'd find the Original Java — nestled down range where medics and other service members can go to relax, enjoy a cup of coffee and the company of others, even for a moment.

"The Original Java was started about five months into our deployment. It was an idea to have a common MWR area for our company. We didn't have that at the time; we just had our quarters, and for a while I would have four or five people come into my living quarters for coffee and we'd sit and talk in the evening. So we thought this would be nice if we could incorporate more people into this," said Staff Sgt. Richard Simmons, 57th Medical Company, Air Ambulance, who started the Original Java with friend Maj. Peter Huggins and members of the 57th Family Readiness Group at home. "We figured if we could just try and make a larger area where we could serve coffee ... it started out slow with just members of our company coming in and then it started to grow. People started coming in and we started getting busy."

Simmons said he thinks it was the atmosphere, not just the coffee, that brought in not only Soldiers from his unit, but military personnel from all branches of service and contractors.

"(The coffee shop was) rank-friendly and when they walked through the door they felt they were no longer in Iraq," he continued. "I've heard people say this was like home to them. Some days were busier than others. We served hot coffees, cold coffees, frozen drinks, etc., and we had a pretty good menu. People were allowed to donate freely for what they felt the drinks were worth and all the funds went into the FRG accounts or towards supplying the shop with cups or ingredients.

No one profited from it to per se, but everyone will benefit from it."

Simmons said family support actually helped the Soldiers down range by boosting their morale.

Simmons' wife, Ginger, who is also the 57th's FRG leader, agreed.

"It was our way to support the cause," said Ginger. "We took great pride in the coffee shop and we began to feel we owned the shop too. So, we had shirts made and I even wore a shirt everywhere I went."

First Lt. Molly Huggins, 4th Squadron, Tennessee National Guard, agreed.

"From our end, just reading the menu and seeing that they've named their drinks after people or events (made the place special)," said Huggins.

"Pete's favorite drink was

the South Vic, which was named after his flight to Baghdad. It made me mad that I never got to go and see the coffee shop because I felt I owned a part of it. But this was a project for (my husband), to give him something to do and take his mind off of everything."

Huggins said as a medic they are constantly seeing horrific injuries and their jobs are stressful. They often need a moment to get away from all that.

"It was hard for me because I worried about him and also worried about him not having an outlet," Huggins said. "(This project) gives him something to do and helps to take his mind off his job even for a moment."

Simmons remembers on one occasion he received a request from a combat support hospital that was along their route asking for iced coffee.

"We had nightly missions where we would go to Baghdad and other (forward operating base combat support hospitals) to pickup injured personnel who (were) going out of country. One of the (hospitals along the way) was the 10th CSH and when they heard we were coming down, they called and ask us to bring frozen drinks," he said. "Sort of a delivery via Black Hawk helicopter. It just blows you away to hear how far word of mouth goes across Iraq and Afghanistan."

But with the troops coming home, the Original Java is still going strong as the next combat support hospital takes over the coffee shop.

"The coffee shop has been handed over to the incoming MEDEVAC unit who will keep it up and running," said Simmons. "They already have the setup and the clientele."

Ginger added, "All branches benefited from the shop," she said. "If you asked them where's Iraq, they'd say it's just outside the door."

