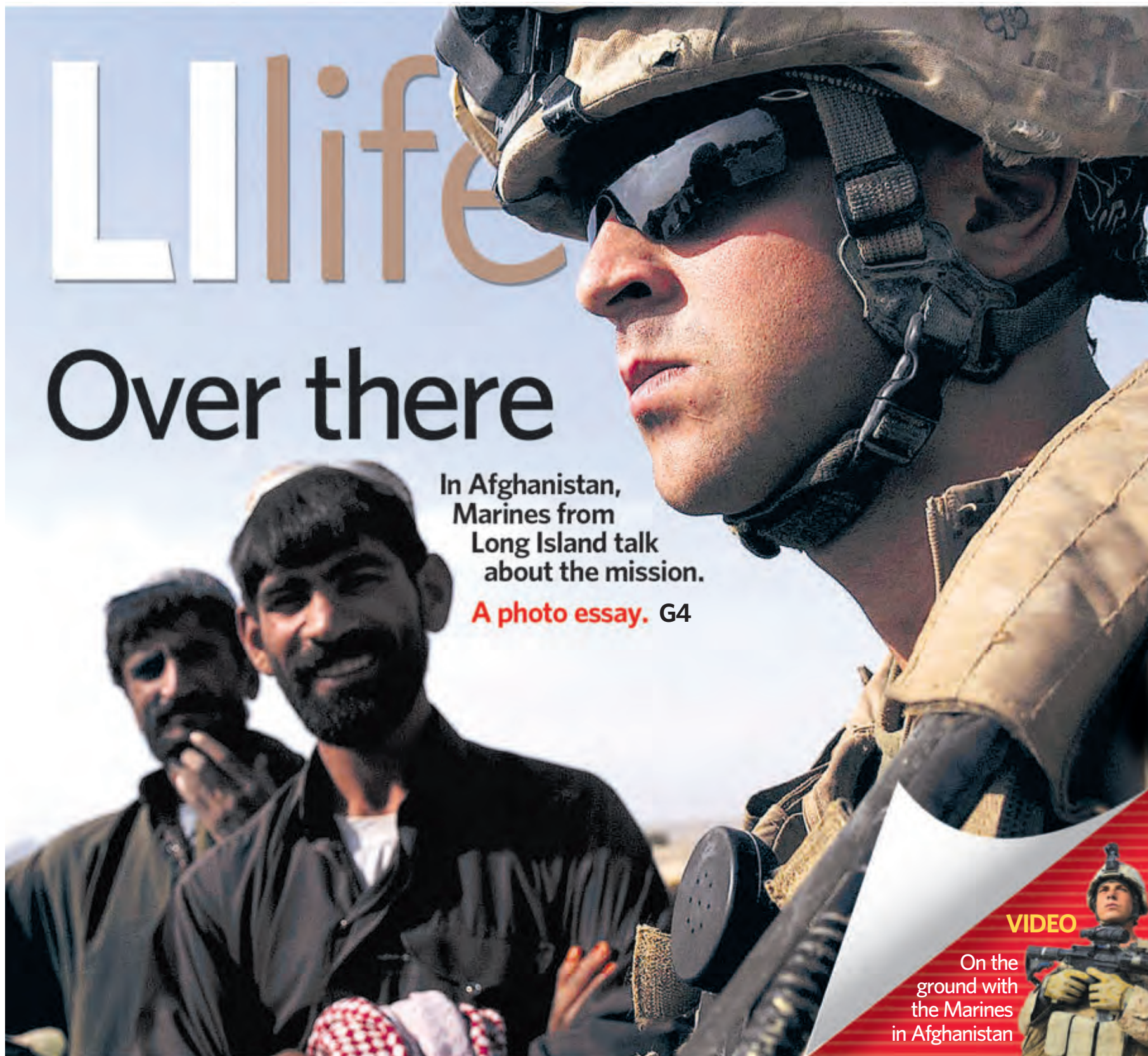


Lilife

Over there

In Afghanistan,
Marines from
Long Island talk
about the mission.

A photo essay. G4



VIDEO

On the
ground with
the Marines
in Afghanistan



PHOTO BY CHARLES ECKERT

Marine Sgt. Michael Salemi of Setauket with villagers during a census in September in Shaibat, southern Afghanistan

Holiday gifts for the gardener

JESSICA DAMIANO
SHARES IDEAS.

Back Page



Plus...

REAL ESTATE
ADVERTISING /
CLASSIFIED

Over there

Two LI Marines talk about the challenges of serving in Afghanistan

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CHARLES ECKERT

Special to Newsday

HELMAND PROVINCE, Afghanistan

[/TEXT]Sgt. Michael Salemi, 24, of Setauket, and Lance Cpl. Joseph Warren, 21, of East Meadow, are among about 400 Marines participating in Operation Khanjar to seize control of Rig District, in southwest Helmand province, from the Taliban.

Along with hunting the Taliban, the Marines, serving with the 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., secured polling locations for the Afghan presidential elections. They also train Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police and conduct civil affairs operations in an effort to win over the local population.

In many ways their mission has more in common with that of the Peace Corps than the Marine Corps. Yet, the Marines still face the constant threat of attack and are dealing with the deaths of three of their men, killed by a hidden improvised explosive device the day they arrived at the compound.

Salemi, a Marine scout section leader, talked in late September about their deployment:

“The Afghan National Army — most of them are pretty good guys. It’s definitely hard to keep in control when you are on patrol with them. The Afghans are funny to work with, and a lot of them joke around. You can tell the ones that really care about the country, and they are trying to help it out. Most of them care, but there a few in every group that are just kind of here.

“It’s kind of frustrating because . . . the Marines are set in their ways, like the way you hold your rifle. You know you always hold your rifle ready to shoot, ready to go, and the ANA [Afghan National Army] is just walking around with their rifles slung over their shoulders. You can try to tell them to hold it right, but they have been here a lot longer, and a lot of these guys have been fighting the Taliban for a long time. They know how to fight. . . . It was kind of bad in the beginning, but we are starting to get a bond working with each other.

“The Taliban won’t really come up to

us and fight us. We will get indirect fire [from Taliban] rockets, mortars, and, of course, IED emplacements. They will shoot at you, then throw their weapon in a canal or something, and they will mix in with the local population so they don’t get caught.

“We are [conducting] a census. When I ask them, ‘What are your biggest problems?’ they say it’s medical care and education. The next unit coming in, maybe they can start bringing doctors in, maybe start building schools for them.

“Am I going to see it, the actual change? No, I am not going to see it, but in the future with more units coming here, I should be able to see the change from home when I watch the news. . . . This is the beginning of something that might end up helping out Afghanistan and its future.”

MORE PHOTOS ON PAGE G8

Sergeant Michael Salemi



Scenes of Sgt. Michael Salemi’s mission, which includes peace-keeping: While on patrol in September, above, he tells a villager of an official’s impending visit to the combat outpost in Shaibat, in Helmand province. Below, he works with a resident during a census.



NOW ONLINE
See more of Charles Eckert’s photos from Afghanistan.
newsday.com/lilife



PHOTOS BY CHARLES ECKERT

The 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, Delta Company, patrols the Helmand province in southwest Afghanistan.

'Here to do a job'

Eight questions for Lance Cpl. Joseph "Joey" Warren, 21, of East Meadow:

Why did you join the Marine Corps?

I joined the Marine Corps because my father was a Marine for 20 years, and I found that it was a very admirable career, so I decided to try it out for four years.

What is your mission here?

Our mission is to win the hearts and minds of the people and try to free them from their ways, you know, so they stop thinking the Taliban are a valid government.

What is the biggest threat when on a patrol?

I would say mostly IEDs.

How do you prepare yourself for such a threat?

We have mine detectors. Everyone stays on their guard. Keeps their eyes open for telltale signs

What are the telltale signs?

Disturbed dirt mostly. Something weird sticking out of the ground. When the mine detector goes off, you know to steer clear of that path and find another one.

What advice do you have for Marines coming to Afghanistan?

Don't be complacent. Complacency can get you or the guy next to you killed, and nobody wants that on their shoulders.

What would you like the people at home to know about what the Marines are doing in Afghanistan?

I would like for them to know what the Marines are doing instead of concentrating on stuff like Michael Jackson's death. There are way more important things going on in the world around us.

What would you want your friends knowing about what you did in Afghanistan?

Just about everything. The patrols, the attacks. Nobody is here just chilling out. This isn't a beach. We are all here to do a job, and we are working really hard.



Lance Cpl. Joseph "Joey" Warren



Where they're serving
Map shows the area in Afghanistan where Sgt. Michael Salemi and Lance Cpl. Joseph Warren are based.



Warren on patrol in Shaibat, above and left, says his Marine battalion's mission is to win over the hearts and minds of the Afghans.