

## TURKEYFOOT ELEMENTARY

By Kathy Vogel

While we sleep warm and peaceful, tucked in our beds on a cold winter's night waiting for Santa's arrival, our men and women serving in Iraq aren't as fortunate.

"He sleeps with weapons under his pillow," said Turkeyfoot Elementary School Secretary, Judy Wilt. Her son, SS Jeffrey Wilt is in the Air Force-- a million miles away from home, missing his family and missing the Holidays.

But the students at Turkeyfoot have sent the Spirit of the Season overseas to Wilt and his unit in Camp Bucco, Iraq. Fourth Grade Teacher Rebecca Dimeff spearheaded a care package collection campaign during Thanksgiving vacation. Her students were asked to bring in one item from a suggestion list, which included things like toiletries, snack food items, clothing, and fun stuff. The response was awesome.

"The kids came up with some creative and neat stuff off of the list, like shoe insoles, crossword puzzles, a Nerf football," Dimeff said. "The students had a good time with this. They had to show me what item they brought before it got put in the box."

Some students went above-and-beyond the one item quota. Getting their parents and even grandparents involved, many brought in bags full of items. Some donated money for shipping.

In addition to stuffing 12 boxes full of stuff for Wilt's unit, each student also wrote letters.

The students didn't just receive a grade for their project. They learned something far more valuable—a sense of appreciation, and the joy of giving.

"We can do something simple like go out and buy toothpaste. They can't. We can be with our families. They can't," Dimeff said. "It's important to help out, and to do our part... It was a joy to see the students' faces, knowing they were proud of helping."

And their generosity has warmed the heart of their school secretary, who's been a part of the Turkeyfoot family for eight years.

"I'm just overwhelmed with the response from the students," Mrs. Wilt said, "They've shown their love and support."

Which is what she needs—because she knew this day was coming.

"Since he was two-years-old, he knew he was going to be a military man. We would go to the library and he wanted military books," Mrs. Wilt said. "He would always say to me 'I'm gonna do that some day.'"

Wilt has been a staff sergeant since 1997, and works security for the Air Force. Currently, he works with detainees. That's all he's allowed to tell his family about his job.

Wilt, who's been married for five years and has two daughters, ages four and three, has had very little contact with his family. And when he does call home, it's just too painful to talk to his little girls.

"It's just too hard," Mrs. Wilt said. "They beg him to come home. They know he's working, but they don't really understand. They say to him 'Don't work in 'raq no more, Daddy.' It breaks his heart."

**(more)**

**TAKE 1**

The care packages couldn't come at a better time. Wilt's unit has very little "down time." And when they do get a few spare moments, those are spent sleeping, doing laundry and eating.

Hopefully, there will be time to enjoy the items that were sent to them with love and wishes of a safe return home, soon—which could be this March.

"He is proud to serve a purpose and to serve his country," Mrs. Wilt said. "But it's hard to listen to the news. To hear of someone else is dying over there, to hear about the funerals. He's in harm's way over there. And we pray he will survive and return to us."

The soldiers serving with SS Jeffrey Wilt include: SRA James Barrio; SSG Doumit Elias; AMD Ryan Gamber; AMN Thomas Horn; SSG Dallas Johnson; SRA Mark Kimball; AMN Kyle King; A1C Christina Loucks; A1C Jennifer Marcum; SRA Michael Putnam; and SRA Matthew Vanderhorst.

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This is an excerpt of Mrs. Wilt's "Thank You" letter:

Dear Fourth Grade Students and Parents,

This is just a little note on behalf of my son, SS Jeffrey Wilt and his unit stationed at Camp Bucco, Iraq. We sincerely want to thank each of you for your thoughtfulness and kindness in donating items for them... These young men and women will be overjoyed at how much our students and parents here have tried to make them feel appreciated and support them for all that they do for the United States.

I have emailed my son and told him about the project and he is very excited and can't wait to receive the boxes so that he can share them with his unit. They are extremely busy and have very little down time and he has promised that someone soon will be writing or emailing us at school... On behalf of myself and my husband, we truly appreciate all each of you have done for our son and his unit.

Happy Holidays to each of you!  
Mrs. Wilt