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News:

Holiday greetings from Greenville

By Lori Hansen - Daily News correspondent

GREENVILLE — As a teacher's assistant in the Greenville Public Schools, Pat Zank got to know a lot of her students.

In 2003, when three of her "boys" were in the military, the Greenville woman decided to write a letter to their parents, thanking them for their sons' service. The letters were forwarded to the young men in Iraq and they each answered Zank.

That began a correspondence between them. Zank then started writing a young woman who was serving as a chaplain's assistant in Iraq.

"When she came home, she asked if I would continue writing to the chaplain, and so I did," said Zank, now 71.

Requests soon came for her to write to other soldiers and Zank added more names to her list. She also selected some names from the www.ansoldier.com Web site.

"In 2004, I read about a request to send Christmas cards to wounded soldiers recovering at Walter Reed" Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Zank said. "So I sent 50."

Her parcel was returned to her in March 2005.

"It said 'Undeliverable.' I needed a chaplain's name," Zank recalled. "So here I was with 50 Christmas cards.

"I decided I would send them for Easter anyway," she said. "I got four or five replies back (from wounded soldiers) saying these were the only Christmas cards they had received."

This year Zank mailed out 200 Christmas cards to four different units in Afghanistan and Iraq, each with a handwritten note to a soldier.

"I might not ever hear back from any of them," she said. "A colonel or a major might be the only one that I hear from. But they told me how much the soldiers appreciate the letters and they are just too busy trying to keep themselves alive to write back. I just keep writing."

Zank now has a tub full of letters she's received in return. Whenever a soldier has written back and requested anything, Zank has sent off a package.

"I send at least four packages a month," she said. "I send snacks, beef jerky, gum, nail clippers, light colored nail polish to the ladies, Tampax and pads, socks, underwear, T-shirts, just things that are hard to come by."

Most of the items have gone to soldiers serving in Afghanistan or Iraq, but at one time or another Zank has sent things to U.S. Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps or Navy



This map of Iraq, above, was sent to Greenville's Pat Zank by Francisco Aceves, a soldier from California serving in Iraq with the U.S. Army. American soldiers had used the map during their work in Iraq. — Daily News/Joe Veselenak

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personnel all over the world.

"Sometimes by the time they get to the (base's) PX the things they need are gone," she said. "So if they ask, I try to get it for them."

"I know I can't reach everybody, but at least maybe they can get a candy bar or something," said Zank. "It gets expensive but it is worth it."

She pays for most of the items out of her own pocket. Postage to either Afghanistan or Iraq costs \$8.10 for a letter and \$13 for a 28-pound box.

Zank's also received some help from the Friends of the Flat River Community Library, the Hurst Funeral Home, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, the Thalia Club and several individuals and businesses.

"I shop all week for bargains," she said. "It's a full-time job, but the Lord has given me strength to continue it so I do."

Correspondent Lori Hansen is a Greenville-area resident.

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