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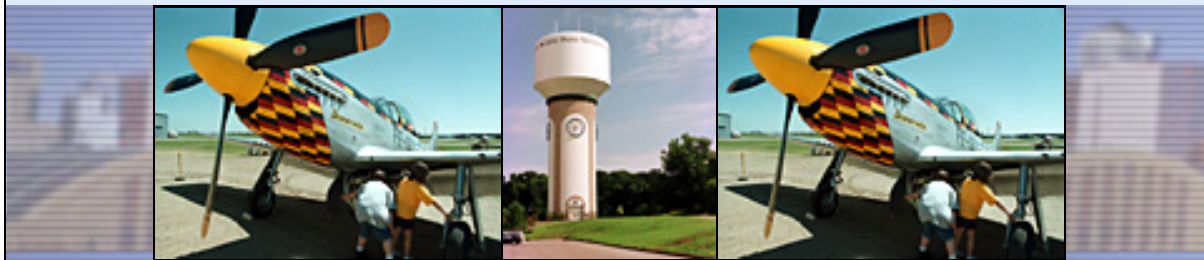
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Local News

Golf clubs raise the military's morale

**By Sue Webber
Sun Newspapers**

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What started with some golf clubs and golf balls for a buddy in Iraq has mushroomed into a garage packed with sporting goods waiting to be shipped to U.S. soldiers.

The story began at Thanksgiving time last year, when Dan Sundt of Edina and some of his co-workers at Ziegler, Inc. in Bloomington decided to send a care package to Greg Larson, a co-worker who was stationed in Iraq.

“A group of us in the shop got gloves, cigarettes, candy and some other things together,” said Sundt, who is a welder at Ziegler. “But there was nothing really fun in the box. I was working in my garage one day, wondering what I could send for fun, and I saw an old driver and two or three dozen golf balls my dad found.”

A light bulb went on.

Sundt went to Braemar Golf Course in Edina to see if he could buy some used equipment or range balls to send to the troops.

Once he explained what he wanted to do with the equipment, Sundt said, "They filled a bag with balls and gave me three more drivers and some tees."

The sports equipment collection was off and running.

Sundt took the box to Federal Express in St. Louis Park, where employee John Heubach waited on him.

"I told Dan he could probably use my employee discount, but I would have to check first," said Heubach, a Vietnam veteran from Golden Valley.

"My senior manager not only approved, she opened her heart," Heubach said. "A number of us in the office helped Dan pack and send his first shipment. It was a good feeling for all of us, since this was before the holiday rush between Thanksgiving and Christmas."

A second shipment went out from Fed Ex in St. Louis Park, and there was equipment left over.

"We felt good about the first shipment, and even better after the second one," Heubach said. "We all pitched in and helped."

What also hit the spot was a postcard Sundt received from Greg Larson in Iraq.

"He said we'd made a ton of people happy," Sundt said. "That's all I needed."

Larson's postcard reported that his area in Iraq was "littered with golf balls."

"I still have a wicked slice, but I haven't hit any trees yet," he said.

Sundt took the postcard to Braemar and shared it with Tom Anderson, who promptly offered him 2,000 more golf balls and more golf clubs.

“It doesn’t matter if the balls are waterlogged or worn,” Heubach said. “Nobody is going to retrieve a one-time shot into the desert sand.”

A Golden Valley neighbor of Heubach’s is John Giese, who was deployed to Iraq in March. Heubach said Giese’s relatives in Chicago also have sent money to help provide equipment for the troops.

Other equipment has been donated, too – softballs, bats, baseballs, footballs, air pumps, mitts, and Frisbees.

“Some of the guys love to toss a baseball around,” Sundt said. “It could rub off in a good way. They could teach the kids in Iraq to play sports.”

With sports equipment starting to pile up in his garage, Sundt needed to find more people to send it to. So he connected with anysoldier.com on the Internet, and got names of military personnel who would appreciate care packages from the U.S.

“You’re sending to a specific soldier,” Sundt said. “The packages are given to the soldiers in the unit who get the least amount of mail. It’s really cool.”

Heubach helped secure names of potential recipients, too, by contacting Calvary Lutheran Church in Golden Valley, which he knew maintained a list of families who had members in the military.

Enter the Rev. Skip Reeves of Calvary, whose own son, Dan, is on active duty with the U.S. Army, working Homeland Security in Miami.

“We have compiled a list of service people and families we could be in prayer for,” Reeves said. “There are several hundred names on the list.”

Some of the soldiers on that list will be recipients of items collected, Reeves said. Calvary also has collected toys and stuffed animals for military personnel to share with the Iraqi children, Reeves said.

“It lets the children of Iraq know people in the U. S. care about them,” Reeves said.

Shinder's has donated \$3,000 worth of magazines, two boxes of mini-bobble head dolls and another box of Beanie Babies, Sundt said.

Sundt said he's contacted the Twins organization about getting baseball mitts, since they are proving to be the hardest thing to find.

"We're trying to win the hearts and the minds of the kids over there, too," Sundt said. "We're spreading this stuff around to let everybody have a little bit of good old American fun."

Sundt's wife, Leslie, said the generosity of people who are donating equipment is amazing.

"It almost brings tears to your eyes," Leslie Sundt said. "We got together a huge package for a friend at work, and all of a sudden, boom! Everyone had something to contribute. It's been fun."

Sundt agreed that the generosity is overwhelming.

"Everywhere I go, people want to give and donate," Sundt said. "A lot of people want to help and they didn't know what to do until now."

As an ex-Marine, Sundt said, he has imagined what it would have been like to get a box of golf balls while he was on active duty in the mid-1980s.

"It would have just been the best," he said.

With sports equipment still piling up in Sundt's garage and more shipments to Iraq and Afghanistan in the offing, the end of the story is yet to be written.

In the meantime, Greg Larson, the Ziegler worker who received the first sporting goods shipment, has returned from active duty in Iraq and was scheduled to be back on the job in Bloomington this week.

"I'm anxious to talk to him," Sundt said.

To donate items to military personnel, go to www.anysoldier.com

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