

Soldiers stop by to say `thanks'

Couple share stories from Iraq with Southwest Middle kids who sent care packages

KATHARINE DALE

kdale@charlotteobserver.com

Earlier this year, some sixth-graders at Southwest Middle School sent care packages to N.C. troops serving in Iraq. On Thursday morning, two of the soldiers stopped by the school to say thanks.

"When I come off 48-hour patrols, I'm exhausted," said John Thomas, a 2001 Charlotte Catholic graduate. "So when I get back and there's a big package on my bed, it's (a) great surprise. And to know there's a group of kids out there taking time to reach out."

John and his wife, Joy Thomas, both Army lieutenants, also had a gift for the students: their first-hand perspective of a soldier's life.

Shortly after the West Point graduates arrived, students hovered around a computer screen popping with images of an Iraqi village north of Baghdad. They marveled at photos of kids chasing soccer balls, civilians crossing the street, a recently restored school.

The soldiers -- wearing camouflage uniforms and combat boots -- explained to the wide-eyed listeners how Iraq is not just a desert, but a country alive with towns and families and culture.

"You hear so many conflicting stories in the news, and don't always know what the truth is," said John, who met Joy at West Point. "We wanted to make it real to them, instead of just some place they hear about."

He says life in Iraq is "usually peaceful." He says he plays games with the children. He calls civilians by name. They communicate using an English/Arab pocket translator adorned with symbols and pictures.

Teacher Bruce McKay, a long-term substitute at Southwest Middle, wrote to the Observer in January asking how students could mail gifts and letters to area residents serving in the war.

U.S. Rep. Sue Myrick's office laid out the procedures. Some Observer readers volunteered mailing addresses, and, suddenly, the distance between a classroom and a war narrowed.

Following the slides and a round of questions, the Thomases presented the students with their unit insignia: a First Cavalry Division patch. After two weeks of leave, the couple, were scheduled to return to Iraq on Saturday.

John had a one last request at the school: "Just understand that a soldier is just doing his or her job.

"... Please continue to support the soldiers."