

- HOME
- Businesses
- Circulation
- eEdition
- Calendar
- Gallery
- Blogs

sign in



Weather Forecast

December 21, 2009

Community NEWS



- Jobs
- Real Estate
- Cars
- Classifieds
- Obituaries

Holiday Giving

News

- Durham
- Orange
- Region
- Columnists
- State
- Nation/World

Business

- Local/State
- Nation/World

Sports

- Top Stories
- Duke
- NCCU
- UNC
- NCSU
- College
- High School
- Canes
- Durham Bulls
- Pro Sports
- Golf
- Tennis
- Auto Racing
- Soccer
- Columnists

Lifestyles

- Announcements
- Books
- Schools
- Health
- Food
- Faith
- Entertainment
- TV
- Columnists

Opinion

- HS Editorials
- HS Letters
- CHH Editorials
- CHH Letters
- Submit Letter

Special Sections

- Senior Times



Stockings filled with support

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Christmas in a war zone is still Christmas. Our soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan this week will have much more serious matters on their minds than sharing a family meal and unwrapping presents by the tree. Like carrying out their mission and staying alive. But that doesn't mean they won't be thinking about the holidays at home and wishing they were here to go to Christmas Eve church services or seeing the faces of loved ones on Christmas morning.

The Durham law firm of Pulley, Watson, King & Lischer, PA has led, for the past five years, a Christmas for the Troops program that provides stockings for soldiers. They mailed 280 stockings Dec. 4 that should arrive in time to bring yuletide cheer to troops with the Army Company HHC of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment in Iraq as well as Marine Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan. The 504th based at Fort Bragg fought in World War II, Vietnam and several operations since. The Marine Special Operation Forces were activated at Camp Lejuene less than four years ago.

The stockings are packed with items that come in handy in the desert of Iraq and rugged terrain of Afghanistan. They include eye drops, Chapstick, Gold Bond powder, trail mix, wet wipes, socks, mints, gum, toothpaste, Slim Jims, seasoned salt and Texas Pete hot sauce. The salt and hot sauce are to add flavor to military culinary fare.

The supplies were funded by donations from across the community, then the firm did the shopping. The stocking stuffing was held the day before shipping and attended by 45 guests. One of the stocking stuffers was lawyer Richard Watson, who is an Army veteran himself. He served with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam, and back in Durham as a Reservist.

Nancy Sutterfield, Pulley Watson's marketing and public relations specialist, is the person who organizes the annual program. Watson rallies everybody, she said, for something he has always been passionate about. Leftover funds beyond the cost of the 280 stockings will be donated today to the Brain Injury Association of North Carolina. The money will support the launch of a new local program for military service members with traumatic brain injuries.

I have a special place in my heart for soldiers myself, being the daughter and granddaughter of them, but I think we can all sympathize with how they're spending the holidays. These men and women have a much more dangerous job that we can imagine. Law enforcement officers risk their lives every day for a government paycheck, too, but even they get to go home for dinner. Those serving in the military work when the military tells them to work and go where they are ordered to go. Holiday or no holiday.

What those 280 stockings sent from Durham are doing for those 280 troops are letting them know that back at home in North Carolina, we support them. Pulley Watson has led the stockings program for different military units each year, chosen by officials at Fort Bragg and Camp Lejuene. The firm is to be commended for what it's done -- much more than just putting a yellow ribbon magnet on a car, it took action to show support.

A war zone at Christmas is still a war zone. I hope the troops get some comfort from holiday tidings sent from home, or at least some tasty food topped with hot sauce. Merry Christmas (for those who celebrate it) to all our soldiers today and to all our soldiers who have ever spent Christmas on a battlefield. Thank you for your service.

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