

U.S. troops in Iraq send thank-you gifts to Vineland merchants, officials

BY KRISTI FUNDERBURK • STAFF WRITER • APRIL 7, 2009



VINELAND -- Local merchants and officials received thank-you gifts Monday sent from local soldiers in Iraq. Army Sgt. Major Israel Garcia and Army Major Jeff Brownlee, both of Vineland, sent plaques with American flags that were flown over the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on Dec. 28 to a group of men who sent donations overseas last Christmas.

"It enhances their morale," said Master Sgt. Robert Cuff, who stood in for Garcia and Brownlee, who remain in Iraq until June.

"By soldiers receiving donations, it lets them know someone back home is thinking of them."

Cuff thanked the sergeant major's brother, Jose Garcia, of Q-Ball Billiards, Brian Lankin of Al's Shoes, Dave Strittmatter of Fairton Christian Center, Mayor Robert Romano and Lou Amico of the Third Battalion 102nd Armor Retirees Association, during a presentation at the Vineland Armory, headquarters for the local National Guard unit.

Romano accepted the plaque for the city's recreation department and Vineland Public Schools, which collaborated to donate basketballs, a hoop and other sports equipment for the Vineland-based National Guard unit deployed to Iraq last fall with the 50th Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

The donations also included shoes and toys for Iraqi children living near the soldiers.

"It's a great honor," Jose Garcia said. "We really appreciated participating in the project and helping kids."

He added he was proud of his brother, a soldier for 26 years, for initiating the project and for his accomplishments in the military.



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Master Sgt. Robert Cuff (right) of the New Jersey Army National Guard, Fort Dix, presents a plaque of appreciation for donations to the children in Baghdad during the 2008 Christmas season. Receiving the plaques are (from left) Jose Garcia of Q-BALL Billiards in Vineland, Brian Lankin, of Al's Shoes in Vineland, Vineland Mayor Robert Romano, for the City of Vineland, Lou Amico of the 3d Battalion 102d Armor Retiree Association and Dave Strittmatter of the Fairton Christian Center. Each received an American flag that was flown over the United States Embassy in Baghdad, along with a DVD recording of the Christmas event held at their Forward Observation Base Freedom located in Baghdad's Green Zone. (Photo/J.D. Griffin)

