

The Herald - Everett, Wash. - www.HeraldNet.com

Published: Friday, April 27, 2007

Everett students salute their soldier

Jackson Elementary School students greet their pen pal, an Archbishop Murphy grad on leave from Iraq, with a cake, a song and a lot of questions.

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Morgan Wolff was at Arlington's Trafton Elementary School during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. He and his classmates wrote letters to U.S. troops in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

That little boy is now a man.

And the roles have switched.

Army 1st Lt. Morgan Wolff, 24, now is a soldier in a far-off place getting mail from schoolchildren.

He's a graduate of Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy High School and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., and has been in Iraq since September.

Home for a two-week leave, he spent precious time Monday at Jackson Elementary School in Everett. It was the first time Wolff's student pen pals had come face to face with their soldier.

First-graders in Theresa Lusier's class surprised him with a cake, a rousing rendition of "The Army Goes Rolling Along" and a fusillade of questions.

The kids have been corresponding with Wolff and others in his platoon in Iraq.

He's with the 1st Cavalry Division, based at Fort Hood in Texas, and serves as a distribution platoon leader at a forward operating base near Baghdad, Iraq.

On Monday, wearing the Army's new digital camouflage gear, Wolff stood before first-graders and their fourth- and fifth-grade buddies in the school cafeteria. One after another, kids raised hands, peppering him with questions that showed interest and innocence.

"Do you sleep in a foxhole?" one child asked.

"We have it pretty good. Wars in the past were not as comfortable," Wolff said. "We sleep in trailers."

"What time do you start the war?" another asked. Wolff's answer: "It's on all the time."

Relating his duties to something first-graders might grasp, Wolff asked if the kids watched NASCAR. Had they seen pit crews changing tires on race cars? "My guys run out to fuel and ammo helicopters," Wolff said.



Elizabeth Armstrong / The Herald

Kaiya Reeves, 7, a member of Theresa Lusier's first-grade class at Jackson Elementary School, shows 1st Lt. Morgan Wolff her bracelet, which bears the name of her pen pal from Wolff's unit in Iraq.



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From left, Jordan Adams, River Moon, Michael Martin and Travis Barnes, all students at Jackson Elementary School in Everett, perform a song during a visit by 1st Lt. Morgan Wolff on Monday.

The event was a family affair as much as a school event.

Before the guest arrived, Lusier told the kids, "You hear me calling him Morgan, because he's going to be my son-in-law. You're going to call him Lieutenant Wolff."

The teacher's daughter is Wolff's fiancée. Twenty-three-year-old Linnea Lusier, a Kamiak High School and Western Washington University graduate, works in speech therapy at Stevens Hospital. The couple plan to marry in March 2008.

Linnea was at Morgan's side Monday, along with Morgan's mother, Ruth Wolff; his sister, Ava Wolff; and Linnea's grandparents, Lena and Leonard Rochon.

Ruth and Dr. Peter Wolff have two other sons at West Point. Axel Wolff will graduate from the military academy in May, and Eli Wolff is completing his first year there.

For the kids, meeting the soldier brought home the meaning of their letter-writing efforts. Some students are wearing bracelets bearing names of soldiers serving alongside Wolff.

Fifth-grader Chase Osburn has been writing to a female soldier. "She didn't just send a letter, she sent me a video and pictures," the 11-year-old girl said.

"I've been writing to my soldier," said first-grader Kaiya Reeves, whose father is in the Navy.

Teaching first grade in a time of war and terror, Lusier said she sticks to a simple message. The soldiers are serving their country.

"Morgan is there so we can be free," she said.

Wolff recently learned he'll be there longer than first expected.

What he thought would be a year in Iraq has been extended to 15 months. He's heading back for nine more months.

What's the worst thing about it? "Being away from family and friends," Wolff said without hesitation.

Watching him Monday, I saw what looked like the best thing.

After Lusier's first-graders had left, a boy from another class dashed into her room to get a look at Wolff. The boy was worried he might miss his bus, but took the chance anyway.

"I've never met a real-live soldier," the child told the Army man.

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