

ER Staff Sends Care Packages To Soldiers In Iraq

Rome- (August 2003) The war may be over, but the U.S. mission in Iraq is far from complete for the troops who remain there to help stabilize the country. And the worry is far from over for the families whose loved ones are stationed in that hostile desert environment.

Vernie Pritchard, a licensed practical nurse in Rome Memorial Hospital's Emergency Department, battles her apprehension by reaching out to her son across the miles through e-mail, letters, phone calls, and care packages.

Sgt. Luke Pritchard, 27, was deployed to Iraq in March with Fort Drum's 642nd Engineer Company. The 1994 Adirondack Central High School graduate is third generation military.

"My dad was Army Airborne, I have three brothers and one sister who are retired military and e-mail him words of advice, and my Great Uncle Frank Doni was a survivor of the Bataan Death March," Mrs. Pritchard said.

Pritchard's 150-member unit is near Balad, a hot spot for U.S. soldiers who have encountered attacks from Iraqi guerrillas. So far Pritchard's unit hasn't suffered any casualties, his mother said with cautious relief.

When he was deployed, his unit followed the invasion force from Kuwait to Baghdad, building helicopter pads to bring in supplies for the advancing forces and evacuate the wounded.

"I have some bad days," she admits, but family, friends, and pride in her son bring her comfort. Ever since her son enlisted six years ago, Mrs. Pritchard helped maintain ties and brighten his spirits by sending regular care packages. Her co-workers in the Emergency Department have started contributing to the packages, which her son shares with others in his unit.

"My son asked us to also look after a young nurse in his unit who reminds him of his sister," Mrs. Pritchard said. Like Mrs. Pritchard, SPC Rachel Moyel is a licensed practical nurse. "When they left in March, Rachel didn't have anyone there to see her off because she's from California, so we've kind of adopted her. I gave her a hug and told her no one needs to go away without a mom's hug."

The care packages include snacks, personal care items, books, and magazines – anything to provide some comfort and make them feel closer to home, Mrs. Pritchard said.

"Up until just recently, they were in the middle of nowhere, living in tents," Mrs. Pritchard said, describing the oppressive 130-degree heat and biting sand fleas. "We've sent flea collars to wrap around their boots, sun block, comics from the newspaper, boxes of

socks, beef jerky, anything we can think of. They are so hungry for anything that reminds them of home.”

Mrs. Pritchard doesn't know when her son will come home to rejoin his wife, Lindsay, 4-year-old son, Corbin and 8-year-old daughter Taylor. Until then, she'll continue to send the care packages. “Knowing the dangers keeps us on edge, but sending a package each week is something we can do and I know he and his unit appreciate them.”