

Taste of home reminds troops we care

by BETH ALTENA

Our men and women fighting in Iraq may be missing the sights and sounds of the holidays, but a local deer processor is making sure they are at least getting a taste of home. Kelly's Deer Processing had volunteers literally lined up as they packaged jerky made with donated buffalo and elk bound for the Company E First Battalion 125th Infantry. The efforts are part of Jerky for the Troops, a project to show support for soldiers by sending care packages of jerky. Colin Kelly, owner of Kelly's and an avid supporter of donating venison and game to local food pantries, said he believes such efforts make life on the lines a little more tolerable.

The 125th infantry receiving the packages recently made news when they lost one of their own to a roadside bomb. Spc. Bradley N. Shilling, 22, of Stanwood, died November 18 in Baghdad, Iraq, of injuries suffered when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle during combat operations.

Kelly said a devastating loss such as this—the second for the battalion, make it that much more important in recognizing their many sacrifices.

“These guys are already missing the holidays, and right now they are missing deer season,” Kelly said. “At least they can have a little taste of home.” Kelly said he believes providing support through care packages is a great morale booster to the troops. Although food and prayers cannot keep soldiers out of harm's way in the deadly conditions they face during war, Kelly and his volunteers believe in doing what they can to show support.

Kelly sent the first jerky care packages to Iraq on December 14, 2005, and again on March 9, 2006. Donations of meat, processing and cash to cover costs made it possible for over 400 pounds of jerky to be delivered to local soldiers.

Sgt. First Class Alan Manville said soldiers have their basic needs provided for by the military while deployed, but appreciate the packages sent from home. “Something like this jerky is really a special treat,” he said. To show his support of the project, he rolled up his sleeves along with fellow soldiers and civilian volunteers to weigh, package and seal one-pound jerky goodie bags. Some of those helping know they will be in Iraq next year when the packages come.

Jean Bennett, Commander of the Family Readiness Group, a troop support organization, said the project is definitely appreciated. “The soldiers who did this last year are now deployed in Bagdad,” she said.

Kelly said a game ranch donated two bison and an elk for this year's holiday package. The elk, a 450-pound animal, and two bison—one weighing in at 250 pounds, the other at 650 pounds—were processed into 200 pounds of jerky. The rest of the meat—that not suitable for jerky—went to Sportmen Against Hunger, reaching 25 different food pantries in time for the holidays.

Kelly explained that the finished box of venison, at 210 pounds, will cost \$387.50 in shipping alone. He hopes to raise \$2,000 for Jerky for the Troops and send plenty more of the popular snack. The program is an extension of his long involvement with Sportsmen Against Hunger, which puts Michigan's plentiful whitetail into the pantries of those in need.

Kelly's Deer Processing has been involved with Sportsmen Against Hunger since 1991. This year Kelly's topped 100,000 pounds for the program, with meat donated by sportsmen who also pitch in dollars to help cover the costs. Kelly's staff donates time and hard work in processing the venison. This year, Kelly's is offering \$10 off the bill for hunters who donate one hind leg of their deer for the program. Kelly also hopes people will pitch in for costs of sending more jerky to our soldiers.

"It would be nice to get them another package before Christmas, but it takes time to process, to package and to mail," he explained. "We can send more after deer season, and I'm sure they will still be excited to get it."

To find out more about Sportsmen Against Hunger and Jerky for the Troops, call Colin Kelly at 231-796-5414.