

Students try to brighten holiday for U.S. soldiers

Monument Elementary sends care packages to troops in Iraq

By **CHUCK ALLEN**
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A group of soldiers stationed in Iraq will have a brighter Christmas this year thanks to the efforts of students at Monument Elementary School.

The students in Tina Mullings' sixth-grade class have been writing to soldiers in the Alpha Company 4/101 Aviation Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. The unit, which has the nickname of Comancheros, is taking part in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Mullings' father, Richard Bittle, served in the same unit during the Vietnam War. He used his connections with the unit to set up a penpal program between the soldiers in the company, which operates UH-60L Blackhawks.

The students began writing to the soldiers in November. They have heard back from several of them so far and developed friendships with many of them through the mail.

"They are pretty busy, of course, so they don't have much time to write," Mullings said. "But the letters we have received have been very interesting. Many of the soldiers have family and friends they are missing back home and are happy to receive mail from the students."

Abner Serrano, one of Mullings' students, said the soldier he is writing to told him that they don't get much mail.

"He said he looks forward to reading my letters," Serrano said.



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Monument Elementary Students stand next to the packages they are sending to soldiers in Iraq. The students are Manuel Delgado (from left), Angie Aguilar, Karen Cerda, Abner Serrano, Araceli Diaz, Mirsel Serrano, Jenna Lerma, Sara Horning and teacher Tina Mullings.

Along with the letters, the class also received a photograph of members of the company posing next to a Blackhawk helicopter.

The class decided it would like to send the soldiers something in return, so they, with the help of the rest of the school, began collecting items for gift packs to go to the soldiers.

The packages have snacks, such as potato chips and candy, lip balm, playing cards, flags, games and toys to give Iraqi children.

Monument's associated student body voted to pay for the shipping of the packages to the soldiers. The packages should get to the soldiers by Christmas.

"I think it was the best thing we could do for the soldiers," said sixth-grader Jenna Lerma. "We are sending them as much stuff as we can."

Along with the students in Mullings' class, students in other grades have helped collect the items and they also helped put together the packages on Friday, Dec. 9.

"They were fast workers," Mullings said. "They have really enjoyed this project."

They are also hoping the soldiers will enjoy their efforts and know that the students are supporting them.

"I think it's cool what they are doing to bring freedom to the people in Iraq," said sixth-grader Araceli Diaz.