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## Class hears about life in Afghanistan from local soldier

By JAMES DRAPER

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Brett Hamilton just doesn't feel comfortable walking on paved ground.

The 24-year-old Army specialist is so used to Afghanistan's rocky, broken terrain, he often steps off smooth paths for more uneven turf.

On Friday morning, the Longview High School graduate finished spending two weeks of leave with his aunt Terry Lanphear's third-grade class at Spring Hill Intermediate School.

Today Hamilton, who has served 2 1/2 years in the Army, returns to Forward Operating Base Salerno in eastern Afghanistan for a 12- to 18-month tour.

"He's going to be like our pen pal," Lanphear told the students, gesturing toward a poster board with pictures of Hamilton in Afghanistan, maps of the Middle Eastern country, his address and wish lists.

"We're going to send him care packages" she said, including his favorite Nutter Butters, Big Red chewing gum and beef jerky along with necessities such as toothpaste, baby wipes and sunscreen.

Hamilton, who specializes in electronics, described his job repairing computers and other devices, working sentry duty and checking visitors for weapons before they visit a free Army clinic.

But the kids, of course, were waiting for the good stuff.

"We want to hear about the missile launchers!" shouted 8-year-old Ethan Winters.

The third-graders oohed and aahed when Hamilton boasted about the base's Howitzer cannons and how in less than 20 seconds, they can hit a target 32 miles away with pinpoint accuracy. The students exchanged mystified looks as he described his own gun that can shoot 800 bullets a minute.

James Wallace, 8, bounced in his seat every time Hamilton mentioned combat.

"I thought that was pretty cool," Wallace said of the soldier's accounts of parachute jumps, missions and the Army's missile and grenade launchers.

"I liked when he told us about the assault rifles and all the different weapons."

Hamilton said children as young as 2 flock to the base's front gates every day, seeking treats and gifts from the soldiers. They're not very different from children here, he added.

"They wake up in the morning, they do chores – I guess they are different from kids in America – then they play," he said, laughing. But "They don't go to school," Hamilton explained, the students staring at him with gaping mouths.



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"Maybe you don't like school, maybe you do. But these kids would like to go."

"These kids would do anything to go to school," Lanphear added emphatically. "See how lucky you are?"

Hamilton recounted tense night watches when insurgents would threaten the base. But lately it's been pretty quiet in the still chaotic territory "outside the wire," he said.

"There's not a lot going on where I am," he said. "It will get hot soon – we have elections coming up."

Hamilton said he's been fortunate to be based at Salerno, and he looks forward to presents from the class, but "A lot of my friends don't have it as nice."

People should visit [www.anysoldier.com](http://www.anysoldier.com), he said, and get addresses to send letters and care packages to other soldiers.

"That's something that people in Longview might want to do," Hamilton said.

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