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200 Soldiers read to their kids from Kabul

By Lt. Col. Frederick Rice

March 24, 2005

KABUL, Afghanistan, March 22, 2005 – Even though service members at Camp Eggers, Afghanistan, are separated from their families by thousands of miles, they still can read to their kids.

Thanks to the efforts of one noncommissioned officer assigned to the Office of Military Cooperation-Afghanistan, more than 200 parents deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom have done so over the past four months.

The "Read To Your Kids" program was established in late November by Army Reserve Master Sgt. D. Keith Johnson from the OMCA public affairs office as a way to bring deployed troops closer to their loved ones while they are away from home. On March 18, Johnson reached a new milestone as he completed his 200th taping.

The 200th reader was Sgt. Tania Steele, from OMCA's staff judge advocate office. She read "The Fairy and the Missing Wand" and "The Way Mothers Are" to her daughters, Shania, 7, and S'Bria, 5.

"This is the first time I have been away from my kids, and I just want them to know Mommy is always with them," said Steele.

Based on a similar project he organized during a previous deployment to Bosnia, Johnson's program offers deployed servicemembers the opportunity to be videotaped while reading children's books to their kids. When each half-hour taping session is completed, Johnson presents participants with their personal videotape and books, along with a padded envelope, to mail home to their families.

"I really like the idea that my daughters can see me reading to them ... it is the closest thing to me being there," said Steele. "It just makes me feel like I still have a part in their lives."

While Johnson is very low-key about reaching the 200-tape milestone, Air Force Maj. Gen. John Brennan, chief of OMCA, thinks otherwise. "To dedicate so much time to the benefit of others is truly great and is an inspiration to all of us," said Brennan.

Johnson spends at least 10 hours running the program each Friday, his only day off from a busy work week. He estimates that he has invested more than 125 hours of his time to the program since its inception. But, he said, it's a labor of love.

"The feedback I get from the parents who have sent tapes back to their kids has been incredible. It makes the whole program worth the effort," said Johnson.



Sgt. Tania Steele from the Office of Military Cooperation Afghanistan, shows off one of the children's books she will read, via videotape, to her daughters Shania, 7, and S'Bria, 5. Sgt. Steele's video was the 200th completed for the OMCA "Read To Your Kids" program. Lt. Col. Frederick Rice

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Brennan thinks it's worth the effort as well. "The program has truly made a positive impact on both troop and family member morale," he said.

Even though 15 openings are available on the schedule every Friday, the program, also open to the members of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan at Camp Eggers, has become so popular that the slots are completely booked weeks in advance. It is so popular, in fact, that it expanded from Camp Eggers to Camp Phoenix, where Staff Sgt. Jerad Myers from the Task Force Phoenix public affairs office established a satellite program with Johnson's assistance. Task Force Phoenix, a subordinate unit of OMCA, is responsible for training the Afghan National Army.

During his reading period, Army Reserve Lt. Col. Joel Sloss made a special tape. His was for the students of Ocee Elementary School in Alpharetta, Ga., where he teaches fourth grade. "I knew the children missed me," he said, "so I was looking for a way to let them know I was all right. Read to Your Kids proved to be a wonderful method.

"They absolutely loved it and were reassured that I was okay here," added Sloss, who received a wealth of e-mail and letters from students after his tape was played for the entire school. "The children really enjoyed seeing their teacher, and many have asked if I would do it again some time."

He plans to.

The program is supported entirely by contributions that have come via the anysoldier.com Web site and through other donors.

Johnson said, "literally hundreds of books and blank video cassettes have been donated to make this program a reality."

Acknowledging the help of his program's contributors, Johnson added that "without the help of the volunteers back home, this program wouldn't have made it past the first week."

Army Maj. Mark Elfendahl, a CFCA staff officer and recent participant, is excited about sending his tape and books home, adding that his daughter will "really love reading along with her dad. ... What a great way for servicemembers to stay in touch with their families!"

And that's why Johnson started his program in the first place – to bring soldiers and their families together, even when duty means being apart.

(Editor's note: Lt. Col. Frederick Rice is assigned to the Office of Military Cooperation-Afghanistan Public Affairs Office.)

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