

FORT BRAGG SPOTLIGHT

Operation Bandanas reaches milestone

by Tina Ray

Paraglide

When Mary Gray's eldest son was deployed to Iraq in 2006, she wanted to send something that would encourage his spirit and sustain his faith. After searching the Internet, Gray found a site that sold bandanas. But, it was the Scripture printed on the bandana that caught Gray's attention. The bandanas contained Psalm 91: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

Gray ordered the bandana and thought it would be good to provide a few hundred bandanas to Army chaplains to distribute to Soldiers deploying from Fort Bragg.

And so, Operation Bandanas for Bragg became thought in action.

Since then, more than 100,000 bandanas have been sent to Soldiers downrange and in 2008,

to reflect demand across other military branches, Operation Bandanas for Bragg changed its name to Operation Bandanas.

It has now been designated a nonprofit organization and Gray serves as executive director.

"It is, and has been, only through the generosity of many grateful citizens and churches of our community, throughout the state of North Carolina, and now from all over the country, that our mission has grown as it has and reached so many of our troops with God's words of strength, courage and protection," said Gray.

Each bandana costs \$3, she said. The generosity of churches, organizations, friends and Family has sustained the mission.

On a recent Monday, a chaplain and a chaplain's assistant from the 82nd Airborne Division, rear detachment arrived at Gray's Fayetteville home to pick up 640



photo by Tina Ray/Paraglide

Col. Dudley Neal, a chaplain with the 82nd Airborne Division, rear detachment, loads boxes of Psalm 91 bandanas onto the back of a pickup Monday. The bandanas, part of Operation Bandanas, were to be shipped to 4th Brigade Combat Team chaplains in Afghanistan.

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"I think it's a wonderful outreach to the Soldiers downrange," said Sgt. 1st Class Mike Talbott, a chaplain's assistant who showed up to collect the bandanas. "I see these gifts of encouragement going out all the time; the uplifting of prayers for our troops — it's unparalleled in scope, nothing compares to it."

Chaplains say they have seen the bandanas do a lot of good. The bandanas have had practical uses such as being soaked to keep a Soldier's head or neck cooled

and as protection against storms, Talbott said.

"We've given these a lot as Soldiers deploy and they are very glad to receive them," said Col. Dudley Neal, who joined Talbott in picking up the bandanas.

Personal testimonials from Soldiers can be found on the Operation Bandanas Web site at www.operationbandanas.org.

"What a HUGE (sic) blessing to receive the Psalm 91 bandanas. They are being offered at our convoy prayers and at chapel services and are always well received," wrote one Army chaplain. "Rest assured that they have found

their way all across Baghdad in our units with some of the most intense duty."

Another Soldier wrote, "I love the message printed on the bandana. Hope, faith and encouragement has never been so easy to carry! It is people like your great group that make year long deployments away from Family and friends so much easier."

The bandanas offer an opportunity to put God's word into the hands of someone who may not have previously read or been introduced to it, said Gray's husband, retired Lt. Col. Eastland Gray.

Gray initially intended for the Psalm 91 bandana to inspire her son, and later other servicemembers, but it has also inspired her.

"It is comforting to think of God as my refuge and my fortress and I love the picture of being under the shelter of His wings where I have nothing to fear," she said.

Gray continues to receive requests for the bandanas, sometimes by the hundreds and sometimes by the thousands, and she wants to keep distributing them to servicemembers.

For information about donating to Operation Bandanas, visit its Web site at www.operationbandanas.org, call her at 578-8840 or e-mail bandanas91@yahoo.com.