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Questions served

At Westview Middle School, Iraq vet looks to change perceptions

By Luke Morin

Longmont Times-Call

LONGMONT — A soldier on leave from Iraq let his guard down Friday to visit with sixth-graders at Westview Middle School.

Army Sgt. Art Gifford flashed a toothy grin and sported a freshly pressed uniform as students peppered him with questions.

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“They were not shy,” Gifford said of the students.

Students sat wide-eyed and silent at their desks as Gifford, in full military dress, talked enthusiastically about his service, his experiences and the conditions in war-torn Iraq.

Gifford said his goal is to shift perceptions on American soil.

“It was great to help them understand what it’s really like over there,” he said. “All they see is negative stuff on TV. ... I think it’s great for them to get a positive image from someone who’s been there.”

The questions ranged from silly (How do you get your shoes so shiny?) to sharp (If you could change one thing about the Army, what would it be?) to solemn (Have any of your friends died in the war?).

Eleven-year-old Preston Medina asked Gifford how often he got to use bazookas and stealth bombers. Preston said the talk changed the way he thought about Iraq.

“I thought war was all about killing and fighting,” Preston said afterward. “I guess war isn’t always that way.”

Gifford’s strongest opinions revolve around media portrayal of the war. He finds news coverage to be overwhelmingly negative and deflating. War video games devalue human life and minimize the emotion behind taking human lives, Gifford said.



Others were simply terrified at the prospect of desert spiders.

Gifford, on 30-day leave after completing his second tour of duty in Iraq, stopped in Longmont to visit Westview sixth-grader Brandon Crist and his mother, Sue. The Crists

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The event was sobering to some students who had personal ties half a world away.

Twelve-year-old Phoenix McDowell was worried about his brother D.J., who has been serving in Germany as an Army mechanic since June.

Eleven-year-old Aisling Bradbury-Gibney has a close family friend serving in Iraq with a family at home and no idea when he'll return.

have been sending him letters through the Web site www.anysoldier.com for more than a year, and he wanted to personally deliver his thanks.

“The real heroes aren’t the ones out there in uniform,” Gifford said. “The real heroes are the people who support them back at home.”

“This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience,” 12-year-old Brandon Crist said after the talk. “It’s not every day you get to meet a soldier that has actually served.”

After the talk, the students crinkled their foreheads in concentration as they logged their impressions of the event in their journals.

One of their teachers told the students their children would one day ask if they knew a soldier in the Iraq war.

“I think that’s when it hit them,” said Karen Clancy-Cribby, an English teacher who has been at Westview for 15 years. “This was a pretty big point in their lives.”

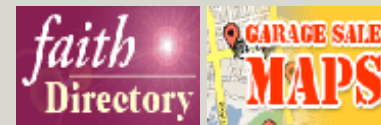
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