

Deeds not words

Drop – 4th ID veteran keeps families informed, connected during deployment

By Mollie Miller
Sentinel Living editor

The spouses, families and friends of Fort Hood's deployed 4th Infantry Division have a secret weapon in their war on waiting – Bob Babcock. Every day, in homes and offices across the nation, men and women, young and old, are opening e-mails and connecting to the Babcock phenomenon where kind words and perfect candor have built a community.

The Babcock phenomenon includes a daily mass e-mail with a selection of articles about what 4th Inf. Div. soldiers have been doing in the past 24 hours, some history of the division and a section dedicated to notes about what families and friends are hearing from their soldiers. The e-mail also includes a countdown to April 1, the projected final day that the Ivy Division will be in Iraq.

"I just love soldiers and their families," said Babcock, a former 4th Inf. Div. rifle platoon leader and current historian for the 4th Inf. Div. Association. "Today, they are doing the hardest jobs in the nation and these e-mails are just a way for me to say 'you are appreciated – you are not alone in this.' "

The distribution list, which today includes at least 2,000 names, started out innocently enough with a few news clippings sent to a couple friends in January 2003.

"Back when the 4th Inf. Div. was first alerted, I started cutting and pasting news stories that I found on the Internet to send to a few veterans, family and friends," recalled Babcock. "There were never more than 100 people on the list."

Babcock's distribution list did not stay small for long. Soon after the 4th Inf. Div. left for Iraq, Babcock became aware of an increased need for information among the friends and family of the deployed soldiers.

"On the afternoon of May 18, I happened to go check out the 4th Inf. Div. Association web page guest book and saw a long list of notes from wives and family members desperately looking for information on the 4th Inf. Div.," said Babcock. "I sent a note to the web master and told him to put a notice out that offered my informal update service to anyone who wanted it."

The brief note that Babcock sent the web master on May 18 held a telling prediction. The note said "I may be opening Pandora's Bo x with this, but it seems like the right thing to do." Babcock's prediction quickly came to fruition – within the first four hours of the notice being posted, the distribution list had nearly doubled in size.

Since May 18, not one day has gone by that Babcock hasn't added additional people to his distribution list. Usually, the list grows by about 15 or 20 names each day but sometimes that number jumps to 30 or more.

For many friends and family, Babcock has become the best resource for information and answers to some of the basic questions of military families enduring a long deployment, "What does this acronym mean," "How should I act on the phone," "Should I tell him his dog died," "What should I expect when he gets home?"

"I get lots of questions that I try to answer to the best of my ability," said Babcock. "Some are real tough ones – lots of emotion involved at times. Others are simple for me – I have a pretty good grasp of the military jargon and can help family members who don't understand what they are hearing."

Babcock credits the popularity of the e-mail updates to the fact that most people don't have time to sift through hundreds of tidbits of information about the 4th Inf. Div. just to find something about their soldier or his or her unit. Further, Babcock says that the group has almost become like a huge support network for waiting families.

"I think it's gotten so popular because it's the only vehicle available for people to talk to each other and to get a snap shot of the news without having to sit through all the negative media reports," said Babcock. "People have said they have quit watching the news because it's depressing and they can get a snapshot from me."

Whatever the reason for the popularity of the daily updates, one thing is certain, Babcock has a fan club of families across the nation who have taken him into their daily routines as they would a brother or sister.

"After getting my coffee, opening [Babcock's] e-mail is the first thing I do in the morning," said 4th Inf. Div. spouse Amy Smith whose husband, Robert, is currently stationed outside of Tikrit, Iraq. "My

emotions range from awe to pride to patriotism to happiness and sadness all in a few minutes of reading time and I understand that I am not alone in this.”

Several of Babcock’s fans had an opportunity to finally put a face with the news updates and words of encouragement Sept. 12 when he traveled from his home in Marietta, Ga. to Fort Hood to participate in the 4th Inf. Div. Association Reunion. On that rainy Friday, more than 100 family members showed up just to say thank you to a man that has made their long wait a little less lonely.

“I was so excited to meet him – it was almost like meeting an old friend,” said 4th Inf. Div. spouse Heidi Barker who gets Bob’s updates forwarded to her from her Family Readiness Group leader. “The e-mails are a connection to the soldiers. Bob gets the highlights from 4th Inf. Div. and targets right in on what you are concerned about. I think that life would be a lot harder if I wasn’t getting the updates because I wouldn’t really feel connected to anything. He really connects all the families.”

Babcock said he has a few passions in his life right now. His work on the updates and his work with the Veteran’s History Project and American’s Remembered, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the memories of veterans and home front workers. These passions take up most of his days with five to eight hours a day dedicated to the 4th Inf. Div. families and the updates. The two passions, he said, work together because soon the soldiers in Iraq will be the veterans he interviews for American’s Remembered, Inc.

“These projects are my passions and what I am doing right now feeds right into that,” said Babcock. “This interaction with the families of the 4th Inf. Div. builds a great opportunity to be on the leading edge to preserving the story from Iraq. After our 4th Inf. Div. troops return from Iraq next year, it is our intent to preserve the stories of the soldiers and those who supported them from home. The families are the keys to attaining this goal.”

Babcock’s wife, Jan, a partner in American’s Remembered, Inc. said although she would like her husband to focus a bit more time on their four children, two grandchildren and on their work with the Veteran’s History Project, she knows that what he does is vitally important to all of the men and women who receive the Babcock update.

“I support and believe in what he does and, as a wife and mother, I understand that it is important for the families of the 4th Inf. Div. soldiers,” said Jan. “At the end of the day, he’s doing all the right things for all the right reasons.”

Babcock has pledged that he will continue his updates until all the soldiers from the 4th Inf. Div. come home. He said he knows how difficult long deployments can be and if he can help the families at all, he will.

“God gave me an ability to communicate and the drive to make this update service a reality for our family members. To not use those God-given talents in this time of national need would be wrong,” said Babcock. “It is hard as the devil to stay home not knowing what’s going on and that’s why I will continue the updates, God willing, until all of the soldiers come home.”

To be added to the Babcock update distribution list, e-mail babcock224@aol.com For more information on American’s Remembered, Inc., visit www.americansremembered.org.