



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE DOWELL/POST-TRIBUNE

Cherie Cope introduces Marine Cpl. Xavier Malfitano of East Chicago during a recent meeting of the Porter County Pilots Association at the Porter County Airport. Cope organized the group Supplies for GIs in 2003; it has sent packages to troops in Iraq since then, including Malfitano's unit before last Christmas. In return, Malfitano presented Cope with an American flag that was flown at Habbanlyah Airbase in Iraq.

A grateful Marine

Flag that flew in Iraq a gift to Supplies for GIs

By AMY LAVALLEY

Post-Tribune correspondent

VALPARAISO — A few years ago, Cherie Cope's son-in-law, Andrew Durning, was stationed in Iraq and told her several of his fellow soldiers were discouraged because they weren't receiving letters or packages from home.

Cope, of Leroy, organized a group of family and friends to send packages to the troops in Iraq. The effort quickly snowballed into Supplies for GIs.

"I passed out 500 names that year; it was wonderful," she said of that first effort, before Christmas in 2003. "After that, I just put it on my heart to sponsor these guys every Christmas."

Cope also enlisted the help of the Porter County Pilots Association, since her husband, Larry, was president of the group at the time. Over time, as Supplies for GIs grew, Cope turned to Northwest Indiana schools and churches for names of soldiers and donation ideas.

After the packages went out before Christmas a few months ago, she got a call from Marine Cpl. Xavier Malfitano of East Chicago. He was one of the soldiers who received a package from Supplies for GIs.

Malfitano flew an American flag in her honor while he was still in Iraq and presented it, with a certificate from his squadron, to Cope before a recent meeting of the Porter County Pilots Association.

Cope said she has received letters from soldiers who got the packages, "but this is the first time someone called me." She was surprised to the point of tears by Malfitano's gratitude.

Cope was sending out the packages — full of snacks, toiletries and even soccer balls — four times a year, but now sends them out to arrive in time for Memorial Day



Marine Cpl. Xavier Malfitano presents Cherie Cope of Supplies for GIs with an American flag that flew at Hab-baniyah Airbase in Iraq.

How to help

To volunteer for Supplies for GIs, contact Cherie Cope at ccope60@hotmail.com or call 613-7608. Monetary donations can be made at any Centier Bank branch.

and for Christmas.

Eugene Clifford, the current president of the PCPA, said volunteers would pack boxes again on April 19. The effort brings together dozens of volunteers.

"Everybody grabs a box and we have items spread out on large tables," he said.

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Cherie Cope, Leroy, organizer of Supplies for GIs