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Capitol project tells soldiers' stories

Mo City quilters hope that Oprah will film segment on united efforts to support troops

By **RICK WEBER**
Chronicle Correspondent

The design of the 93-by-93-inch quilt — a batik fabric with stars on the edges that morph into diagonal lines— is typical for quilters in the Ministers of the Cloth at Southminster Presbyterian Church in Missouri City.

It's a blend of traditional patterns they've used many times.

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The 49-patch quilt includes 47 patches that tug at the hearts of the 20 quilters, sometimes bringing them to tears.

Each of those patches was taken off the uniform of a U.S. serviceman who recently has served or is serving in one of 12 countries or at sea.

The quilters don't know the story behind every patch or what's happened to the soldiers who sent them.

They can go to AnySoldier.com and find the names of many of the soldiers, along with their title, unit, mailing address, date expected to return to the United States and personal journal entries.

"I was reading a letter the other day from a soldier — quite a long letter," Theresa James said. "In it, he talked about what it was like to be there, how the people were treating them, how wonderful it felt when they opened new schools and saw kids getting

back to some semblance of normalcy.

"I was crying by the time I finished reading it. We see the car bombs on the news every day, but he was giving the positive side. It was so inspiring," James said.

The Ministers of the Cloth ask for God's protection for those deployed in the military. Shari Rickert said, "We look at those patches and we're very prayerful that they are still healthy and come home that way."

And sometimes they feel closer than they ever could have imagined.

"I was at Best Buy the other day and saw a man in a camo uniform with that patch," said Dorothy Goforth, pointing to a green patch with a red numeral 1. "I said, 'Look! That patch is on our quilt!'"

Last year, the quilters, who range in age from those in their 30s to retirees, started making lap-size quilts for wounded soldiers. They became more passionate about the plight of the soldiers, so they started delving into what other organizations are doing for soldiers.

Rickert became a regular visitor at AnySoldier.com. After a few months, she contacted Marty Horn, who built and maintains the site.

Horn, who spent 20 years in the U.S. Army as a military police officer, started the site to help his son, U.S. Army Sgt. Brian Horn, who was one of 1,000 soldiers who parachuted into northern Iraq in March 2003 as part of the U.S. military effort. Horn knew that his son's unit, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, was enduring extremely difficult conditions, so the idea was to send care packages that could be shared among the troops. His son agreed that any packages addressed to Attn: Any Soldier would be distributed to those who were not getting mail.

The Web site drew interest. Many requests came to support other military units. Less than a year after starting the site, Marty Horn had 100 contacts. Anysoldier.com now has 3,731 contacts (3,032 Army, 411 Marine, 218 Air Force, 70 Navy) who are helping 114,252 soldiers.

After corresponding with Rickert, Horn posted some pictures of the Ministers of the Cloth's quilts on his Web site. In February, he asked Rickert if her group would be willing to make a quilt if he supplied the patches he had been collecting since he started the Web site, adding that the quilt eventually would be displayed at the Capitol in Washington, D. C.

"I was like, 'Yes!' " Rickert said. "I didn't even ask anybody. Then I called Dorothy and said, 'Guess what we're doing!' "

A few weeks later, they received a package with seven patches. The next month, a box with dozens of patches.

"I don't know if he had it in his head what he was going to do with the patches when he started collecting them," Rickert said. "He may have had something in his head the whole time, but wasn't sure what it would be until we told him we were doing quilts."

"I'd like to think he looked at the quality of our product!" said Tanya Martin, drawing a chorus of laughter from the rest of the group.

The women bought material and went to work.

"What's fun is that it's an assembly line," James said. "You might have one person who is doing nothing but putting one square here and stitching this, then handing it to someone who presses it."

Somebody might trim it and hand it back to the person who put the second piece on. One person might stand at the ironing board all morning. Another person is cutting and trimming.

"It's cooperative in the way we do it. I think that's what makes this group work so well together," James said.

The women arranged seven rows of seven patches. In the middle, they put an AnySoldier.com patch that reads, "Freedom isn't free. Just ask any soldier." In the bottom right corner, they put their patch that includes their name, church and city.

The other 47 patches from those in the military were arranged so that they would provide a contrast. Some are colorful patches that were taken off a dress uniform and never worn in the line of duty, such as the one for Ricky G. Roberson (U.S. Army, Afghanistan) that has the words "Task Force Diamond Head Operating Enduring Freedom Afghanistan" stitched over a U.S. flag. Some have been ripped off the uniform and still have the original string, such as the one for Bruce Balvin (U. S. Army, Iraq), who was born in Houston and raised in San Antonio.

The quilt was presented to the congregation at Southminster Presbyterian at both services on May 29 and has been sent to Horn. The group has 62 unused patches and the fabric for another quilt.

"Horn asked us if he would wear out his welcome," Rickert said. "I said 'No.' "

"We may run out of money," Darlyne Fratt said.

"But we'll do a fund-raiser," Rickert said.

In the meantime, they'll continue to make quilts for wounded soldiers, infant baptisms, the church nursery and charities such as the Ronald McDonald House.

"I wrote to Oprah and asked her to do a segment on the soldiers and the quilts to encourage other people to participate," Martin said. "So I've got my fingers crossed that Oprah's going to show up here one day."

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