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Soldiers tote more than weapons

By MARGARET FRIEDENAUER

, Staff Writer

Pfc. Matt Albertson killed time with a hand-held PlayStation game Monday as hundreds of soldiers waited to board a plane to the Middle East at the Joint Mobility Complex on Eielson Air Force Base.

He wasn't the only member of the 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team adding optional high-tech gear to the boots, fatigues and rifles they will carry into action in northern Iraq. Soldiers worked on laptops, listened to digital audio players and brought along DVD players.

Albertson said iPods and MP3 players are popular with troops because music can be a big morale booster. He and his buddies had compiled a variety of music to listen to while in Iraq, such as Black Sabbath and Disturbed.

"Stuff that gets you pumped up," he said.

Spc. Scott Ehret had another popular item among the 3,800 members of the deploying brigade--a digital camera. Troops have been told they should have Internet access intermittently so some plan on sending photos to friends and family.

Ehret entered the Army a year ago today and said he knew little about what types of personal items could make life more comfortable in Iraq.

"My girlfriend has been the best source of advice," he said. "She's been researching this thing quite a bit."

Ehret's girlfriend, Catherine Connington, is a stage manager in New York City and began learning more about the military when she met Ehret. She said she had never dated anyone in the military or had anyone in her family serve in the armed forces.

"I actually started it when he was in basic (training) because I became interested in what was going on with soldiers," she said Monday by phone from New York.

Two months later, Ehret found out he was deploying with the 172nd.

Connington found www.anysoldier.com, a Web site that helps civilians send needed and wanted items to military personnel overseas. She discovered things like baby

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wipes, dental floss and toilet paper were popular requests for soldiers at remote bases in Iraq. She said at the bigger bases that have more amenities, they often request small toys and stuffed animals they can hand out to Iraqi children.

Since beginning her research, Connington started stockpiling items to eventually send Ehret.

"She has a storage closet in her apartment in New York decorated as a mini PX," he said.

Connington said she sent Ehret off with "tons and tons" of Crystal Light powdered packets because she's learned that the water available to soldiers doesn't always taste good and flavored drink mixes can help keep soldiers hydrated. In the first care package she has planned, she said she'll send powdered Gatorade and snacks like sunflower seeds, Fruit Roll-Ups, Pop Tarts and Twizzlers--anything that won't melt.

She's also learned that she needs to send gum that has the pieces individually wrapped, otherwise the sticks will melt together in the desert heat.

While Ehret no doubt appreciates the time and research Connington puts into her care packages, she said the effort benefits her probably as much as him. Connington said the task is a way for her to be involved.

"I feel so helpless otherwise," she said.

Ehret certainly appreciates the creature comforts Connington provides. But for Ehret, he values something else even more than Gatorade, candies or granola bars.

He pulled out his wallet from inside his shoulder pocket covered with patch of the U.S. flag. Inside, he had a small amount of cash and tucked behind his military ID and drivers licenses, he pulled out what he said was "arguably the most important thing in my wallet"--four wallet-sized laminated photos of him and Connington.

"I've been looking at them a couple times an hour," he said.

Staff writer Margaret Friedenauer can be reached at 459-7545 or mfriedenauer@newsminer.com.

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