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From the heart — Schoolchildren give a lift to American troops serving overseas

By [Jennifer Toomer-Cook](#)

Deseret Morning News

A few drew tanks and Army helmets. Others colored in hearts with American flags.



Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News

Ben Watson colors an American flag. This is the second batch of cards Crestview students have created for soldiers — they also sent Christmas wishes.

"Dear soldier: How aer you doing it must be skeree," wrote one first-grader.

"Thank you for serving our country," wrote another.

These are some of the valentines Crestview Elementary students are making for a U.S. soldier, stationed in Iraq and working as a medic. It's the second round of cards these approximately 600 students have created this school year; the last batch — a package heavy enough to require \$27 in postage — went out for Christmas, said school media specialist Joy Ligget, who is heading up the project.

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The cards are likely to dangle in tents and hang in hangars of servicemen and women as reminders of why they serve.

"I had more people with big grins on their faces reading those things, you just can't believe it," said Chief Warrant Officer 5 Gary Wallin, a Utah Army National Guard tactical operations officer and instructor pilot for the AH64 Apache helicopter. He received valentines from schoolchildren two years ago while training for deployment in Afghanistan, and another installment while overseas.

"It kind of makes you homesick, but it also lets you know there's people out there who love and appreciate what we're doing and realize what we're doing is for the good of the people," Wallin said. "Is it tough? Yeah. Is it emotional? Yeah. But is it emotionally uplifting? Yeah. That's the big thing."

Elementary schoolchildren all over Utah have been writing letters, drawing pictures and creating cards for the troops, Utah National Guard spokesman Maj. Hank McIntire said.

"The kids that age, they don't necessarily get wrapped up in the politics of why we're there or whether or not we should be there. They just know we've got folks in uniform who are overseas and are serving honorably," McIntire said. "It means the world on the recipient's end . . . to know that they're remembered for what they are doing. And I'm speaking from personal experience here . . . it doesn't just make your day, it makes your month."



Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News

Crestview first-grader Nathan Nelson writes a letter to a soldier who is serving in Iraq.

Crestview students are sending valentines to one soldier, who school secretary Leanne Helbling heard from a church service might need a lift.

The school, where some students have deployed relatives, readily accepted the project.

"I think it's good we're doing it," fourth-grader Abi Thomas said. "I'm trying to help out, and it just feels good."

First-grade teacher Pat Nixon believes the projects help children understand the world around them.

"I think it brings them an awareness. To them, it's just on the news. But when they start hearing about people they know, it makes it more real," Nixon said. The card projects also have students talking about their fathers, uncles and grandfathers who have served in past wars. Children are learning that the world is larger than their own circle of friends and relatives, said principal Verneita Hunt, who is Wallin's sister in-law.

"It made them realize what we're fighting for — these kids . . . their freedom," Hunt said. "They will have these cards up until they drop off the walls. It spurs them on, gives them hope that there is good in the world."

► **Want to write to soldiers, too?**

The Draper Family Assistance Center can offer tips. Call Lynnae Chilcott at 523-4080.

The Web site www.anysoldier.com also helps connect well-wishers with the Armed Forces. The service grew out of a Maryland Army serviceman's work to distribute packages addressed "Attn: Any Soldier" to colleagues who were not getting mail.

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