

Camps offer welcome break for 'suddenly military' kids

By Doug Gross
Associated Press

DAHLONEGA — The crackers weren't so bad.

Otherwise, 11-year-old Megan Canter didn't have much use for the minestrone MRE — or "meal, ready to eat," she whipped up for a military-style lunch at summer camp.

"It was disgusting," she said, munching on chocolate cookies on top of a picnic table at the Wahsega 4-H Center, tucked away in the northern Georgia mountains.

Flavor aside, the meal was a small way to connect with her dad, Sgt. Chuck Canter, who's serving with the Army National Guard's 48th Infantry Brigade in Iraq.

Megan was one of 22 children at a special summer camp designed for the 11- to 15-year-old children of deployed military parents, mostly National Guard members and reservists serving in Iraq.

Organizers say the camps are a way to help the children of Guardsmen and reservists deal with the fear, anxiety and confusion surrounding their parent's potentially dangerous missions in far-off lands.



From left, Tyler Heck, Tyler Wodard and Chris Pierson pick out Meals Ready To Eat as they prepare for lunch at Operation 4-H at the Wahsega 4-H Center outside of Dahlonega. The program for kids from military families is part of Operation Military Kids.

"We call them the 'suddenly military' kids," said Sharon Gibson, camp coordinator from the University of Georgia's college of family and consumer sciences. "They don't have a peer group to really bounce things off of and they're not like active-duty military kids, who are more used to their parents coming and going."

With the May deployment of

the Georgia-based 48th Brigade to Iraq, there are more of those children in this state than in any other time in recent memory. With 4,000 troops, the brigade is the largest combat unit of Georgia National Guard troops to deploy in wartime since World War II.

During the height of the 2003 Iraq invasion, about 224,000

Guard members and reservists from all military branches nationwide were mobilized. That figure now stands at 138,000, according to the Pentagon. The National Military Family Association estimates that about 140,000 children have a parent deployed in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

The weeklong camp held this month in Georgia cost the participants just \$25 and was funded largely by the national Operation Military Kids — a collaboration between the military, state and county cooperative extension offices, the 4-H Club and Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

The camp's design had "suddenly military" kids spending the week with the children of active-duty military parents — giving them a chance to interact with others who have been through long deployments.

In many ways, it mirrored a typical 4-H camp. Campers played Frisbee, attended a dance and panned for gold in Dahlonega, the mountain town home to the nation's first gold rush in the 1800s.

But this camp started with a military-style "bag and drag," where campers were handed gear including dog tags. Instead of groups, they formed "units."

Each day started with PT — or physical training — at 6:30 a.m. and ended with a flag ceremony complete with the playing of taps.

"It gives me an idea of what my daddy had to go through for boot camp," said Canter, of Tignall. "I wouldn't have made it."

Also, discussion sessions gave campers a chance to voice their feelings with counselors and campers who have had similar experiences.

Teresa Harvey's 11-year-old daughter, Emilie, was one of those campers. Her father was deployed to Iraq with the 48th Brigade.

"My daughter is the only one at her school going through this," said Harvey, a 4-H employee from Wrightsville who worked at the camp but went out of her way to keep her distance from Emilie. "She's very close to her dad; she's had it tough."

The camp is similar in style to others that have cropped up across the country — from California to Florida — as the war in Iraq and the international war against terrorism continue. This year, roughly 2,500 campers will participate in one of 23 free Operation Purple camps run by the National Military

Family Association — more than twice the number of campers from last year.

"The Guard and reserves are being hit hard by the fact that they've not operated at this pace of deployment and activation before," said Michelle Joyner, a spokeswoman for the association. "At the same time, active duty has been hit equally hard."

Along with camps in the states, the association runs summer camps near military installations in Guam, Germany, Italy and Japan.

"We see there always being a need for these camps because there are always going to be deployments," Joyner said. "This is something that isn't going to go away."

Organizers of the Georgia camp are treating this year as a pilot program. They hope to expand next year, taking in as many as 120 campers.

Thirteen-year-old Greg Barnett of Loganville, Ga., says he'd encourage his peers to check it out.

"You get to meet a whole bunch of people and just have fun," said Barnett, whose father also is in Iraq with the 48th Brigade. "I can relate to most of the people here."