

OPERATION BOILED PEANUTS

Effort brings snacks to troops in Iraq

By Elliot Minor
Associated Press

ROCHELLE — Members of Georgia's 48th Infantry Brigade who are serving in Iraq will miss the usual manifestations of fall back home — deer hunters in camouflage, the roar of cotton gins, football season and the first frost.

But because of one soldier's phone call to his mom, the statewide network of 4-H clubs has launched "Operation Boiled Peanuts," which will bring a taste of home and the season to the 4,300-member brigade serving in the deadly combat zone half way around the world.

Volunteers are working to deliver two tons of boiled peanuts, fresh from the south Georgia fields where they were grown, to the state's soldiers serving in Iraq. The peanuts are being packed in 5,000 sealed, foil pouches labeled "The Country Caviar" and "Georgia Fresh Green Peanuts Ready to Eat."

Spec. Clark Rountree's simple homesick request in late July has turned into a statewide soldier-support project, involving 4-H members across Georgia and even Gov. Sonny Perdue, whose office is even helping to arrange the transport of the peanuts to the troops.

The 22-year-old cavalry scout told his mother, Patricia Anderson of Rochelle, that he yearned for boiled peanuts amid the parched sand and 130-degree temperatures of Iraq.

"Clark told me to send boiled peanuts and some rain," Anderson recalled. "I said I can get boiled peanuts, but I don't know how to send rain. I offered to send bottled rainwater, but he wanted it coming out of the sky."

He asked her to contact his former boss, Wilcox County peanut farmer Rex Bulloch. She told Bulloch about her son's craving and his desire to share boiled peanuts from one particular south Georgia farm — Hardy Farms of nearby Hawkinsville — with fellow soldiers.

"He and Rex would go to Hardy Farms, get a big bag and ride around and eat those peanuts while checking the crops," Anderson said.

Instead of sending a few bags, Bulloch decided to supply the whole brigade. He contacted Hardy Farms and the family-owned business agreed to supply the two tons at a reduced price. "Anything Clark and those boys want, and I can get it, I'm going to get it done," said Bulloch, 57, an Army reservist during the Vietnam War.

Authentic boiled peanuts are made from "green" peanuts that are pulled from the ground early, just before they would mature into the kind of peanuts used in peanut butter, candy and snack nuts. Boiled peanuts are cleaned and then boiled in brine, often sold at roadside stands throughout the state.

"It's a Southern thing," Bulloch said. "We grew up with them and they're good. Some



Elliot Minor/AP

Brad Hardy stirs boiled peanuts in a vat recently at Hardy Farms near Hawkinsville. A member of Georgia's 48th Infantry Brigade in Iraq asked his mother to send boiled peanuts from Hardy Farms. A Wilcox County farmer was told of the request and offered to send two tons to all members of the brigade.

people don't know how to eat them. They don't know you have to pop the hulls."

Hardy Farms has built a niche market with green peanuts. They sell bags of green peanuts to those who want to boil them and they also sell boiled peanuts — fresh from the kettle at 24 roadside stands, frozen and in metallic pouches that are sold in supermarkets and discount stores.

"We always wanted to do something to show our appreciation for what they do and their sacrifice and dedication," said Brad Hardy, son of the farms' founder, Alex Hardy. "The opportunity came."

Besides the Hardy Farms label, pouches going to the troops bear the green cloverleaf logo of 4-H.

When friends suggested that others might be willing to share the costs, Bulloch, who is a former 4-H member, headed to the University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension office in Rochelle, which runs the local 4-H program.

Suzanne Keene, the local 4-H director, notified state 4-H officials in Athens, who launched a statewide fund-raiser known as Operation Boiled Peanuts.

"The next thing I knew, it was all over the state," Anderson said. "It's amazing how this one little request exploded into a blessing from everybody wanting them to have a part of home."

The 4-H goal is to raise \$6,000 by next

week, enough to buy and transport the peanuts to Iraq.

While he couldn't give an exact dollar amount, the state's 4-H program leader, Bo Ryles, said, "We are confident we will reach and surpass the goal."

Ryles said any extra money raised will go to the 4-H's Operation Military Kids program, which provides summer camps and other opportunities for children of deployed military personnel from Georgia.

Anderson said her son, an avid wild hog hunter who prefers outdoor jobs such as farming, joined the National Guard in January 2001, but didn't tell her until two months later because he didn't want his mother to worry.

"I realized in December that my baby was leaving for Iraq," she said. "He had just turned 22, but he's still my baby. He said, 'Mamma, it's just like I'm going wild hog hunting.'"

"I trust and believe that God's going to take care of him," she said. "I pray off and on all day for him and the others. It's terrible not to have him here."

Bulloch said he misses his conscientious worker, but realizes Rountree has an obligation to fulfill.

"I sure hated to see him go, not just because I was losing an employee, but because he was like a son," Bulloch said. "I told him to keep his head down low and come back safe. He's got a job when he returns if he wants it."