

Camp designed for military kids

Helps children of reservists, Guard members cope

Associated Press

DAHLONEGA, Ga. — 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.

"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 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.

The weeklong camp held this month in Georgia cost the participants \$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

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Tignall, Ga. "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.

The camp is similar in style to others that have cropped up across the country 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.

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."

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