

A family waits as a soldier spends...

THANKSGIVING AT WAR

Sergeant will eat with men

By STEVE HAYNES

Randy McHugh will have Thanksgiving dinner at a mess hall in Kuwait, 7,100 miles from home, but you can bet he'll be thinking about March, when he gets to come home to his kids.

Hard as it is to be away from the kids, he said, it'd be even harder if it weren't for the people back home who send cards and letters and packages, love and prayers.

"I think that that's the most important thing for the people over here," he said, with only a slight echo betraying the cell-phone circuit crossing two continents and the Atlantic, "knowing that somebody cares."

Mr. McHugh, a staff sergeant with the 735th Truck Company of the Nebraska National Guard, has been on active duty since January, and shipped out to Kuwait in March.

He thinks what he's doing is important. The people of Iraq are better off today than before the war, he says, though it may be some time before things settle down.

"There's a lot of good things going on here that don't get into the news," he said, noting that news reports seem to focus on the worst or most exciting events.

Iraq has thousands of miles of highway, he said, with U.S. convoys running day and night to supply troops all over the country. Most move without incident.

His unit went north twice, in April and in June, for convoy duty. While they did run into a few of the "IED's," or improvised explosive devices, along the road, he said, no one was hurt.

"As soon as you head north," he said, "all the little problems that you had seem to fade away. As soon as you cross the border, your awareness level goes up. You're more alert."

"We've had a few IEDs go off



THE MCHUGH FAMILY, (from left) Jordan, 13; Tyler, 4; Conner, 10; and mom Kristin, had big grins when his sister threatened to tickle Tyler. For Thanksgiving, they hope to get to talk to their dad in Kuwait on his cell phone. — Herald staff photo by Steve Haynes

near our convoys. It was a good experience otherwise. We got back with all of our guys. We had guys all over Iraq for a while."

While Kuwait is mostly sand and desert, he said, Iraq has more water and more greenery, especially along the Tigris and

Euphrates rivers. "There's a lot of water up there," he said. "A lot of sheep, a lot of camels."

Sgt. McHugh manned a .50 caliber machine gun atop a truck in the convoys. In Baghdad, he said, the men got to tour one of dictator

Saddam Hussein's palaces and bunk in a guest house.

"The floor was marble," he said. "The walls were marble. There was a big eagle in the wall, all marble, and the doors opened up in the middle of it."

(See SOLDIER on Page 10A)

Weather feels like spring here

Area gets almost an inch, a lot of rain for fall days

By KIMBERLY DAVIS

The weather pattern for the last couple of weeks has been more like spring than fall, but people aren't complaining.

Last week, the area received .97 of an inch rain, almost an inch, which is normal for the entire month of November. Dave Floyd, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Goodland, said it is unusual to get all the month's precipitation in one storm.

Last week's rain was a real nice soaking event, said Mr. Floyd. It was a good, slow-moving system and gave the area a real good round of rain.

This isn't usually the rainy season, he said, so the storm was a little unusual, but welcome. He said when a storm comes through this time of year, it isn't unusual for it to be liquid, since the highs are in the 50s. This time of year, said Mr. Floyd, the area usually starts to dry out.

If it had been colder, the rain could have turned to snow. Mr. Floyd said statistically there is about a 13-1 ratio for snow to water, so if the area received an inch of rain, it would have been 13 inches of snow. Depending on the conditions, if it is colder, for instance, there can be a greater ratio of snow to water.

The November weather doesn't really mean anything about the winter here, Mr. Floyd said. The winter outlook was just revised, and there really wasn't any change. There is an even chance of the area being any wetter or dryer than normal.

What this recent weather could do is help replenish the soil moisture. The drought isn't over, he said, but the area is starting to recharge the lower levels of soil. It will help get the winter wheat crop established and also help in the spring as the crop starts to grow.

Oberlin has already received 1.69 inches of precipitation for the month, he said.

Savings put to use to purchase city a new transformer

By KIMBERLY DAVIS

The Oberlin City Council agreed to buy a new transformer for the city's electrical department Thursday, which will help bring the electrical system in the city up to date since the current one is at least 30 or more years old.

At a meeting Thursday night, City Foreman Dan Castle said that around 10 years ago, the council and staff agreed that the city needs to update the electrical components, but there was no money then. In 2002, an infrastructure fund was set up, he said, and now there is money for improvements.

Mr. Castle said the oldest components need to be looked at first. The main conversion transformer at the power plant was a top priority several years ago, he said, and it still is.

The transformer converts 2,400-volt current from the city generators to 7,200 volts and 7,200 to 2,400 volts.

Mr. Castle said there is some question to how old the transformer is. The city bought it used in 1973, he said, but he has been told it was built in the 1950s.

It is at least 31 years old, he said, but he thinks it is older. There have been problems with it over the years and it has been fixed several times.

There is no way to predict when an electrical component will fail, said Mr. Castle, but it is time to replace this one.

The cost of a new transformer is \$90,235, but there are some expenses that aren't included in that price.

Mr. Castle said the big tower next to it will need to be torn down. He talked with two companies, and one would charge \$145 an hour and isn't sure how long it will take. The other company said it will charge \$765 for the complete job.

The price for the transformer is from Solomon Transformer Corp. The company will either find a transformer for the city or build one, he said.

Councilman Patrick Pomeroy asked if they could avoid tearing down the tower, but Mr. Castle said no.

The tower doesn't have to go back up, he added. It formerly held an old storm siren in the 1940s or 1960s, he said.

The tower, said Mr. Castle, could be sold for salvage. City Administrator Gary Shike said they have talked about using the metal for something for the city.

Will this be another used transformer? (See CITY on Page 5A)

Parent asks board to build sidewalks at grade school

After dropping her 5-year-old off at Oberlin Elementary School the first day in August, Shanna Long knew something needed to be done about the lack of sidewalks outside the kindergarten building.

Since then, she has proposed a plan to the school board to make it safer for the kids to get in and out of cars. Board members aren't sure they need to spend more than \$9,000 for sidewalks, however, and the school instead decided to try walking the kindergartners over to the other side of the block for pick up.

Meantime, the sidewalk plan is on hold. In the last 40 years since the kindergarten building was built, officials say, this is the first time any-

one has complained about the lack of sidewalks.

Mrs. Long said she talked with Superintendent Kelly Glodt about the problem in August. She said she thought sidewalks should have been put in on the west side of the street across from the kindergarten building and from the kindergarten building north when the building was built.

She said the kids need a safe place to walk. In the winter when it snows or when it rains, the little hill to the north of the kindergarten is a mess, she said, so kids walk in the streets. That isn't teaching them the right thing to do.

(See PROJECT on Page 10A)

Mother, wife makes plans for turkey day

By STEVE HAYNES

Kristin McHugh will round up her three kids Thursday and take them to her mom's house for Thanksgiving dinner.

Her mother, Karen Metcalf of Oberlin, will have a spread for the whole family, Kristin and her kids, her brother Barry Richards and his family, and their brother Todd from Texas and his family, plus a slew of other relatives and friends.

"It's probably the biggest bunch we've had for a while," she said.

They'll all be thinking about her husband Randy, a staff sergeant with the Nebraska National Guard serving in Kuwait. But there's one big difference between them and families of those who served in other wars.

The McHugh kids — Tyler, 4; Conner, 10; and Jordan, 13 —



ATOP AN ARMY TRUCK, Sgt. Randy McHugh manned a .50 caliber machine gun on covoy duty in Iraq.

probably will get to talk to their dad at Camp Doha, a port area in the Arabian nation.

He has a cell phone that ties him to home, and his mother, Dorothy

Dyer of Manhattan, buys time for him to talk to his family.

"It takes so much of the stress out of it," Mrs. McHugh said. "I know how good we've got it, compared

County checks into bridge replacement

By KIMBERLY DAVIS

Decatur County commissioners talked with a representative from Husker Steel last Tuesday about replacing some of the county bridges.

Road and Bridge Supervisor Tim Stallman said he wanted to get ahead of the game on replacing the bridges. He has been in contact with Lloyd Johnson from the steel firm about

the process.

Mr. Johnson said they have been helping counties with small bridges for years, offering steel structures with concrete decks. He said they can do all sizes.

All of the bridges they put in meet or beat state regulations, he said, adding that he had looked at two bridges in the county, a smaller one

and larger one.

The first one was a 20-foot bridge. He said he thought the replacement should be 24 feet long. There is a lot of steel that would be put underneath the bridge. To make it a little longer would cost less than making the wings longer, he said.

The county would remove the old structure, do the dirt work and buy

the concrete, he said. Mr. Johnson asked that the prices not be shared in case the commissioners decided to bid the project. The bridges would cost in the \$40,000 range.

The other bridge he looked at was 60 feet long. He said he thought it only needed to be 40 feet long.

Mr. Johnson said the prices (See BRIDGES on Page 5A)

* Family misses Dad

(Continued from Page 1A)
him in Nebraska. She recalls one weekend with particular glee.

She said she loaded up the car and told the kids they were going for an adventure. They wandered to Pioneer Village in Minden, then to Hastings for McDonald's and a supposed visit to the mall. Instead, they wound up at the National Guard base where his unit was camped.

"I went in to find him," she said. "I walked out, and he came out behind me. The kids just went crazy."

The Guard is so much a part of her husband, she said, that she's not sure she likes it when he talks about getting out.

"He'd been in the Guard for 10 years when we met," she said. "It's such a big part of him. It'll be 25 years in May. He was 17."

"To me, that's his career. That's what his retirement is going to be. That's what he is, a soldier."

Mrs. McHugh said she and her husband have received a lot of support from people in town and friends everywhere. Her family has helped her a lot.

"They just pick up my slack that needs picking up," she said.

The family knows how important this work is to him, and to everyone, she said. When he was at Fort Riley last year, right before shipping out, she recalled that the maid at their hotel kept telling the kids she was "sorry" their dad had to leave.

"We don't talk about it that way," she said. "Finally, a woman came up to him at breakfast and said something, and he told her, 'I'd rather it was me than my kids.'"



AT CAMP ARIFJAN in Kuwait, Staff Sgt. Randy McHugh stood by the sign marking his company's area. The Nebraska National Guard unit lives in tents with wood floors and air conditioning in the sandy desert camp.

* Soldier stationed in Kuwait

(Continued from Page 1A)

The first time the unit went north, he said, he didn't tell his wife, Kristin, until they got back.

He doesn't expect to go back to the battle zone in his last three months, but, McHugh said, you never know.

For now, part of his platoon is detailed to Camp Doha, a port area near Kuwait City, where they help new units coming in.

The main base is Camp Arifjan, southwest of the city, where the men have been providing security for a logistics base. The troops live in tents with wood floors and air conditioning, he said, so conditions are not so bad.

"You get up in the morning," he said, "and go to work just like a regular job."

The weather is starting to cool off, and the rainy season is coming: "It got down to 70 last night."

He was following the U.S. offensive in Falluja, west of Baghdad, last week.

"Those guys are doing a heck of a job," he said. "We had to go

through that kind of training. Urban warfare, that's the worst thing you can do. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes."

What happens now?

Sgt. McHugh says it's hard to use Afghanistan as an example, because Iraq is different, more urban in some areas and a lot of "foreign fighters" have come in.

"I don't know how long it's going to take," he said. "It's going to take a while. There is a lot more freedom here now. I think a lot of the trouble started when the foreigners showed up."

Meantime, he keeps doing his job and thinking about March, when the 735th is supposed to rotate home. He said he really wanted to thank all the people who have written for their support.

He remembered especially letters from Steve Arnold and Sharon Johnson, among "lots of others." The junior high Sunday school class at the United Methodist church sent a care package, which he shared with the guys.

"It makes a big difference," he

said. "It's just nice to know that people are thinking about us over here."

He says he runs into plenty of others from Kansas and Nebraska, including Oberlin's Roger Pachner, whose reserve unit just came home.

"My wife needs a big attaboy for what she's doing," he said, "but I know it's hard on her now."

He says he's not sure, after a year overseas and a stint guarding airports after the Sept. 11 attacks, that he'll re-enlist in the Guard when he comes back.

"I like the Guard, and I like what it's done for me," he said, "but missing the kids' basketball games and football games is hard."

He knows his job with the Decatur County Sheriff's Department is waiting for him. When he gets back, he figures he'll head for the nearest grass and take his shoes off, just to enjoy the feeling after all that sand, as he did when he was home in August.

"It'll be good to get home," he says.

* Project presented to school board

(Continued from Page 1A)

Mrs. Long said in September, the school board looked at the area during its tour of the building, then in October she attended a board meeting to give the sidewalk proposal. At the November meeting, the board talked with her again.

Basically the plan calls for two sidewalks. The first one, on the west side of the street in front of the school's parking lot, would cost \$1,425. If parents volunteered to do the dirt work and forming, then it would cost \$750 for concrete.

The second project, from the kindergarten building on the east side of the street north up Cass Avenue, would cost \$7,875. She said bids came from Oberlin Concrete.

When she went to the meeting in November, Mrs. Long said, she had \$4,000 in donations, but since has given the money back after some board members said the district should pay for the work. There is \$568,973 in the district's capital outlay fund, she said, and there is grant money for projects like these, but she would need permission to pursue the grants.

She said she would just like to have a safe place for the kids to be dropped off and picked up. If a parent drops their kids off outside the kindergarten building on a new sidewalk, she said, then the traffic flow would be directed north, away from the school.

Mrs. Long wants people to talk to board members about this project. The board will look at the options they are using now during the December board meeting.

Member Kurt Vollertsen said the board is looking into options and hasn't decided anything as yet. The

board voted to table the plan at the November meeting to look at some changes in how kids are picked up and dropped off. He said they probably will wait for a report back from Principal Duane Dorshorst to see how that works.

Since the board meeting, the place for the kindergarten kids to be picked up has changed. Mr. Dorshorst said the students are escorted from the kindergarten building to Rodehaver Avenue, east of the school. Along the way, they drop off the bus kids behind the kitchen.

Mrs. Long said she wondered where the kids will walk to if it is raining or snowing. There isn't any protection from the weather at that spot, she said.

Board member Barb Olson said they looked at alternatives and took the principal's recommendation for a plan that would cost less money. Mrs. Olson said the first board discussion on the proposal was at the building tour at the beginning of the school year.

The board discussed painting curbs and changing sidewalks. She said she thought those items had been addressed.

"Safety is really important to us," said Mrs. Olson, "and if we can do that better, fine, but I'm not sure if we need to go that far that fast."

She said she didn't think the board was saying "no" to the sidewalks, but wanted to go slow.

Mr. Dorshorst said they take suggestions from anywhere, and if someone has a good idea then they use it. He said they haven't ever received a complaint about the sidewalks before, though the kindergarten building was erected in the 1960s.

Sheriff patrolling today

The Decatur County Sheriff's Department will be patrolling U.S. 36 from county line to county line all day today as part of a state saturation patrol.

The patrol started at midnight and will last until 11:59 p.m. this evening. This is in cooperation with state troopers.

The saturation effort is sponsored by the Kansas Department of Transportation and the Kansas Highway Patrol.

Undersheriff Michael French said they plan to emphasize enforcement for speeding, seat belts, child safety seats and impaired driving.

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