

(02.03.05)

Serviceman tells Regina students of life in Iraq

Regina Dominican students learned a number of interesting facts about life in the military and in Iraq in particular – about exotic, 36-inch spiders in the Middle East, the various ranks of enlisted men and women in the armed services, and the life of one soldier serving in Iraq. Most importantly, however, they learned about the value of freedom and that, through the simple act of writing a letter, they can make a strong impact on the life of a man half the world away from them.

These lessons took place January 20 with the visit of Staff Sergeant Michael Harvey, a cousin by marriage of physical education teacher Natalie Rysavy. He was one of several soldiers who received letters as the result of the school's letter-writing campaign, organized by the Student Council. In gratitude, Staff Sgt. Harvey visited the school, greeted the students during lunch, and gave a presentation to interested classes during the last period of the day.

A native of Rockford, Staff Sgt. Harvey joined the Marine Corps in 1981 but has in recent years been in the Air Force Reserves, based in Madison, Wisconsin. He returned to the United States in mid-January after serving his third stint in Iraq. As an Air Force police officer, he was charged with protecting the planes and pilots and with inspecting vehicles coming into his base.

Throughout his talk, Staff Sgt. Harvey emphasized his love for the military and for the United States, his belief in the mission to bring freedom to the people in Iraq, and his willingness to serve wherever he is called. Asked about the morality of the war, he said freedom is worth dying for. "I'd rather fight the insurgents in Iraq" than on the streets of Wilmette, Illinois, he explained.

He painted a detailed picture of daily life as a soldier in Iraq, noting that he served "six hours on, six hours off for six straight months." His duty primarily entailed serving at a check-point, inspecting vehicles seeking to enter his base. The work involved constantly climbing into and out of trucks in the 100-degree heat, never knowing if he would find a bomb that could end his life.

While in Iraq, Staff Sgt. Harvey fostered the respect of the Iraqi people. They live in a region that often doesn't trust the American people, but "if you show respect for others, they'll respect you." Before being stationed in another country, he said, he makes it a point to learn about that country's language, culture and religion. In particular, in his latest service in Iraq, he gave water, Gatorade, sandwiches and fruit from his own stores to local workers, earning their loyalty and gratitude. "Most people just want to raise their families," he explained. "They're not all aggressors."

On a more personal level, he spoke of the importance of writing to service men and women overseas. During his most recent time in Iraq, he'd arrived in October and returned in mid-January, missing Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's with his wife and two small sons. "The holidays are the hardest time to be away from your family," he said, but the students' letters – which he read on Christmas Eve – made a tremendous difference to him.

Staff Sgt. Harvey also gave the students some advice. Acknowledging that war is usually not popular, he noted that those in the military merely enforce policy – they don't set it. "If you want to make changes, when you turn 18, vote. That's the way you make a change." He noted that the people of Afghanistan have voted for the first time in 500 years, and the Iraqi people for the first time in 50 years. He also encouraged the students in their early adult years to spend a couple of years in some form of full-time service – whether the Peace Corps, the Marine Corps or other volunteer programs – to gain a wealth of experience of other people and nations.