

Bangor Daily News

Pupils honor veterans

By Toni-Lynn Robbins

Saturday, April 14, 2007 - Bangor Daily News

HAMPDEN — When Chris Gould put on his uniform before work Friday morning, his son Chris Jr., 5, grew worried.

"He got kind of sad and kept asking where I was going and when I was coming back," said Gould, 27, a sergeant in Maine's Army National Guard and custodian at the Reeds Brook Middle School in Hampden.

Gould, who returned home from a yearlong deployment to Iraq in March, assured his son that he would be home that night.

He put on his Army uniform Friday for the first time since his return. He was to be a guest speaker at the middle school as part of an early Patriot's Day celebration aimed at honoring veterans.

Nearly 100 veterans of all wars, from World War II to the present, were celebrated in the daylong event. In the morning pupils watched a Black Hawk helicopter land at the school as they toured Humvees and armored vehicles. By afternoon, the celebration moved to the school's gymnasium, beginning with an address by Gov. John Baldacci and later highlighted by a live video interview with Maine soldiers in Iraq.

When Gould stepped up to the flag-draped podium, the youngsters, educators and other veterans in attendance gave him a standing ovation. During his brief speech, the soldier thanked the other



Members of the Maine Army National Guard Security Force II in Iraq talk to pupils, veterans and guests on a video link provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation at Reeds Brook Middle School in Hampden on Friday. (Bangor Daily News/Gabor Degre)



Sgt. Chris Gould works at the Reeds Brook Middle School in Hampden as a custodian. Sgt. Gould talked to students Friday. (Bangor Daily News/Gabor Degre)

veterans, the Reeds Brook staff for helping his wife while he was deployed, and all of the military spouses for providing unwavering support from home.

"I know when some of you guys came home you didn't get the support I did," Gould said. "Thank you so much for not letting that happen to me. When I came home we had nearly 1,000 people there greeting us."

All afternoon the pupils mingled with veterans, shared their stories and honored their service.

"The thing that struck me was the time I spent with the veteran I adopted," said Sophie Lataille, 14, of Hampden. Several pupils had spent time with veterans earlier in the week and listened to their stories. A spotlight shone on individuals or small groups of youngsters as they shared the stories of their "adopted" veterans Friday. At the end of each presentation, the youngsters met the highlighted veteran and offered a big hug, prompting a bright smile.

Tears slid down the cheek of Mary Jordan, 66, of Camden when a student-produced slide show of photos featuring war scenes from 1941 to the present played to country singer Toby Keith's "American Soldier." Jordan's husband, Charles, a Navy veteran, recalled the struggles that young soldiers, such as Gould, experience during war.

"I was in Cuba when my oldest son was born," Charles Jordan said. "I never even saw him until he was at least 6 weeks old."

A little earlier in the day, at about 12:30 p.m., the school had used a Web camera to connect with Maine Army National Guard soldiers now deployed to Iraq over a video link provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a New Jersey based charity which provides state-of-the-art communications services to military families free of charge. Despite delays between questions posed by pupils and the soldiers' answers, the Guard members shared stories of daily interactions with Iraqi civilians, their convoy security missions and how they stayed in touch with family back home.

The soldiers, who hail from every region in the state, are part of the Security Force II unit, and have been deployed for nine months. They are scheduled to come home in June.

In keeping with the military theme, the middle school pupils also ate MREs, or Meals Ready To Eat, for lunch. When the Maine soldiers on the video screen learned this, they burst into laughter, which was quickly replaced with sympathetic stares. The soldiers offered a genuine, "Man, I'm sorry," before erupting into laughter for a second time.

"They were awful; I am hungry," Jon Haws, a pupil at the school, said after the ceremony. The shortbread cookies, raisins, stale crackers and beef stew did not satisfy his 14-year-old appetite, nor did they please his palate.

While Gould was offered an MRE for lunch, he declined the opportunity.

"I didn't want to cheat any of the kids out of the experience," he said, as his smirk turned into hearty laughter.

At the end of the roughly 15-minute live feed with the soldiers overseas, the pupils asked whether the men would like to say anything to the crowd back in Maine.

Silence fell over the soldiers, who moments before had been laughing and stepping over one another to get into the picture.

Then, from the back of the crowd, one soldier finally spoke up: "Uhhh ... Just that we want to go home."