

Final day: Operation Holiday Greeting: Mission Accomplished

On Veterans Day 2004, I announced that I would be leading a group of congressmen to visit our troops in Afghanistan just three years after Operation Enduring Freedom ended the reign of the Taliban and the sanctuary of Osama Bin Laden. I decided to go during the summer of 2004 when I learned that our Indiana National Guard accounts for more than 15 percent of the 10,000 National Guard troops serving in Afghanistan. I couldn't think of a better place to spend the holidays than with our neighbors serving in the Guard on freedom's frontier.

To make the trip a little more special, I asked Hoosiers to send me greeting cards that I could deliver to the troops so that they could experience a touch of home during the Holiday season. I called it "Operation Holiday Greeting" and with the generous help of newspapers, television and radio stations across Indiana, we got the word out.

In the few weeks between the announcement and our trip, we thought that we'd hear from a few thousand folks. Boy, were we wrong. In the two weeks that followed the announcement, our office received more than 25,000 holiday greeting cards! They came from children and seniors, from cities and rural areas. In virtually every card, there were a few handwritten words of gratitude for the soldier who might read it on the other side of the world.

To all of you who wrote and sent cards from your kitchen tables, churches, schools and senior centers, I am writing to say: "Mission accomplished!" Everywhere we went, your cards went with us. From Camp Phoenix outside Kabul, to Bagram Air Force Base to the Landstuhl Medical Center in Germany, your cards were passed out by the fist-full to men and women eager to hear from home. Every time I handed the cards to soldiers, I'd say, "We got 25,000 of these for you in two weeks!" And each would smile with amazement and delight. Often the recipients in uniform would ask, "Really?" and, "Do they really know that we're here?" To which I would reply, "25,000 in two weeks." Case closed.

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, so I would encourage anyone who took the time to respond to Operation Holiday Greeting to visit my website at www.mikepence.house.gov and see the reaction of the soldiers for yourself. The impact of your kindness is visible on every soldier's face.

While it was special to see thousands of brave soldiers in Afghanistan delight at your cards, my favorite moment came at the military hospital in Germany where our soldiers are taken as soon as they can be moved from the battlefield. It's always tough to be in the hospital and for these heroes it's no different. Having the privilege of leaving each of them with a stack of your cards was special, but I was most touched by one particular soldier in the intensive care unit.

He was lying on his back with a tube in his throat, lost in a web of hoses and cables, but the doctors told me I could speak to him. He looked up at me with dull eyes as I spoke of the gratitude of the people of Indiana, but he gave me very little reaction. But when I brought out a stack of the cards and held them a few inches above his face and told him what I had told hundreds of other soldiers, "I got 25,000 of these in two weeks," that brave soldier started to cry. And so did I.

Pence update: Operation Holiday Greeting

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As I left the room, I touched his bare shoulder and breathed a prayer that God might reward his selflessness with healing and I thought what a privilege it was to carry your mail.

May each of you that responded to Operation Holiday Greeting know that your efforts were not in vain. You touched hearts. You encouraged heroes. It is such a privilege to represent people like you in Washington, D.C.

- Rep. Mike Pence, Kabul, Afghanistan