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PRESS RELEASE

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UMM QASR- GIFTS FOR THE CHILDREN

Although the festivities normally associated with this time of year are not celebrated in Iraq, the spirit of Christmas was very much in the air for some very lucky children living in the southern Iraqi village of Umm Qasr. Soldiers from 100 Pioneer Squadron based at Cramlington near Newcastle assisted by colleagues from 45 Signal Squadron 'Tiger Team' based at Worcester visited three local schools bearing gifts donated from two schools back home in Britain.

Local clerics and community leaders turned out to welcome the soldiers and also helped to keep order and discipline amongst the excited children. Teachers arranged the youngsters into small groups and brought them up to the 'Goodie Boxes' in orderly lines. A variety of odd sized shoe boxes containing small cuddly toys and other little gifts were donated by Manor Park School, Worcester. Mrs Susan Harrison-Sturt, who works at the school, assisted by an army of willing volunteers, co-ordinated the collection and packaging back in Britain. Her son, Captain Andy Sturt, Officer Commanding Tiger Team based at Umm Qasr was the link man in Iraq and took on the responsibility of co-ordinating the security and distribution arrangements.

As the shoe boxes were handed out around the classroom the faces of the children lit up with glee as they removed the lid and discovered its contents.

Gifts of a very different kind were in another consignment sent out from the UK. The Squadron Sergeant Major (SSM) from 100 Pioneer Squadron based in Umm Qasr, Sergeant Major Steve Wardlaw, had taken receipt of several large cardboard boxes full of footwear ranging from flip flops to trainers which had been collected by the pupils, families and staff of St Bedes Roman Catholic School, Bedlington near Newcastle.

Following a comment he made by telephone to his wife back in Bedlington, in the North East of England, about the children in Umm Qasr walking around with no shoes on their feet, the SSM was unaware of what was about to happen back in the UK. His six year old niece Shirley Charlton, who attends St Bedes RC School in Bedlington, told her teacher Mrs Dolby the story about 'the poor wee bairns with nothing on their feet' and the school swung into action and started a shoe collecting campaign. The soldiers distributing the shoes at Umm Qasr tried to match up the foot sizes of as many children as possible and

by the end of visit every child in the school had something on their feet, regardless of shoe size.

Even though Iraqis don't celebrate Christmas, being Muslims, they have just had their own big annual celebration: The Festival of Eid, marking the end of the Ramadan when the country fasts, so excitement was already at fever pitch. The gifts from England were quite simply the icing on the cake!

Local community leader Sheikh Majd Altaee asked Captain Andy Sturt and Sergeant Major Steve Wardlaw to pass on his thanks to everyone back in Britain who has helped to make the children of Umm Qasr so very happy.

ENDS

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