

# ***New library to enhance Soldiers, Iraqis knowledge***

By Sgt. Judith DaCosta

"A library cannot be constructed," said Nicholas A. Basbanes, author, journalist and world chronicler from Boston, quoting a Scottish historian, "it is the growth of ages."

Understanding the need for books for Soldiers and Iraqis in Balad, 3rd Corps Support Command, with the help of World War II veterans, Boy Scouts and individual American volunteers, opened the doors to growth and knowledge and the 3,000 books in the new Halbert and Red Circle Library during a ceremony inside the Black Jack Education Center at Logistical Support Area Anaconda.

Guests and key leaders came to the library opening to welcome the LSA Anaconda public and describe the significance of this library in Balad.

"This is just an extraordinary opportunity to do what I have written five books about – celebrations of books, book people, book culture, and libraries," said Basbanes who said he was proud to speak at the library opening.

"These books make a connection for Soldiers," said Col. Susan Sowers, the 3rd COSCOM Chief of Staff, at the library opening. "They [Soldiers] may find an interest that they never knew they had. Whatever motivates you, it's available."

In addition to providing books for Soldiers, the 3rd COSCOM hopes the local community benefits from the books as well.

"There is an appetite and hunger for the English language among Iraqis," said Lt. Col. Brian McNerney, the 3rd COSCOM public affairs officer. "For example, doctors and people in the medical profession have to use English because it is the language of medicine, so there is a natural community that hungers for English. Under Sadaam there wasn't ready access to general Western Literature, or ideas – it wasn't allowed."

Eventually, the library and all its books will be handed over to the Iraqis, said McNerney.

3rd COSCOM is extending the mission beyond the confines of Balad to the surrounding Forward Operating Bases in Iraq as well.

Books will be sent on combat logistics patrols as gifts to Soldiers, said Col. Jannett N. Jackson, the 40th Corps Support Group Commander, at the ceremony while holding a small cardboard box representative of the many other boxes of paperback books ready for distribution.

"However, we are only seeing the end portion of this project here today," said Jackson.

The project to make books available to Soldiers and Iraqis through the Halbert and Red Circle Library began in Germany one year ago as an idea inspired by World War II veterans, explained Col. Mark W. Hampton, the 35th Area Support Group Commander, who summarized the events that brought the books to Iraq during the ceremony.

While interviewing veterans at the 61st anniversary of the end of the war in March 2005, McNerney learned how American troops stationed in Germany introduced Germans to an American style of democracy simply by providing books, said McNerney.

Upon arriving at his duty station in Balad, McNerney reportedly said there were not enough books available for the large amount of Soldiers stationed in Balad to read.

McNerney saw an opportunity for veterans to impact the world as they had done roughly 60 years ago in Germany.

"It occurred to me that one way they [veterans] could make a difference is if they took on a mission to collect books for Soldiers," he said.

Veterans were enthusiastic about the idea and immediately spread the word – a course of action that would "snowball to unbelievable results," predicted Robert Patton, a veteran of the 65th Infantry Division, in an email to McNerney in December 2005.

In February 2006, Patton initiated a book drive in the Chapel Hill, N.C., area that raked in close to 10,000 books, according to an e-mail from Patton.

Members of several groups and several other volunteers stacked, packed and sent the books to the transportation branch chief at Pope Air Force Base, N.C., to be shipped overseas, according to a report by the North Carolina Legion News.

About four weeks later, many of the books arrived in Iraq.

In four months, a fully functional library was established with about 6,000 to 7,000 more books on the way, said Hampton, during the ceremony as he stood amidst bookshelves with little or no space left for additional books.

Also, 3rd COSCOM dedicated the library to the Soldiers of the 65th and 71st Infantry Divisions whose veterans predominantly supported the project, said McNerney.

"This is a project that shows the Iraqi people what really is in the hearts of Americans," said McNerney.

McNerney planned to relay this message to the Iraqi public through Iraqi media member Kaym Maytham at the ceremony; however, Maytham was unable to attend.

"I wanted an Iraqi – one of the ultimate recipients of these books – to be here, understand this and be able to explain this [event] to Iraqis," said McNerney.

Though Maytham was not able to attend the ceremony, he is scheduled to come to the LSA in the near future, said McNerney – at which point McNerney plans to show him the library.

The library mission has grown into a massive combined effort allowing WWII veterans, Boy Scouts and volunteers to share a wealth of books with Soldiers and Iraqis.

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When you look around, you see it's not Harvard and its 15 million volumes, and it's not the Library of Congress and its 30 million volumes but it is the Halbert and Red Circle Library in Balad and it has 3,000 books on day one, said Basbanes.

The library will continue to grow as books continue to come in. For now, 3,000 books is a good beginning. |