



Sweet Dreams for Soldiers

NJAA members decorate pillows to send to American troops overseas.

Story & photos by **Chelsea Good**

When many Americans lay their heads on their pillows at night, they think of friends or family serving their country overseas. They pray for their safety and comfort. Chances are the soldiers half a world away have already been up for a couple of hours. But even if they were lying in bed, there likely wouldn't be a pillow involved.

"Nobody can believe it, but military personnel don't receive pillows when they check in overseas," Susan Merriman, Michigan Junior Angus Association (MJAA) leader, says. She adds that the soldiers have the opportunity to purchase a 4-inch (in.) x 6-in. piece of foam rubber that's about 2 in. thick for \$5. These go flat after a couple of nights' use.

The MJAA thought soldiers deserve better, so they made it their American dream to help change this. A camouflage T-shirt-wearing army of MJAA members arrived at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) with a mission to execute.

Their mission was Operation Pillow Talk, a program that sends decorated pillows to soldiers overseas. Thursday and Friday of the NJAS, National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) members could decorate pillows in the Expo Center with drawings and messages of encouragement. The pillows were meant to send emotional support as well as physical comfort to soldiers.

"We hope the soldiers receive these pillows and realize that there are still people back home thinking about and praying for

them," MJAA member Rachael Vaassen says. She adds that, as time passes, people seem to think the war is an old issue, and she wants to let the soldiers know there are still people supporting them.

"We had a tremendous response," Merriman says. The pillow-decorating tables were never empty the whole time the project was going on. Operation Pillow Talk at the NJAS started with two tables that would fit five or six kids each, but the MJAA added a third table after a line of eager kids formed.

Reighly Blakley of Oologah, Okla., drew a flag on her pillow and wrote, "I hope you make it home safe."

"I think the soldiers are really brave, and I hope they are excited when they get my pillow," Blakley says.

Another girl drew her Angus steer, and some youngsters wrote about how hot it was at the show.

"I just hope that some farm boys overseas will get one of those and know that life is still normal somewhere out there," Merriman says.

She adds that many people came up to the tables during the event and told her they had friends or family overseas with the military.

The West Michigan Military Family Support Group organizes Operation Pillow Talk.

The group first began the effort about five years ago. It has since sent close to 6,000 pillows overseas, paying for shipping through donations. The MJAA purchased their 300 pillows at a Tulsa, Okla., Walgreen's store, which provided them at cost. Two Men and a Truck® donated the trucking.

Even with all of that support, it was a big commitment for the MJAA.

"It cost us \$600 to put on, but we felt the cause was well worth it," Vaassen says. She would like to thank those NJAA members and adults who helped make the MJAA's dream of sending pillows to soldiers a reality.

Tonight, there are 300 soldiers who can lay their heads on pillows knowing Angus youth and adults took time out of their busy show week to send them messages of encouragement. Hopefully, that thought will help make their dreams a little sweeter.



► **Above:** NJAA members decorate pillows that will be sent to American troops overseas.



► **Right:** MJAA members wear camouflage shirts promoting Operation Pillow Talk.



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

► **Left:** American Angus Association Regional Manager Jerry Cassady and Executive Vice President John Crouch join Angus juniors decorating pillows.

► **Below:** An Operation Pillow Talk participant looks up from the pillow he is decorating.

Operation Pillow Talk

The West Michigan Military Family Support Group sends pillows to a soldier's troop when his or her name and Army Post Office (APO) or Fleet Post Office (FPO) address are submitted to: westmiasmfamilysupport@netscape.com or Rená Guttrich, 1466 Edgeknoll Dr. S.E., Kentwood, MI 49508.

Donations mailed to this address are also appreciated. Checks should be made payable to the Salvation Army/OPT.



► A girl shows off the flag she drew on her pillow.



► A cot in the MJAA display offers a visual reminder that soldiers don't receive pillows when they check in overseas.



► MJAA members decorated their stalls with a display expressing their dream to help American troops overseas.