

WARM WELCOME

Since the start of the Iraq War, volunteers in Maine have greeted over 1,000,000 troops at the Bangor airport

It was 2 a.m., and Army Lt. Col. Kate Van Auken just wanted to sleep. But the August 2008 flight, her first in a three-leg trip to Afghanistan, had landed in Bangor, Maine, and the 250 soldiers on board were ordered to

deplane for refueling. They expected a desolate airport but instead found a group of local senior citizens, wide awake and cheering. "Each one of the greeters shook our hands and hugged us—all 250," recalls Van Auken, 42. "They never tired. Each squeeze was as filled with love as the first. It was the



Knight (right, with Mundy and Gaudet) says that meeting the soldiers has also made their own lives richer.

most incredible display of devotion.”

Since the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, a rotating group of about 50 volunteers at Bangor International Airport (one of the military’s main U.S. departure and arrival points) have met troops deploying or coming home at all hours. This spring they greeted their millionth service member and have no plans to stop.

“These are volunteer troops,” says World War II veteran Bill Knight, 87, who helped start the practice. “We decided to honor them, make them feel they’ve done a good job for us.” Knight rarely misses a day—even through his battle with cancer. He and two others, Jerry Mundy, 74, and Joan Gaudet, 76, were featured in a 2009 documentary, *The Way We Get By*, made by Joan’s son Aron. At that time, they weren’t near the 1,000,000 mark, which Mundy, a former Marine, sees as a bitter-sweet milestone. “It’s a landmark. But why did we have to go this long?”

Besides warm wishes, the troops also get donated treats and use of a cell



“Somebody’s got to tell them we care,” says Mundy (left).

phone to say “I’m back” or one more “goodbye.” JoAnn Lyles received such a call in 2008 from her son Marine LCpl. Jordan Haerter, 19. “It was great—even though he was still in the States—to hear from him,” says Lyles, whose son died a month later in Iraq.

“That phone call was so special.”

The greeters, too, get something out of it. “It feels like you’re doing your small part for the country,” says Gaudet. “It’s just a fantastic feeling.”

By Jennifer Wren