

Weekly knitting circle makes scarves
and helmet liners headed for Afghanistan

Warming the troops

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

A great bonfire raged on the Guilford Green the night World War II ended, Jennie Offredy recalls, as she presides over a weekly knitting circle at St. George Catholic Church. When she got home from the celebration, she saw the sweater vest she had finished for a soldier that day. It still hangs in her closet.

From the time that President Franklin Roosevelt declared war on Germany and Japan in December 1941, Offredy had been knitting wool vests to keep American servicemen warm, using yarn furnished by the Red Cross in Guilford.

"I was working two jobs then," she remembers, "but whenever I had a spare moment, I'd take up the work." She wasn't alone: "anyone who could hold a pair of knitting needles was doing it."

More than six decades later, she's heading a similar effort on the homefront. Each Thursday evening, a group of women ranging from a grade-schooler to a pair of golden-agers assemble around a table in a modest classroom at the Fr. Sullivan Center at St. George on Whitfield Street, just a stone's throw from where the 1945 festivities took place, industriously making

See **KNITTING**, Page 4



Yolanda Sirchia of Madison works on a scarf for troops in Afghanistan. The Knitting Group works at the St. George Catholic Church in Guilford. Photo by Peter Casolino.



From left to right; Christine Richard of Guilford, 10-Year-old Christina Sirchia and her mother Yolanda of Madison, and Mae Olmsted of Guilford work on making scarves for troops in Afghanistan. The Knitting Group works at the St. George Catholic Church in Guilford. Photo -Peter Casolino

F R O M P A G E O N E

Knitting circle: Local women engage in a heartwarming enterprise

From page 1

scarves and helmet liners for troops exposed to wind and bitter cold.

Offredy, who grew up in Guilford, came upon the project by chance. Earlier this year, she was shopping at the Yarn Basket in Branford and spotted an article in Family Circle Magazine about a troop support program called Operation Helmetliner. Founded in 2005, the operation, based in Peoria, Ill., is part of Citizen Support for America's Military (Citizen S.A.M.) and has spread throughout the country, with volunteers using Citizen S.A.M.'s guidelines to knit or crochet sorely needed articles for armed forces in the field.

The New York Times recently reported that roughly 130,000 troops remain in Iraq; it estimates the number of troops in Afghanistan at 58,000

and that number is rising. Those isolated in remote outposts, like the towering, craggy mountains near the Pakistani border, often brave frigid temperatures in the winter. At night in the deserts of Iraq, soldiers ride in open humvees at 60 m.p.h. in sub-zero wind chills. In such areas, access to items like helmet liners and scarves is limited or non-existent.

That's where the experience and resourcefulness of Offredy, who's widely known for her good works with the elderly and sick, kicked in. The vigorous senior citizen made copies of the article and passed them around. When, as she puts it, "almost everyone who learned about it couldn't wait to get started," she found someone to download patterns for the scarves and helmet liners. In

compliance with the instructions, she bought wool instead of synthetic fibers. According to the Operation Helmetliner website, wool is inherently nonflammable and won't melt against the skin in the event of an accident.

Conforming to the strict requirements is at times a challenge, says Offredy. Being off as little as one-half stitch per inch will render a helmet liner useless because it might restrict a soldier's field of vision. To prevent wind from whipping underneath it, the face ribbing can't be too loose. There's little latitude as well in color options: volunteers must use black, charcoal, brown, tan, or olive drab-colored yarn.

On a recent Thursday evening, Mae Olmsted and Margaret Motzer, both of Guilford, diligently counted

stitches to ensure that the scarves they were laboring over met the required dimensions. Says Motzer, who teaches part-time in New Haven, "it's just fun working with a nice group of people doing something worthwhile."

With a nephew from Colorado deployed to Iraq last month, Olmsted is the only member of the group with a family member or relative in the field. Still, there's a quiet sense of mission that pervades the small classroom. Even the group's youngest member, Christina Sirchia, 10, of Madison, feels it. "When I'm knitting, I imagine a soldier walking in the snow with the wind blowing really hard, and he has this scarf I made that's keeping him warm," says the fifth-grader.

There's not much discus-

sion about whether the troops should be fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the reason is simple: regardless of anyone's opinion on the war, "the fact is they're there, and because they're there, this is something we can do to help them," says Christina's mother Yolanda Sirchia. "It's all about supporting our men and women," echoes Christine Richard of Guilford, who works at Yale-New Haven Hospital, "about making them a little more comfortable and at the same time knowing they're appreciated."

It's also a little reminder of home, says Offredy. That's why her first priority is to ship the scarves and helmet liners to those from the shoreline serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. In that spirit, she's sending out a call to their families, friends, and relatives to get in touch with Larry Santamaria, commander of the VFW, through Gayle Molly-

Barbour at 203-214-7427, with any contact information they might have. The VFW will then arrange to get the articles to the troops.

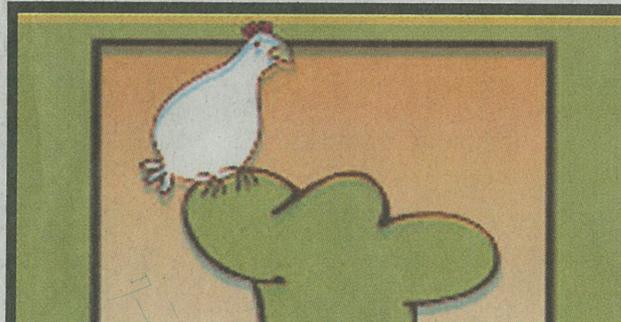
To the sound of the group's needles clicking, Offredy reminisced about the bonfire on the Guilford Green—and the unworn sleeveless sweater. "I never had to give it to the Red Cross," she said. "The war was over, and that was one terrific feeling." Still, she added, "until the last soldier's home-

from Iraq and Afghanistan, I'm just going to keep knitting until my arm falls off."

For anyone interested in getting involved with Operation Helmetliner, the group meets at 6 p.m. each Thursday at the Fr. Sullivan Center at St. George Catholic Church on 33

Whitfield Street in Guilford. Beginners are welcome.

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Busy Schedule

Nightly Blue