Letters from home

Tom Sikes is the pastor of First Christian Church in Meridian. His letter is to all service men and women who are serving overseas in the U.S. War on Terror.

To those serving in war,

While we are snuggled under a comforter around our fireplaces watching the latest shows and sports events, you are bunkered behind walls securing a place for democracy and peace.

Sikes

Thank you for being a peacemaker. When you celebrate your purpose in life, please know that you are honored, appreciated and supported by many here in The States.

When you return home, please know that we will be here ready to welcome you home. We open our arms, run toward you and celebrate your faithful service and dedication to freedom. Like the Father running to welcome the child who was far away (Luke 15), so God is doing the same now ... looking out the window waiting for you to bound the hill. He runs toward you.

Blessings in your mission.

Tom Sikes

Steven Mercado is a freshman at Meridian Community College. His letter is to Tyler Coldwell, a former Valdosta football player and now a member of the U.S. Army Rangers' Airborne Division.

Dear Tyler,

I am writing this letter because I would like you to know how proud I am of you. You are willing to put your life on the line every day to keep our country safe. I have not met very many people like you who are so determined to be the best in everything they do.

You are in Iraq as an Army Ranger, and I know you will make us all proud. We have all really missed you. Everyone keeps telling your family how proud they are of you. We all cannot wait until you get home safe. Your family is doing well, and we are all in school.

All of our neighbors have the yellow ribbon magnets on their cars in support of you and all the other brave men and women of the armed services. Again, I would just like to say how proud we are of you, an we all cannot wait until you get home safe. You are in our prayers.

Steven Mercado

Dawn Lummus is a sophomore at Meridian High School. Her letter is to all service men and women who are serving overseas in the U.S. War on Terror.

Dear military men and women,

I want you to know how much I appreciate you helping protect our country. I know you miss your families and home. I want to say you are the people that saved us on 9-11. I hope you continue to protect and serve our country. You are brave and strong to be in the military. I would not have been that way. Thanks for everything you have done for our country.

Dawn Lummus

Roni Evans is a sophomore at West Lauderdale High School. Her letter is to all service men and women who are serving overseas in the U.S. War on Terror.

To U.S. troops,

... My best wishes go out to you and your families. This is a very difficult time for all of you. Just keep your faith in God and he will lead you through this complex moment in time. My family supports our president and supports you troops overseas fighting for our freedom.

I can only imagine what all of you do on a daily basis while away from your homes. Thanks for being so courageous and going to a foreign place for your country's sake. I really appreciate what all of you do to protect the rights of your fellow Americans. Please come home soon and God bless you and yours and America.

Roni Evans

Mission

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Cluff's family experienced a suppressive government firsthand. He was born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1970 — during the height of the Vietnam War.

He's adamant regarding the fight for freedom. And, he's a strong supporter of President George Bush.

"People who criticize President Bush ... need to understand that we, the American soldiers, Marines, sailors, Guardsmen, Reservists, Coast Guard members and airmen believe in the cause for freedom," Cluff said.

"Some of us will die so we can talk, walk and eat with our family, or do anything else — including voicing our opinion — without worrying about being killed or having the feeling of fear."

Cluff also responded to attacks on President Bush in the media.

"I believe in what President Bush is doing. He received a lot of negative media from major networks and newspapers especially during the election process," Cluff said.

"I feel the media has not given him the proper respect, which he justly deserves. Even if one does not respect the person as president, you should respect the position.

"He is not my president, President Bush is our president. He represents us as one of the leaders of the free world and as a leader for the United States of America."

Making choices

Cluff, who has served in the U.S. Marine Corps for five years, said he joined the military for one reason: "To prove to myself that I can do whatever I put my mind to."

He said he chose the Marine Corps because he wanted to be a part of a military branch "where I felt my experience would be most beneficial to God, my country and my family."

And another important reason Cluff chose the Marines: "Ever since I was a kid and saw a Marine in his dress blues, I knew it was the branch for me."

But, Cluff also enjoys his role as community college teacher — and he shares his computer knowledge with professionals at various companies. He recently began his own computer consulting firm, ITG Consulting, in 2003.

Family, business history

Cluff has just about traveled the world in his 37 years of life, thanks in part to his father's work as a news correspondent while serving in the U.S. Army.

"We came to America in 1970, soon after my birth in Vietnam. We lived in Virginia for five years and moved in 1975 to Anchorage, Alaska," Cluff said.

"In 1985, I moved to Tallahassee, Fla., where I was a beach bum for about three months. I basically started working because I ran out of money — go figure! I worked at a car rental place for about two years, and moved back to Alaska for family reasons."

After his return to Anchorage, Cluff and his wife, Carla, a Tucson, Ariz., native, married in 1990.

That same year, Cluff graduated from Alaska Computer Institute, where he learned about business programming. Following graduation, Cluff went to work for United Parcel Service as an information system technician until 1994.

He was later hired as a computer network programmer/analyst for the State of Alaska, where he was employed until 1998.

Cluff moved his family to Newton, Miss., in 1998, following his mother's death from brain cancer.

He began taking classes at ECCC, and took time off during his sophomore year to join the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve.

Cluff graduated from ECCC in 2001, and later went to work for a computer software company in Meridian. He also worked at his family's restaurant, BoRo's in Newton, until he started ITG Consulting. That same year, 2003, Cluff went to work at ECCC.

Far from home

What will Kelly Cluff miss most about home?

Here's a partial list: "The chaotic noise of my loving kids when they want my attention, the quiet time talking to my wife about everything and nothing, my friends at Central United Methodist Church, the ECCC students, my work time with the ECCC family, the sounds of laughter and the 'light bulb' that goes off when a student finally 'gets it,' my computer consulting business and my own cooking."

Although he "loves" his wife's cooking, Cluff said he also enjoys cooking for family and friends. He recently prepared fried egg rolls and other goodies for his colleagues at ECCC.

He said he may write a cookbook called "Fifty Ways to Serve an MRE," because he will be eating a lot of MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat) in Iraq.

Although Cluff was not able to discuss the details of his mission in Iraq, one can rest assured knowing that he and the thousands of other men and women serving our country are doing their best not only to provide freedom for the Iraqi people, but for the rest of the world as well.

Jacome-Cluff

IN HIS DAUGHTER'S EYES

Katherine Jacome-Cluff is the 9-year-old daughter of Sgt. Kelly Cluff of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. She is a fourth-grade student at Newton County Elementary School, where she drew this picture of her father in art class.

186th

From page 1

Al and Fred Key lifted off the grass strip of Meridian's airport to break the world record for sustained flight.

They flew for 27 days. When they landed on July 1, 1935, the crowd that greeted them is estimated to have numbered 30,000-40,000. The Meridian airport was renamed Key Field in their honor.

The flight was made in a Curtis Robbins Monoplane called the "Ole Miss," and it proved that air-to-air refueling worked.

Both brothers served in World War II as pilots and both contributed to the design of the B-17 Flying Fortress bombers.

On Sept. 27, 1953, the 153rd Observational Squadron of the Air National Guard was established; it would evolve into the 186th Air Refueling Wing.

During World War II, the unit was assigned several roles, including anti-submarine aerial patrol. After the war, the unit served as a fighter squadron and an escort squadron from Strategic Air Command.

In 1992, the 186th ARW was assigned its current mission. Its counterdrug mission was assigned in 1996.