

Volunteers show support with Steaks for Troops

Written by Darci Tomky

- What seemed like a small, simple gesture has expanded into a meaningful token of appreciation. Several Holyoke community members had an opportunity to say “thank you” to American soldiers by simply cooking up some steaks.
- Steaks for Troops is a program organized by the Kansas-based All American Beef Battalion. It is the vision of Bill Broadie, a Vietnam veteran and cattle rancher who uses steak dinners to support both American troops and the American beef industry.
- Volunteers serve meals to troops and their families on military bases just before they are deported or after their homecoming.
- “It’s just a small appreciation for what they do,” said Allyn Robinson, a volunteer from Holyoke who served meals to troops at Ft. Carson in Colorado Springs in April.
- Robinson found out about the organization when the Enterprise ran a story about volunteers Gordan Miller and Bill Harmon, both former Holyoke residents. He served with his wife Sheila and daughters Crystal Oakley and Ashley Gragg.
- Miller and Harmon also influenced other community members including Miller’s sister Peggy Rafert and her husband Lennie as well as Gene Kleve, a friend of Miller and Harmon. Other volunteers from Holyoke who served meals in April were Lonnie Carlstrom, Ron Lock, Stacy Reuter, Alan Strong and Phil Krumm.
- Having cooked thousands of steaks, Miller and Harmon travel to military bases 1-2 times a month with their huge barbecue grill to serve with Steaks for Troops.
- By “giving back a little bit,” Robinson explained this is just a small appreciation for what the soldiers do for America. He took two Saturdays to take his big smoker cooker to Steaks for Troops. “The guys can’t believe we take time out just to do that,” he said. “It goes a long way.”
- Cooking is a hobby for Robinson, so grilling over 600 steaks one week and 1,000 the next was no problem for him. Two crews with a dozen people each cut, prepared, seasoned and cooked the steaks. These were combined with hot dogs, hamburgers, potato salad, green beans, rolls and cookies to make quite a feast for the troops and their families.
- Kleve noted that volunteers are put right to work to get the meal prepared. With his apron on, he grilled hot dogs and even sauteed onions, a new experience for him. Even with so much to be done in so little time, Kleve thought the lunch preparations went smoothly for a meal of that magnitude.
- Starting at 7 a.m. the large-scale meal took a few hours to prepare and then took 30-40 minutes to get 1,000 people through the long serving line. Kleve said it was a family style dinner, and of course, the families got all the leftovers.
- The troops and their families were all very appreciative of the meal which allowed them to spend some time together before being deployed. Rafert said a presentation was given for the troops at the beginning of the meal to send them off. The meal she served in April took place two weeks before the soldiers were deployed to Afghanistan for several months.
- “To know we were contributing and helping to send them off was pretty neat,” said Rafert.
- Kleve reflected on the tension between the soldiers, their wives and children, noting he has had that feeling with two of his own sons in the military. His oldest son, Jon, is currently serving overseas as a special operations pilot while Mitchell, his youngest son, will probably be deployed in 6-8 months with the Army Corp of Engineers.
- As a third generation member of the military and a Vietnam veteran, the biggest impact for Kleve was the support of the military given by the Steaks for Troops organization. He remembers the negative view of soldiers during the time he served and what a contrast this is to that. “Respect for our military is what we need to look for,” he said “It is a message all of

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America needs to get.” It was inspiring for him to see the volunteers’ regard and respect for the troops. Kleve said, “Everyone thanked me for putting a roll on their plates. No—we’re thanking you!”

□ Steaks for Troops is expanding and serves troops everywhere from Kansas, Colorado, Texas, Utah and Wyoming. Food and money are donated to provide supplies for the meals; and all the servers are volunteers. Rafert noted a rodeo group from Garden City, Kan. helps coordinate the food.

□ For more information on donating or volunteering with Steaks for Troops, visit the All American Beef Battalion website at www.steaksfortroops.com.