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Going global

100+

Driving ranges at
U.S. military bases

26

No. of countries that received
donated equipment

150,000

Golf clubs shipped
to troops worldwide



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BUNKERS IN BAGHDAD

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Lance Calvert shows his appreciation for Bunkers in Baghdad, a Buffalo-based nonprofit that ships golf balls, clubs and more to servicemen and women around the world. Calvert is stationed at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan.

BY MATT CHANDLER
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Sitting in the upper level of Mezza restaurant in downtown Buffalo, Joseph Hanna picks at a plate of lentils on a bed of lettuce. The Lebanese eatery in the heart of the Elmwood Village is a favorite spot when he is looking to escape the chaos of his average day.

On this day, the Goldberg Segalla partner is here to talk about two of his favorite subjects: golf and Bunkers in Baghdad. He founded the latter more than five years ago and said the charitable organization has reached levels he never could have imagined.

It's gone global, thanks not only to a dedicated group of volunteers but support at both the grassroots level and through partnerships with the likes of Arnold Palmer and Callaway Golf. Sometime in the next month, Hanna will disappear into the makeshift storage space at his downtown office that is overflowing with donated golf clubs, balls and bags. There he will seal a carton with packing tape and celebrate a milestone when he sends out the 5 millionth golf ball.

"We just sent out a shipment of equipment to Somalia, making it the 26th country we have shipped to since 2008," he said.

At the beginning, he said, he figured he would simply hit up friends, relatives and fellow attorneys to collect their old sets of clubs. He would throw them in a box, send them to Iraq and bring a smile or two to soldiers there.

"I really had no expectations of this," he said.

These days, Bunkers in Baghdad has partnerships with nearly 30 professional sports franchises. Hanna gets daily emails and phone calls from soldiers serving stateside and across the globe, thanking him. The organization has collected enough golf balls to fill 10 full-size school buses.

Along the way, it has delivered clubs and balls to Wounded Warriors and VA hospitals in all 50 states and beyond.

Not bad for a kid from Buffalo whose drive to give was instilled in him at an early age by his parents.

"When you think about everything that these brave men and women sacrifice for us, this is such a little thing we can do for them," he said of the golf equipment. "It is just an honor to be able to give back something for all they have given."

If there is any doubt how much the soldiers stationed



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thousands of miles from home appreciate the ability to drive balls into the Afghan desert or tee up a bucket in one of 100 driving ranges installed on bases across the globe, the pictures certainly tell the story. They arrive at Hanna's office at the Buffalo law firm on a weekly basis — a testament to the charity. The photos show men and women smiling, laughing and sharing in the game of golf — one man's effort to offer a slice of home to the peo-

ple proudly protecting their country.

Despite impressive growth, Bunkers in Baghdad remains true to its roots: Hanna said he still hand-packs every shipment, using space donated by Goldberg Segalla. And even with mega-partners such as Callaway Golf Co., it continues to be fueled by things like the dozen balls dropped off by a retiree or an extra set of clubs donated by a colleague.

"The Western New York community has been incredible in their support," he said. "Without the people of Buffalo, this would never have gotten off the ground."

That support began with the Buffalo law firm and Managing Partner Richard Cohen.

"My father was an Air Force captain during World War II, where he flew B-10 and B-24 bombers," Cohen said. "Chris Belter, another member of our firm's Facilitation Committee, is an Air Force veteran. And we have many other proud veterans or family members of vets among our attorneys and staff. We saw this as an opportunity for us, together as a firm, to thank our brave soldiers for all that they do and to let them know we are thinking about them back home."

He added: "We want all of our (employees) to be excellent at what they do, and even better human beings. Bun-

kers in Baghdad is a clear illustration of what that principle means and what we can accomplish together, and we are glad to continue supporting this effort."

The involvement of schoolchildren is another component of the charitable organization.

"Through our Bunkers Buddies program we have now partnered with 165 schools in 42 states," Hanna said. "These students have either collected equipment and sent it to us or they have written letters and drawn pictures for our military heroes that are then put in the shipments that we send overseas."

And more than just working with students, Hanna has become one. As much as he has done for the charity, he recognized that his expertise is in law, not running a nonprofit. So as he prepares to take Bunkers to the next level, he has gone back to school.

"In an effort to learn more about how to run a nonprofit, and specifically on how to better Bunkers, I enrolled at the Syracuse University Maxwell School," he said.

"The Maxwell School's Public Administration program, which happens to be rated the No. 1 school in the country in its discipline, has given me a much stronger knowledge base related to fundraising and the administrative aspect of running a nonprofit."

He said he hopes that will help prepare him and "an amazing group of friends and volunteers" as they embark on the next 5 million balls.

"People ask me all the time if I'm worried about the drawdown, if Bunkers is coming to an end," Hanna said.

"The answer is no. As long as we have troops overseas and veterans at home who want golf equipment, we are going to keep on collecting it, cleaning it and shipping it out to them."

www.bunkersinbaghdad.com



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