

# WAR ON TERROR

## Bronx GI was king of the ball

By DENISE BUFFA

Lt. Col. Stephen Stewart used a secret weapon in Iraq: the soccer ball.

In his nine months as an Army reservist in Baghdad, the Bronx resident collected and distributed so many soccer balls and other toys he earned the nickname "Baba Noel," Santa Claus in Arabic.

Stewart did it out of the goodness of his heart — not expecting anything in return. But what he got was invaluable: tips about the locations of insurgents' bombs.

"There's a fringe benefit . . ." Stewart, a court officer at Bronx Supreme Court, told The Post. "If it saves just one life, it's worth it."

Stewart, 50, worked as a civil-affairs officer in Baghdad.

The charitable work he assumed on his own — soliciting soccer balls, Beanie Babies, shoes and other needed items from Americans, including his courthouse buddies, to distribute to Iraqi children — paid off in even greater dividends.

Maj. Michael Guiles, an Army reservist who served with Stewart in Iraq, can attest to that.

Guiles, 48, said he would stop by to visit Stewart in Baghdad and stock up on soccer balls and other invaluable items before venturing out to dangerous areas.

"We passed out literally thousands and thousands of soccer balls," he said.

In return, the children would serve the soldiers as interpreters — and spies.

"The kids would be a great source of information for us. They would tell us who the bad people were," Guiles said.

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