Evan sits on a bench at St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., waiting for his Soldier friends to arrive.

Soldiers show support for six-year-old boy with *cancer*

Story by Air Force Staff Sgt. Robin Olsen
Photos by John Evans

RACHEL and Alex Pertile have secretly paid for the meals of servicemembers when they see them out with their families in local restaurants. It was their way to show thanks to the men and women who serve in the armed forces. They never imagined the favor would be returned in such an inspiring way.

On the morning of May 21, two members of the Tennessee National Guard Joint Force Headquarters public affairs staff went to the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis to meet Evan Pertile, who was diagnosed with medulloblastoma, a highly malignant brain tumor that causes painful headaches.

John Evans and Capt. Darrin Haas were eager to meet six-year-old Evan, who is from South Carolina, after hearing about his heartbreaking battle with the highly aggressive disease.

Evan's headaches began the week of Thanksgiving 2008. Rachel and Alex Pertile, his mother and father, are both physicians and knew right away the headaches were not normal. Alex rushed his son to the emergency room, while Rachel stayed home with Evan's three brothers.

No one at the hospital that night was qualified to interpret the computed tomography, or CT scans, Evan received, so Alex did it himself and was devastated by the results. "I had to look twice."

His son had a four-centimeter brain tumor in his cerebellum.

Evan was taken to a hospital in Charleston, S.C., for surgery to remove the tumor. After the tumor was removed, further scans indicated a hard-to-treat variant of the disease, which brought Evan, Rachel and Alex to St.

Jude's Children's Hospital two days later. Scans there showed that some of the tumor was still inside Evan's brain. He had to undergo surgery a second time, followed by craniospinal radiation therapy.

In January, Rachel returned to South Carolina to spend a few days with her other children, while Alex stayed in Memphis.

On the plane home, Rachel met a woman named Brenda Bowen, who works at Fort Leavenworth. Brenda saw Rachel crying as the plane prepared for takeoff. Bowen comforted Rachel, listening to her speak about her son's battle with cancer.

Evan has a Web page at caringbridge.org, a site helping people to connect with others during a critical illness.

"She told me about her son and how he loves Soldiers, and I thought, 'I bet I can get a few Soldiers to send him messages,'" said Bowen.

"I really felt like she would post on his Web site and that would be that. I had no idea all that she would do or the ball that would start rolling. Within 24 hours, members of the military started posting on his Web site," said Rachel.

Evan beamed with excitement when he saw the initial messages from servicemembers. "All day long, Evan and his dad carried a laptop around and read the guestbook," Rachel said.

Thousands of posts are now on Evan's site and through their entries, teams of supporters assure him that he has the strength to overcome obstacles. The messages come from people who live all over the United States and the world, and from every branch of the military.

"Everyone wants to make sure Evan is OK," said Alex.

"There are a significant number of messages that have been posted," said Col. Bob Burns, the director of the Center for Army Tactics at the Command and General Staff College. "It grows like these things do, and guys in Iraq have started leaving notes as well."

Evan shares a meal with Staff Sgt. Terrance Wright at his favorite restaurant.

Evan munches down on a bite of chips and queso.

In addition to the messages, Evan has received his own Army combat uniform, complete with patches and a beret. Burns even sent him his own colonel's rank to wear on his new uniform.

Soon, Evan began receiving care packages. Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, commander of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., made Evan an honorary Soldier.

"It's all just been phenomenal," said Rachel. Many servicemembers have visited Evan and his family at the hospital. A group of servicemembers even came to his birthday party.

Evan has received many other gifts from visitors. Gifts from TNNG Headquarters included a Frisbee, a grenade-shaped stress ball, a baseball and football that were both signed by Soldiers and Airmen, a National Guard T-shirt, and a replica National Guard racecar.

"Evan has received a lot of coins from Soldiers across the country," said Haas.

Staff Sgt. Terrance Wright, an Army recruiter in Memphis was also there with Haas and Evans on the visit in May. "I try to visit once a week, but I call every day," he said.

After their visit at the hospital, Haas, Evans and Wright went with Evan to eat at one of Evan's favorite restaurants. "We played tic-tac-toe and every time he lost, he had to eat a french fry," said Wright.

Evan will have to undergo nine to 12 months of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation therapy before he can go home to stay.

"Evan has started saying, 'Mom, you're strong, but I'm Army Strong,'" said Rachel. In March, Evan received four rounds of chemotherapy.

"I've been thinking about you each and every day," said Bowen on Evan's Caring Bridge page. "Grab your boot straps and be the Soldier you were meant to be." ❖

Evan sits on his dad's lap to get his blood pressure checked during a routine checkup.

"I've been thinking about you each and every day," said Bowen on Evan's Caring Bridge page. "Grab your boot straps and be the Soldier you were meant to be."