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## Local toolmaker's invention makes soldiers lives safer in Iraq

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The U.S. Army's 163rd Mechanized Infantry had a problem.

They were digging up mortars and landmines southwest of Kirkuk, Iraq, with nothing more than unwieldy No. 2 shovels, bayonets and their bare hands.

So Sgt. 1st Class John M. Hawkins of the Oregon National Guard went looking for something better.

He found it in Upper Deerfield Township, Cumberland County.

Local toolmaker George Lesche modified a digging trowel for Hawkins that the soldier, in an e-mail Wednesday to The Press of Atlantic City, said is perfect for the job.

Now, a local union is paying to send 40 more trowels to Iraq, and they're trying to get other unions around the country to do the same.

"We gave it to them at cost," Lesche said. "It's all non-reflective. There's no shine on it. It's all black. No label. You've got the army sheath. It's practically indestructible."

Hawkins uses Lesche's tools, which are widely renowned, back home in his work as a relic hunter.

Near Kirkuk, he gave another sergeant a quick lesson on how metal detectors can be used to locate not only fragmented ordnance but also fuses that will show more clearly, via the mapped azimuth, where a rocket was originally fired.

His leadership took advantage of this, and it led to the discovery of a huge weapons cache.

Soldiers led by Master Sgt. Neil Brooks have been digging ever since, but they found their equipment wasn't ideal for digging potentially dangerous ordnance.

"I am in charge of hiring local folks to do work here and the 'G' troop commander had asked me what I can do to get some more or better equipment for his soldiers," Hawkins wrote. "The means to do that on the (Iraqi) market are about zero, so I went this route."



Hawkins posted his situation on the Internet, and Lesche went to work modifying the first digging trowel (see photo left), which reached Hawkins on March 30.

"He didn't ask me for the tools," Lesche said. "He was just telling me about the situation."

Lesche, who works for a contractor doing work at a Paulsboro oil refinery, mentioned Hawkins' situation to his foreman, Mike Toal, who then contacted Jim Kehoe, union business manager for Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 322.

Kehoe spread the word and found enough cash in little more than a week to send 40 more digging trowels to Kirkuk.

"The guys on the job have donated money out of their pockets," Kehoe said.

Kehoe's now pitching the idea to his national union to see if more money can be raised to pay for more tools.



While Lesche designs products for his wife's Predator Tools line as a side job, they still pay independent crafters around the nation to build their equipment. They hope the next batch of tools reaches Iraq in two to three weeks.

Hawkins said the tools are coming at a good time for his unit. The 163rd lost their first soldier last week, as Sgt. 1st Class Robbie McNary, of Montana, was killed in combat.

Lt. Col. Jerry Healy, an Army spokesman, praised Hawkins efforts, comparing them to soldiers' creative armoring of Humvees.

"If somebody comes up with a better way of doing things and soldiers are using it, I don't think that's a bad thing," said Healy. "Soldiers often adapt to things in different ways."

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