Master Sgt. Darrell Jaeger of Saukville found Afghanistan "10 times worse than I expected," but he was able to help some of the Afghan people and, best of all, he won't have to go back.

A few days after Christmas last year, Master Sgt. Darrell Jaeger kissed his wife Michelle and sons Mitchell and Jake good-bye and headed to Fort Riley, Kan., to complete his training for deployment to Afghanistan with the U.S. Army Reserves.

He was in Afghanistan from March until Dec. 2, arriving home in Saukville on Dec. 6, just in time to shovel the first snowfall.

"I'm glad to get back," Jaeger said. "The only thing I miss is the weather. It's in the 70s and 80s now."

Jaeger found Jake, 13, five inches taller, and Mitch, 15, a sophomore at Port Washington High School, was learning to drive.

He had missed the boys' soccer games and band concerts. He wasn't home when his beloved golden retriever Simba died.

These were among the many things Michelle handled alone and they shared via e-mails and occasional phone calls from halfway around the world.

Jaeger set up a Web site where he shared pictures and experiences with family and friends, something that wasn't possible when he was deployed to Bosnia 10 years ago.

His wife said she was so busy that the year actually went fast.

"There was so much to do between my job, school, sports activities, Boy Scouts and church things. With only one of you, I was running all around," said Michelle, who works in the Saukville village office.

"You miss not having him there to do the yard work and snow shoveling, but the boys were old enough to help, and I had a lot of support from his parents, neighbors, friends and co-workers."

Being able to communicate frequently through e-mail, instant messaging and via video cam on the computer helped a great deal, she said.

"When he went on missions and I didn't hear from him for a week, that was a little hairy," she said.

She prayed every day that her husband would come home safe, Michelle said, but she tried not to dwell on it.

This was Jaeger's second and last deployment. In January, he will retire after 26 years with the Army Reserves 84th Training Command, which used to be based in Milwaukee but now is out of Fort Knox, Ky.

"I actually started the paperwork (to retire) when I got my orders to deploy to Afghanistan," Jaeger said.

From his training, talking to returning soldiers and news reports, Jaeger said he thought he knew what to expect.

"I thought it was bad, but it was 10 times worse than I expected," he said. "You didn't go off base without being fully geared up because you didn't know who was going to shoot at you or if there were IEDs (improvised explosive devices). To go

to the gas station, you had to take a full convoy.

“We had ramp services (for deceased soldiers being sent home in caskets) every day. We worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day. I never had a day off, but you want to stay busy because it makes the time go faster.”

The area is so primitive, he said, “I was expecting Jesus to come around the corner.”

During July and August, it was 120 degrees in the shade, Jaeger said. It was over 100 degrees from May 1 through September, but in November and December it was beautiful.

Jaeger was called up to oversee the communications center at the base in Khandahar, but that isn’t what he did.

Instead, he managed the Commanders Emergency Response Program, which allocates money for Afghans to build roads, schools and hospitals and funds other humanitarian projects.

“I enjoyed getting out and seeing the work being done,” Jaeger said. “It was often simple things, like wells to get water to a village.

“You get the biggest bang for the buck with wells. They’re cheap, but they serve a huge number of people and have a big impact on their health.”

Despite that, he said, there were villages that refused the aid for fear the Taliban would retaliate against them.

“We put them in towns that would give us intelligence, where police were trying to get control,” Jaeger said.

“There were times they turned us away. We would have clothing and food, and they would actually help us load it back on the trucks because they didn’t want the Taliban to find it.”

Until August, Jaeger worked with an Illinois National Guard unit that was on its third rotation in 28 months to Afghanistan.

“I enjoyed working with them. They were well organized and had mentoring teams with Afghan police and army,” he said. “The teams were out there every day and they were being shot at. I knew people who didn’t come back. A lot of them were just young kids.

“I didn’t have any close calls, but I came upon them.”

One time during a sand storm, they had to slow their convoy.

“When we came out of the cloud of sand, the Afghan police were in a gunfight with the Taliban,” Jaeger said. “When they saw our vehicles, the Taliban took off.”

In August, Jaeger was assigned to the Combined Security Training Command, a newly formed coalition effort that included Australian and British soldiers.

“It was a start-up organization and we had nothing. By the time I left, the group was getting fully operational,” he said.

“When our group started, there were only 12 people and half were Air Force and couldn’t be gunners, so Army had to be security.”

He took his turn as a gunner.

Afghan interpreters, usually young people, accompanied them everywhere.

“They put their lives on the line every day,” Jaeger said.

The coalition soldiers handed out rubber bracelets with “Afghan security forces are our heros” written on them in Arabic to children.

“But 90% are illiterate, so we told them what it said,” Jaeger said. “The people are afraid of the police and military, and we’re trying to get them to trust them.

“But the army and police fight against each other. They’re fighting the Taliban and each other.”

Jaeger also sent the bracelets to the eighth-grade social studies class at Thomas

Jefferson Middle School in Port Washington, which took up collections of personal care items, snacks, candy, DVDs and other items for soldiers. The Saukville American Legion Post also sent boxes of such items. The soldiers really appreciate them because the PX isn't well stocked, Jaeger said.

Jaeger, a project leader for Rockwell Automation in Milwaukee, is off work until Jan. 2. The company made up the difference between his salary and his Army pay.

"I'm just trying to get caught up on everything," Jaeger said. "It's nice sleeping in my own bed and eating real food."

Master Sgt. Darrell Jaeger brought various items from Afghanistan for his sons Mitchell (right) and Jake and wife Michelle. Photo by Sam Arendt