

A WARM WELCOME



BIGFORK PIECEMAKERS Quilt Guild members Donna Danz, Kathy Greytak and Peggy Aagenes-Janzer are pictured with quilts that will be sent to sailors on the future USS Montana nuclear submarine. (Mackenzie Reiss/Daily Inter Lake)

Bigfork guild makes quilts for babies of USS Montana sailors

By MACKENZIE REISS
Daily Inter Lake

A nuclear submarine named in honor of the Big Sky State won't be commissioned for at least another year, but one group of Bigfork quilters is already giving the sailors a warm welcome.

For the better part of a year, members of the Bigfork Piecemakers Quilt Guild have been making star-and-stripes-themed quilts for babies born to crew members of the future USS Montana. To date, seven babies have been born to the sailors, and each has been the recipient of a handmade quilt bearing a special panel with the sub's logo and baby's name custom-printed.

"Those sailors are on [the submarine] for 90 days at a stint — 90 days! — and if we can do some little thing from Montana like this that is special for those sailors, why not?" said project co-chair Donna Danz.

Once completed, the future USS Montana will join more than 10 other vessels in the Navy's Virginia class of subs — among the most advanced in the fleet with cutting-edge weapons, stealth and navigation capabilities. The submarine will carry a crew of 135 — several of which hail from the sub's namesake state. The future USS Montana is scheduled to be finished in 2020 and is currently at 71% completion.

"It shows support for the military and especially because that submarine is going to have the Montana name, it pulls you in and makes you feel proud that you're working on the quilts," co-chair Kathy Greytak said.

The quilters meet at the St. John Paul II Catholic Church in Bigfork every month to



THE SON of a USS Montana crewmember smiles atop a quilt gifted to him by the Bigfork Piecemakers Quilt Guild. (Courtesy of USS Montana Committee)

work on the quilts and plan to outfit each baby born to serving crew members of the future USS Montana with one of their hand-crafted creations. Bill Whitsitt, the Chairman of the USS Montana Committee, approached guild president Linda Stewart during the 2018 Northwest Montana Fair with the idea for the baby quilt project. The group voted to accept the endeavor that September and have since created 13 quilts. Future USS Montana Commander Mike Delaney said he couldn't begin to express how much the support of the

Piecemakers meant to his crew.

"To see the smiles of the parents whose babies receive these beautiful quilts is really touching. The fact that Piecemakers ladies donate their time, energy and creativity to design, sew, and send the quilts is remarkable," Delaney said. "And the newest members of the Montana family will have heirlooms to pass to future generations, reminding them of the amazing support Montanans demonstrate for the members of our military and their loved ones. We couldn't be more grateful."

Each blanket takes around eight hours to make, from cutting the fabric to sewing it together to, finally, the actual quilting. The latter is done by Peggy Aagenes-Janzer and her long-arm quilting machine, which uses a computer program to stitch the patriotic star pattern into the fabric.

All the members of the guild take part in the project as money raised from the group's quilt raffles is used to purchase supplies for the USS Montana baby quilts.

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DONNA DANZ

"We don't do quilting because it's cheap. We do it because we love it and we want them to have something to treasure," Danz said. "We're proud to be Americans. We're proud to have USS Montana. We love our military and this is just a small way we can show our appreciation for them."

And maybe one day, the quilt recipients will pay a visit to Bigfork to see the place that welcomed them from a distance with open arms.

"It's far-fetched," Danz smiled, "but it could happen."