

Operation Christmas Cheer

A stateside army of volunteers is dedicated to making sure troops in war zones aren't forgotten—especially during the holidays. Here's what keeps them inspired all year, and how you can help too.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Susanna Schrobsdorff

Newsweek

Updated: 1:19 p.m. ET Dec. 14, 2005

Dec. 14, 2005 - When Jim Stiles finds his wife Peggy crying in front of her computer, he knows why. She's reading online letters from U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Sometimes I stop looking at the posts at the holidays because it just breaks my heart that they are so young, and so far away from home," says Peggy. "I want to adopt them all."

The retired computer specialist doesn't just read the letters she finds on AnySoldier.com, a Web site founded in 2004 by relatives of a soldier in Iraq. She responds with e-mails and care packages—more than 100 so far—to deployed servicemen and women. A spare bedroom in the Stiles' Michigan home is stacked high with toiletries and snacks waiting to be shipped. "When I go shopping, my husband pushes our cart and I push one for the soldiers," says Stiles.

This fall, a stateside army of volunteers has been working flat out to get holiday cheer to the approximately 150,000 troops in Iraq and the 20,000 in Afghanistan—as well as the thousands of others at bases around the world. It's a staggering effort by both non-profits, churches and family members. The U.S. Postal Service says it expects to ship 10.5 million pounds of mail to military addresses during the six weeks before Christmas. On an average non-holiday day, about 15,000 packages are mailed to troops around the world.

Much of the work is being done by Web sites like AnySoldier.com and Give2theTroops.org. They are among several organizations that collect wish lists from the troops and match them with donors. Anysoldier.com, for instance, has recruited 3,800 deployed servicemen and women who post requests for their units and then distribute packages when they arrive. Give2theTroops of Hartford, Conn. has coordinated more than 8,000 large shipments of donated supplies this year and sent more than one million letters via its eight U.S. branches.

AnySoldier.com is one of a few sites that offers a direct connection between stateside

civilians those on the front lines. Founder Marty Horn, a 20-year Army vet and father of two soldiers, organized the site so that troops can post notes and photos as well as requests for goods directly to the site with no censorship (only strategically sensitive information is deleted). The letters and updates are a blog-like chronicle of military life in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kuwait.

Even the mundane supply requests listed in the postings on AnySoldier.com are revealing. Soldiers ask for shoelaces that don't break, sirens to clear the roads when they are driving, baby wipes for when water is scarce, SAT study guides and video cameras so they can send tapes to infant children they haven't met yet. Many ask for clothing, toys and candy for Iraqi and Afghan kids. And they post emotional thank you notes and joyful photos of local children (and their fellow squad or unit members) receiving the stateside gifts.

An Army shop foreman in Iraq asks for Gatorade, deodorant and anything to distract from the constant danger. He writes: "When the siren sounds on camp, run as fast as you can to take cover cause we have something coming that's going to make a big boom... incoming artillery, RPGs [rocket propelled grenades], mortars rockets, etc. You never know when it's going to be your time-[you need] something to relieve stress and take your mind off things-magazines, games..." And an Army specialist describes going on patrol "outside the wire" and encountering an Iraqi family who gave her tea and bread. "It was so nice to meet the faces I am here to protect," she says in one of many long letters on AnySoldier.com

For Marty Horn, who spent eight years patrolling the German woods during the cold war, AnySoldier.com is a crucial effort to keep the troops connected. "I can tell you," says the 53-year-old, "that any support sent is going to help their morale, and keeping their morale up is what's going to bring them back alive. Sending people out on a mission have low morale is more dangerous than an IED [improvised explosive device]."

Horn came up with the idea for the AnySoldier.com two years ago while his son Brian, a 25-year-old Army infantry soldier, was stationed in Northern Iraq. Brian reported that some of the guys in his unit weren't getting any mail, so Horn and the rest of the family pitched in to make sure everyone got something at mail call. Brian took care of handing out the packages and compiling the request lists. Now Horn says a third of his Maryland ranch home is dedicated to the project, and his wife's companion organization, which sells pre-made soldier care packages [TreatAnySoldier.com]. This time of year it the busiest for the family, but Horn urges donors to keep the soldiers in mind for the rest of the winter as well. "Don't forget them after Christmas. There's nothing lonelier than being in the field a couple of months after the holidays."

Andi Grant, who runs Give2theTroops out of Canton, Conn. spends more than 40 hours a week working for her non-profit on top of a fulltime job with an accounting firm. And, she's raising a 13-year-old son. Her group uses hundreds of volunteers to assemble large batches of packages and letters to military personnel who contact her. She's even shipped more than 1,500 pounds of soccer equipment to a soldier in Iraq who wanted to

start a youth league. She feels her group offers relief for stressed military families. "Soldiers don't want to burden their family," she explains. "They'll say everything's fine, if their family asks. If they do get something they might worry: Oh, my wife had to spend money on this. So sometimes they feel less guilty asking strangers for help."

Grant has become a confidant not only for the soldiers, whom she e-mails constantly, but for the mothers and fathers of troops who often call just to talk. Sometimes, the stories are hard to hear. Recently, she was contacted by a female reservist in Iraq who wanted children's books. "She had to leave preschool kids at home and she wanted to send them tapes of her reading books so they wouldn't forget mommy's voice," says Grant.

On Dec. 2, Grant met with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as part of a summit of 175 non-profit military support organizations organized by the Department of Defense to promote private organizations and companies that do everything from retrofit disabled veteran's homes to providing phone cards and video hookups for troops and their families. Last fall, the DoD launched an umbrella Web site [www.americasupportsyou.mil] with links to dozens of volunteer groups organized by state and type of project.

While the debate between those who support the war and those who don't may be heated, the DoD says it has no trouble finding volunteers for support efforts. "Some of the folks we work with are not shy about what their views on the war are, but they are very bold about their support for the troops," says Allison Barber, Deputy Asst. Secretary of Defense. Marty Horn agrees: "It's not like Vietnam—I was spit on then. This time, both sides of the fence, the left and the right, are on board with taking care of the troops. They know these are our people, our sons and daughters over there."

For AnySoldier.com donor Peggy Stiles, sending Christmas packages to her adopted servicemen and women is a way of making up for what she saw as mistreatment of troops during the Vietnam War. "When I was teenager," she says, "I thought it was awful what they did to the soldiers. I want to let the soldiers now know that we're thinking of them."

They are thinking of her too. Two weeks ago, Stiles' doorbell rang with an unexpected delivery. She figured it was a mistaken shipment from an Internet company. But when she opened the package, she found an American flag. It was from a colonel in Afghanistan to whom she'd been sending mail. There was a note of thanks from the colonel and a certificate indicating that flag had been flown on her behalf in an A10 Thunderbird jet in Afghanistan. Once again, she found herself weeping over the troops—this time, happily. "I was so touched that he would think to do this when they are so busy over there."

© 2005 Newsweek, Inc.

© 2005 MSNBC.com

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10436097/site/newsweek/>