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Holiday season rough on students with loved ones in Iraq

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Students worry for family, friends in Iraq

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Amber Newman, a junior majoring in biology, sat at her kitchen counter looking over photos, each one representing a different time in her best friend Bianca Henderson's life.

One, taken of Henderson in high school, showed an attractive girl with long brown hair. A hint of mischief shows through the slightly arched eyebrows.

The others were radically different: Henderson with cropped hair decked out in camouflage and another of her dressed in full battle gear standing next to two Muslim women in shawls in the middle of the desert.

At 21, Henderson, a field medic in the Army, was deployed to Iraq last fall. She left her young son, now 4, behind.


"She wanted to go," Newman said. "Just because she knew that if she went, someone else would get to come home."


But Henderson won't be home for Christmas. The holiday season has been bittersweet for the soldiers in Iraq, and for their families and friends.

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They know too well the feelings associated with an empty chair at Thanksgiving dinner or a brown military package instead of a neatly wrapped gift.

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Newman said she's proud of what Henderson has done in Iraq. This year she received a Purple Heart after a roadside bomb left her with several broken ribs and contusions all over her body. Despite her injuries, she focused on saving the other soldiers' lives, Newman said.

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"She tended to two men after the explosion," Newman said. "She saved one long enough to get him back to the hospital in time."

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Newman described Henderson as loud and outgoing, a woman who will say what's on her mind. She was raised in a military family and entered the Army at 17.

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"We come from a really small town," Newman said. "Either you choose to do something with yourself or you don't."

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Henderson's son knows that his mother will be coming back soon. When asked where she is, he replies, "She is in Iraq, taking care of the sick people," Newman said. Henderson's mother, who works full-time, also takes care of her son while she is away. The boy's father passed away.

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Henderson will come home in January if everything goes according to plan.

Newman said other with loved ones in Iraq should avoid watching TV, which is riddled with negative images of the war. She also said to "keep faith in God."

"I know he has Bianca is his hands," she said. "He will bring her home."

Sarah Maddox, who graduated from the University with a nutrition degree in the spring, said her brother and his wife were sent to Iraq in mid-October.

They left their two young children, a two-year-old and an eight-month-old, behind with Maddox's parents.

"It really breaks my heart not to have their parents around to see them grow and learn on a day-to-day basis," she said. "They missed the youngest's first Christmas."

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Maddox said "value of prayer" has sustained her as she has worried about her brother and sister-in-law.

She is able to keep in touch with her brother through e-mail and instant





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messaging, but she still worries when she does not talk to him frequently.

"It's always in the back of your mind," she said. "Every time you hear about another soldier being killed, you wonder if it was someone you know, if it was them."

Maddox said her sister-in-law recently asked for Christmas decorations for her room at base camp.

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The University is also host to several soldiers who have returned from combat.

Staff Sgt. "Ka-Bar" Martin, who asked that his given first name not be used because he was told not to speak to the media without special authorization from U.S. military officials, recently returned from service in the Al-Anbar region. Fallujah, the site of the largest battle in the Iraq conflict, is located there.

Martin, a graduate student in music and a linguist for the Marine Corps, said being away from his family last Christmas was hard.

"The military goes through great lengths to make it feel like Christmas," he said. "But for some of the younger guys it was a real downer."

Martin said a charity group set up a Christmas tree, and he received a turkey dinner at his base, but because of constant movement it was difficult to receive packages from his family.

"I got a lot of generic packages," he said. "A lot of times random people will send a care package to any soldier in need."

In the past, anyone wishing to send a care package to troops could address it to "any soldier." But for security, the military has barred packages not addressed to a specific person.

Students who want to send care packages can do so through a number of Web sites. Anysoldier.com allows troops to post things that they need or would like for people to send. These packages will often be distributed by the recipient to multiple troops.

"If a big box shows up, most of the time a guy will open it and just start pulling things out and giving them to Marines who really need them," Martin said.

Joseph McCreless, a sophomore majoring in aeronautics engineering, served for almost three months with the Marine reserves in Iraq before being sent to Germany for medical reasons.

"When I was in the hostels in Germany during Christmas, well-meaning people did a lot for us," he said. "One of the most touching things I received were letters of encouragement from young kids. It's good to let troops know you care."

Martin said besides letters, troops often want nonperishable food items such as hard candies and snacks, tobacco products, Kool-Aid mix with sugar added, batteries, travel-sized toiletries, baby-wipes, any kind of reading material, weight-lifting supplements, DVDs and CDs.

"One time someone sent about 50 burned CDs of random stuff from his hard drive," Martin said. "That was nice."

Martin said not to send alcohol, weapons, home-cooked food or chocolate.

"A lot of times these packages sit in the sun for weeks," he said. "Chocolate is good, but not when you have to suck it out of the bottom of a box."

Both McCreless and Martin said the most important thing is to show troops that they are grateful.

"In a way, the things that you get from anonymous or random people are more special than anything else," McCreless said.

"To those who may not support the war but still say they support the troops, this is the time to show it," Martin said. "Take the time to send some care packages to a

deployed service member, or even just a letter saying 'thank you.'"

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