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The best gifts are free, or simply the cost of postage

By Dr. Jan Meyer



Holiday gift-giving at our house will be the same this year as it was last: there won't be any. Instead, we are again sending packages and letters to our military troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While it doesn't cost much, it does take a little time to shop for the things to go in the boxes, and then to package and mail them. (The U.S. Postal Service makes it as easy - and economical - as possible with the free flat-rate boxes and \$8.95 to mail them, no matter how heavy!) But by far the biggest involvement of time is picking out to whom the boxes will go. I use the amazing Web site [anysoldier.com](#).

On the first page of this resource is a highlighted box with this message: "Warning: Contents of this site are addictive. Persons using this site may be overcome with tears of sympathy or tears of joy. May also cause a sense of pride in our great nation and the fighting men and women who defend our freedom." This is most certainly true.

The entries from the military personnel can be viewed in several ways: the site user can look at individual names by the number of times the address has been requested, by the number of contacts from that individual, by country where the individual is serving, by the end date of the stay in that country, by the date of the latest e-mail from that person, by the newest contact to the oldest, by number of females or males in the unit, by the service branch, by where the unit is from, by special projects, by old contacts, and by old contacts dropped in the last three days.

Each individual in the military who wishes to participate sends an initial e-mail message to [anysoldier.com](#), including some suggested facts. They also include special requests and information that might affect what is sent, such as whether they have a microwave, refrigerator, stove, etc. And then they can keep adding messages as often as they wish. Since they don't have a lot of time to send individual thank yous, usually the follow-up postings are the feedback for the sender. If [anysoldier.com](#) doesn't hear from a soldier for a period of 60 days, that listing is added to the "old contact" category.

Reading the messages is proof of the value of the efforts. Marine Sgt. Jenifer Altman wrote from Iraq that her unit is deployed every year from September to April. "Some of our guys and gals don't really get care packages out there and I am trying to get some extra packages so they don't get left out." She then listed some requests, and then for the women she added "perfumes (we like to smell nice stuff every once in awhile)...We have make-believe spa nights."

She thanked everyone for their support: "These back-to-back deployments are hard enough, but when you receive a care package in the mail, it really brightens up these guys' days. Thanks again!" She added, "The packages you have sent have been wonderful and have really boosted the spirit of my Marines!"

Marine SPC Monolito J. Arnold, based in Iraq, said, "Thank you all so very much for all the support we are receiving, especially since we are so close to the holidays, it is getting very hard for a lot of our guys here. We have been receiving a lot of Christmas cards and that is awesome! We hang them up in our room so it does feel a little bit like Christmas."

Marine Cpl. Todd Aunger wrote from Iraq: "Thank you....It's getting close to Christmas time and it is

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hard on some guys because it is their first time away from home during the holidays....Some of the people who have sent us packages have been only about an hour or two from a few of our hometowns...and we are meeting a lot of very nice people."

SSG Pradeep Bhagwandeem in Iraq with the Army posted thanks for the packages and letters, adding that "It is a great morale booster for my soldiers."

SSG Harry Deen, also with the Army in Iraq, sent pictures of the Christmas decorations his unit had received through this program, along with a picture of the bulletin board with all of the letters they had gotten. He said they especially like the letters and notes from children. He added, "It's good to know there are people out there who still support America's soldiers, and we thank you for that support."

HM1 Sara Ferguson, with the Army in Kuwait, said after thanking everyone, "We appreciate everything you do to help, and your support means more than you can imagine."

Often the requests are just for information from home: in his first e-mail to anysoldier.com, SPC Newt Chang, with the Army in Afghanistan, said that for his group "hearing or seeing how everyone back home is doing would be nice," so asked for news magazines and other informational items.

Army Sgt. Sean Toutoungi in Iraq said the same thing, that in his past experience, they welcome "families and anyone willing to send letters to the guys just talking about any subject. This allows them to feel a connection to the American people."

I had to read through the entries looking for someone to send the stuff to this year because the people I had been sending to have now gone home. It's not easy to pick a few out of all of those thousands of entries.

The warning at the beginning of the Web site is correct: it is addictive. I'd really like to send something to everyone.

But as one of the soldiers said, "You don't have to send packages. We're really happy to just get letters." So this year after I sent off the packages I had ready, I decided I'd send even more letters than I had been doing. It's a gift that is practically free - one first-class stamp covers it - but it means a lot!

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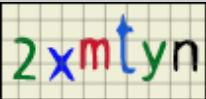
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