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Published December 3, 2004

U.S. soldiers greet overseas packages with open arms

Troops seek soup, Band-Aids, eye drops and ... pickles.

By Kathleen Lavey
Lansing State Journal

t an air base in Kuwait, Ian Whitney worked 12 to 14 hours at a time in sweltering desert heat, fixing A10 attack planes.

When he got a chance, he'd catch some sleep or eat a canned entree.

The best entertainment during that time in the spring of 2003: packages from home.

"It's the highlight of the day or the week," said Whitney, 21, a member of the Michigan Air National Guard's 105th fighter wing out of Battle Creek. "You don't have much over there that reminds you of home and the people that are thinking of you and praying for you and love you."

The holidays can be especially lonely for those overseas, but it's not too late to send a package or card to troops deployed in the Middle East and around the world. Even people who don't know a soldier personally can spread cheer through various Web sites and programs that funnel food, games and necessities to those in the military.

To arrive in time for Christmas, first-class letters and cards and Priority Mail packages should be on their way by Monday for military APO/FPO addresses with ZIP codes starting with 093. Get all others in the mail by Dec. 11.

From the Army and Air National Guard alone, Michigan will have more than 2,800 people serving outside the state by January, said Master Sgt. Janet Weber, state family program coordinator for the Guard.

Her office has just finished matching 83 families of service people with benefactors who will help provide holiday gifts. After polling soldiers and their families, the next effort will be to collect phone cards for soldiers.

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Suggested items

FOOD

Soldiers consistently request:

- Canned soups and stews, such as Campbell's chunky soups (don't forget to include a working can opener)
- Tuna in cans or soft packs
- Beef jerky
- Regular and instant coffee and filters

"Just to be able to hear that voice makes a difference for a lot of people," she said.

During his time in Kuwait, Whitney was most grateful for gifts of food. Other items soldiers consistently request include baby wipes since water is scarce, CDs, electronic games and batteries, lip balm, eye drops, phone cards and insect repellent.

Military personnel also enjoy paperbacks, magazines, puzzles, game books, DVDs and disposable cameras.

Kay Sargent of Okemos sent many packages to her son, Capt. Charles Sargent, a 2001 West Point grad who has done two stints in Iraq and is now at Fort Bliss, Texas. Even though he's safely back in the States, she has kept sending packages overseas.

"Whether you support the war or not, we need to support these troops," Sargent said. "Sometimes you hear back from the soldiers and sometimes you don't. It makes no difference."

Cassie Veselovsky, youth services librarian at the Capital Area District Library, wanted to help U.S. troops somehow. Then she unexpectedly heard by e-mail from an old high school friend who is in Iraq.

She started sending packages to him, and he'd share them with others in his unit.

Then she found the Web site anysoldier.com.

It works like this: Soldiers volunteer to receive and distribute mail to members of their units. They post items they need and want on the site. Volunteers buy those things, package them and send them to the soldier, who will distribute them.

Some units are asking for CDs and video games, others for Campbell's chunky soup. Members of one Hawaii-based National Guard unit sent out a plea for long underwear and gloves when desert nights in Afghanistan cooled down this fall.

Veselovsky has mailed packages to Iraq, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan so far. She rounded up donated books to send to Afghanistan, so soldiers who are parents could videotape each other reading the books, then send the books and tapes to their children at home.

Veselovsky, who lives in East Lansing with her husband, Paul, and 5-year-old daughter, Anna, encloses a personal note and has even put some of Anna's artwork into the packages. She has sent around a dozen packages so far, as well as 25 or so Christmas cards.

SNACKS

Send packaged snacks of all varieties. Those that travel best and get frequent requests:

- Candy and gum
- Trail mix
- Fruit in small, pull-tab cans.
- Canned peanuts and mixed nuts
- Canned chips, such as potato sticks or Pringles
- Packaged snacks, such as brownies, snack cakes and crackers
- Powdered, presweetened drinks, such as Kool-Aid and Gatorade

PERSONAL HYGIENE

- For men or women: Sunscreen, shampoo, deodorant, razors, shaving gel, foot powder, toothbrush, toothpaste and dental floss, lotion, nail clippers, nail files, tweezers, hand sanitizer, mouthwash
- Especially for women: Include tampons, panty liners, appealing high-end lotions and shampoos, a hair brush, pony- tail holders

HEALTH CARE

- Band-Aids
- Cough drops
- Small tissue packs
- Lip balm
- Eye drops
- Insect repellent in non-aerosol cans
- Over-the-counter pain relievers

WRITE HOME

She has filled a few personal requests from Woodruff's unit, too.

"They had this thing for pickles," she said. "Do you know how heavy pickles are? I bought all these jars of pickles and when the guy at the post office weighed the box, he said, 'What's in here?' "

Whitney now is 21 and a junior at Michigan State University. He recalls how he and friends would get their mail delivered to their work stations on the airbase and open them on their next break. Packages became community property, stored on makeshift shelves in a trailer they called the "sugar shack."

"It was like a little 7-Eleven," he said.

Whitney's mother, Louise, still sends packages to those overseas. She also has contributed to help a Michigan National Guard soldier's family have a pleasant Christmas.

"The best part was that it made me feel like I was doing something," she said. "I feel they make such a sacrifice."

Find a soldier, send a package

Because of terror fears, the Department of Defense asks people not to send unsolicited mail addressed to "Any Soldier." A number of organizations around the country try to facilitate gifts to soldiers. If you want to send a package to a soldier overseas, try these contacts:

- The USO supports troops around the world. It will send a care package to a soldier for a \$25 donation; check its Web site at www.uso.org and click on "Donate Now."
- AnySoldier.com lists soldiers who are willing to accept packages to distribute to others in their units. Soldiers are stationed in a variety of locations, and units have different needs. To learn more, check the Web at www.anysoldier.com. Its companion site will package and ship boxes for you; check www.treatanysoldier.com.
- The U.S. Department of Defense maintains a Web site about the war on terror at www.defendamerica.mil. Click on "Support Our Troops" on the left side of the page for links to organizations.
- The Michigan National Guard will begin to collect phone cards for soldiers later this month. To learn more, call Master Sgt. Janet Weber at 702-5116. Or mail cards in any denomination (AT&T phone cards work best in Iraq) to: Michigan National Guard Family Program, 2500 S. Washington Ave., Lansing, MI 48913.

MAILING TIPS

The U.S. Postal Service makes specific recommendations when sending mail to soldiers overseas.

- Address: Use the service member's full name. Print it, the military organization or unit, the APO or FPO address and nine-digit ZIP code (if one is assigned) on the lower right portion of the package

- Writing tablets

- Envelopes

- Pens and pencils

- No need to send stamps; soldiers mail letters for free

Related articles:

- Bumper decor salutes troops with color, style

on one side only.

- Seal the box: Use 2-inch-wide paper or plastic packing tape. Do not use string or twine, as this can catch in sorting equipment and damage the package.

- Include a card: In case the package is damaged, put a card inside that lists your name and address and the recipient's name and address, as well as the contents of the package.

PACKING TIPS

The U.S. Postal Service recommends:

- Keep extreme temperatures in mind; desert temperatures often exceed 100 degrees.

- Select a strong box that is large enough and cushioned.

- If you are reusing a box, cover all previous labels and markings with a heavy black marker or adhesive labels.

- Cushioning: Newspapers provide cushion and news from home. Foam peanuts and bubble wrap also work. To determine whether there's enough cushioning, close and shake the box. If it rattles, add more.

- Remove batteries from radios, computer games and electric razors. These can turn themselves on during shipment. Wrap batteries separately.

Restrictions

These generally apply to soldiers in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

- Do not send obscene articles (prints, paintings, cards, films, videotapes), any religious matter that criticizes the Islamic faith, any items depicting nude or seminude people, pornographic or sexual items, or non-authorized political materials. Don't send pork or products containing pork.

Mail rates

- Mail sent to military APO and FPO addresses goes at domestic rates. First-class mail costs from 37 cents for one ounce to \$3.13 for 13. Priority mail rates for packages of 1 to 70 pounds are based on weight and distance; it would cost \$6 to \$12 to mail a 5-pound box. For fastest delivery, the military recommends sending boxes that are no larger than a shoe box or weigh less than 25 pounds.

Contact Kathleen Lavey at 377-1251 or klavey@lsj.com.

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