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Posted Aug. 13, 2005

Troops say mail, items from home worth weight in gold

By Ashley Richardson
Post-Crescent staff writer

Deep in the abyss of the World Wide Web are the names of 3,472 men and women.

Separated by thousands of miles, they are the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters of loved ones they have left behind as U.S. servicemen and servicewomen.

As thousands of U.S. soldiers remain deployed in the war on terrorism, members of family support groups say it is imperative the troops maintain some type of contact from the home front.

"People don't realize the power and importance of a piece of mail from home," said Donna Nickel, 48, of Hortonville, who has a son stationed overseas. "An envelope in your hand lets you know that somebody from home cares. Letters are more important than boxes."

But showing support may not be easy unless you know the name of a serviceman or woman.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the U.S. Department of Defense suspended the "Any Service Member" mail program that allowed U.S. citizens to send mail to any service member abroad.

Lt. Col. Tim Donovan, director of public affairs for the Army and Air National

Sending packages

What to send: Hard candy, DVDs, blank cards, personal care items, board games, books and magazines, phone cards, non-perishable food items.

What not to send: Pork, pornographic items or alcohol.

Tips: The U.S. Postal Service offers flat-rate boxes in two sizes. Anything that can fit into the boxes up to 70 pounds is \$7.70.

Do not mix food items with hygiene products.

Purchase international phone cards.

On the Web

For information on how to support U.S. troops, go online to <http://dma.wi.gov>, click on "Community Support" and then "Support Troops."

For information on how to send to any soldier, go to <http://anysoldier.com>. The site has the names of U.S. servicemen and women who have signed up to receive e-mails and packages.

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Guard Wisconsin, said for security reasons, the military will not release the personal information, including addresses, of U.S. troops. He said the only way to send something is if the soldier supplies his or her address.

"There used to be ways to do this in the regular mail," he said. "That all changed after 9-11 when the world changed."

For people who find themselves in this predicament, the Web site <http://anysoldier.com> provides information on how to help.

Developed in 2003 by the father of an American soldier deployed in Iraq, the site allows troops to post information about their units and what type of supplies the unit could use.

Many of the posts ask for things like microwaveable foods, books, magazines, personal hygiene supplies and phone cards.

"Anything would help, even a simple letter for us to respond, mail is worth it's weight in gold," reads the post of Gunnery Sgt. Rene R. Benedit, a Marine stationed in Iraq.

Civilians also can hook up with a member of a local support group.

Nickel, whose son Joseph is a member of the 202nd Quarter Masters and has been stationed in Iraq for the past six months, is one such person.

Rallying the support of the Hortonville area, family and friends, Nickel has been sending packages of food, hygiene supplies and blank greeting cards to all 51 members of her son's unit. Her group recently mailed 30 boxes of supplies so the unit could have a picnic Aug. 20.

Though her son is scheduled to return in January, Nickel said she would continue sending whatever she can. She urges others to do the same.

"Those are all of my kids over there and I have to do what I can to help," she said. "I cannot have somebody die over there because they feel forgotten. Either send a box yourself or find somebody else who will do it."

Electronic cards also can be sent through the state Department of Military Affairs Web site, <http://dma.wi.gov>.

Lynn McKellar of Hortonville, who has been helping Nickel and whose husband served in Desert Storm, said she knows all too well the hardships of war and the pain of separation. She said people should be making every effort they can to help troops out.

"They're over there fighting so that we don't have to worry about fighting on our own home territory," she said. "So whatever they ask for, as citizens of the (United States), we are obliged to do so. They're there for us."

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