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More troops, the more we need to do

By Julia Spitz/Daily News staff

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The war wasn't supposed to last this long.

It wasn't supposed to call for 21,500 more troops almost four years after the fighting began.

What was supposed to happen in Iraq hasn't, and things don't exactly look picture-perfect in Afghanistan.

That's why what's happening at home matters more than ever.

When Ashland Girl Scout troops send cookies to Sand Aijo, it matters. When Southborough residents donate enough items to fill 2,258 packages with 27,000 pounds of supplies, it matters.

When students at Framingham's Walsh Middle School or Milford's Memorial Elementary send letters, it matters. And when Uxbridge Supports Our Troops hosts a "Shoobox Campaign" or Millis AMVETS Post 495 puts together care packages of macaroni and cheese, it matters.

"I don't think it's even about the stuff so much. It's the gesture," said Deb Aijo, whose son, Sand, a 2005 graduate of Ashland High, is a private first class serving with the Army's 10th Mountain Division in Iraq. "Just opening up the package makes you know there are people out there who care."

On Sunday, Ashland Girl Scout Troop 2380 sold 288 boxes of cookies in front of Shaw's supermarket, where Sand once worked. Seventy-seven boxes are being donated to servicemen and women, including Sand's unit.

Last month, Troop 2381 of Ashland collected about 24 boxes in a similar drive and donated them to soldiers.

"I think it's a great idea," said Mollie Romanello, whose daughter, Amy, is in Troop 2381. "I hope they get a lot of cookies from Ashland."

Romanello's troop got help with shipping from local resident Cheryl Larrubia, mother of Army Cpl. William Larrubia.

"When my son was over (in Iraq), we adopted his company" and ended up sending over about "\$10,000 worth of stuff," said Cheryl Larrubia. "We were paying the cost of shipping," but then found an organization called Local Heroes will help pay to send items to troops overseas.

That makes it a lot easier for Larrubia to conduct local drives, and "we're still actively pursuing getting these things for our troops," she said yesterday.

Like Larrubia, Southborough's Lisa Braccio knows the power of a box.

She's spearheaded four collection drives in her town since August 2005, and the response has been "awesome, awesome, awesome."

"Kids really got involved this time," she said, and many have gone on to do their own projects with school and scout groups. "On three separate occasions, different classes from the schools have taken it upon themselves to do things for the troops.

"The amount of support we got here, from veterans groups, from residents," was wonderful, she said, but there's no need to wait for an official drive. "Anybody can do it. We've had families who adopt a soldier in between drives."

Braccio goes through www.anysoldier.com, where "you can read (the soldiers') words, what they want.

"These guys are so thankful for anything," said Braccio. "Any little thing means so much to them."

Soldiers have written thank-you notes to schoolchildren, she said, and she received a letter from a commanding officer saying "the boxes touched almost 1,000 of the people under his command.

"I have no (relatives) in the military," she said, although she's made friends with military families since getting involved with anysoldier.com. The reason she wants to collect donations is "it's the right thing to do" and "it doesn't take a lot.

"It's not about supporting the war. It's about supporting the troops."

Sometimes, all it takes is an idea.

Cell Phones for Soldiers has raised about \$1 million and donated thousands of phones since Norwell teens Brittany and Robbie Bergquist launched the charity in 2004. The Bergquists got the idea from a Daily News story on Army Reserve Sgt. Bryan Fletcher of Natick, who ended up with a cell phone bill of more than \$3,000 calling home from Iraq.

Most times, it's easier to go through an existing program, such as anysoldier.com, soldiersangels.org, americasupportsyou.mil, www.mass-localheroes.org, Operation USO Care Package, Massachusetts Soldiers Legacy Fund, Homes for Our Troops, the Ahern Family Charitable Foundation, New England Caring for Our Military or Kids for Our Troops.

"We've learned not to question why (soldiers) don't have what they need," said Braccio. "It serves no purpose. It does no good."

The bottom line is "the young men and women over there deserve our support," said Deb Aijo.

More troops headed to Iraq means more we need to do here at home.

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