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March 23, 2007

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Americans Flood Troops with Support

NewsMax.com Wires
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Four years into the war in Iraq, private support for US soldiers looks as strong as ever.

What do U.S. soldiers need in Iraq? Probably not hand-knitted caps and booties.

"We're running into a lot of knitted items" in care packages, says Marine 1st Lieutenant Barry Edwards, public affairs officer for Regimental Combat Team Six in Fallujah. "Great job on the knitting, but we're starting to break 85 degrees [F.] ... and in about another month it's going to be over 100."

Four years into America's war in Iraq, public approval of the effort has fallen sharply, but private support for the troops looks as strong as ever. Since no official statistics exist, the evidence is necessarily anecdotal. Soldiers in war zones receive a steady influx of care packages and letters. Domestically, organizations that offer aid to soldiers and their families have enjoyed consistent support, and some have even grown.

After only three months in Iraq, Lieutenant Edwards has received over 200 care packages addressed to him. They came from friends, family, and complete strangers, he said in a phone interview, adding that he distributes most of them throughout the regiment.

"We definitely receive more now than in previous deployments. America's support for her troops has not waned," he says.

Other troops report similar experiences. "I have received so much stuff, I would be hard-pressed to say 'thanks' enough," writes Commander Paul Eich, a naval aviator working as an intelligence officer in Baghdad, in an e-mail. Commander Eich, speaking as a citizen, not a representative of the US military or government, says he once received two boxes with enough hand sanitizer to last him over six months.

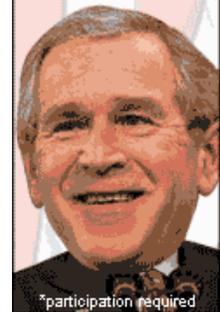
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Army Pvt. Ryan Zarzecki, from the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment in southern Baghdad, said he's often surprised to get mail from a stranger.

"Anything you get in the mail that's not a bill is a nice thing," he says with a smile.

Mailing is easier

Mailing letters to troops deployed overseas has become much easier, contributing to the steady support. With over four years to build up bases and establish effective logistical supply routes, mail service has drastically improved since 2003.

During and immediately after the initial invasion of Iraq, it could often take months for packages to reach soldiers at the "tip of the sword." Now care packages mailed from the United States can arrive just about anywhere in Iraq within seven to 10 days. Mail sent shortly after soldiers deploy sometimes arrives in Iraq before they do.

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Significant support has come from private groups. AnySoldier.com, for example, allows individuals with or without a connection to the military to send letters or packages to US forces deployed in dangerous places. Service members create a post on the site and list the items their unit needs or would appreciate. People wishing to support soldiers can search the postings, find one that appeals to them, and send the unit a care package.

Marty Horn, a retired Army sergeant 1st class, and his wife founded AnySoldier.com in August 2003 to support their son's unit deployed in northern Iraq. Mr. Horn and his wife were "going broke" sending their son care packages when he asked for more because he'd been sharing his packages with colleagues who didn't get mail.

To meet their son's request, Horn and his wife enlisted the help of their friends. Four months later AnySoldier.com was helping to connect US troops deployed in any war zone with care packages and letters. Now AnySoldier.com helps an estimated 115,134 soldiers.

What's inside that box?

Care packages sent through AnySoldier.com, and a host of other organizations, include anything from snacks to toilet paper to books about Islam.

"The most common thing that we've seen in care packages recently and in previous deployments I've participated in has been snack items, small hygiene products, reading material, writing material, cards and letters, those kinds of things," says Edwards.

A number of people like to send candy, but service members ask that people please consider the nutritional value of what they're sending. "A little [candy] is fine, just not a lot," wrote hospital corpsman 3rd class Adam Shepherd in an e-mail from Al Taqaddum, Iraq. More popular is beef jerky and low-carb snacks.

For nonfood items, soldiers say they appreciate foot powder, high-quality toilet paper, baby wipes and old DVDs. More complete lists can be found on donation websites. Army Pvt. Tyler Moore, from the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment in Baghdad, enjoys the support packages. "It builds morale for the soldier just to receive something from back home," he says. "The soldiers want to know that someone else other than their family supports them."

Operation Quiet Comfort is one of several organizations that specifically helps wounded soldiers. Among other things, volunteers make quilts from old blue jeans to keep injured soldiers warm on long flights home on cold cargo planes. Each quilt takes 20 hours to make.

"It's not what is sent that makes us appreciate the packages. It's just knowing that people are thinking of us that matters," says Specialist Adam Lamberson in an e-mail from Scania, Iraq.

Some try to profit from aid efforts

An unfortunate side effect of the apparent continued goodwill toward US soldiers has been unethical entrepreneurs seeking to profit from people's desire to support the troops.

AnySoldier.com is taking legal action against four organizations that took the address of soldiers for free from their website and then sold them to other people trying to donate items to soldiers.

Other companies selling premade care packages reportedly use only a small percentage of donations for soldiers and make a healthy profit from the business.

To avoid scams, soldier aid organizations recommend going through established channels. Aside from dodging groups with dubious intents, Marian Watt, public relations chairperson for Operation Quiet Comfort, warns, "If you try to go out on your own to do something, you're not going to get very far. There's a lot of red tape."

Charles Moskos, noted military sociologist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., questions whether genuine, widespread support for troops exists.

"What I think characterizes America today is what I term 'patriotism light'," he explains. "It's more symbolic, rather than true support."

Not all care packages come from Americans who support the war, but many soldiers don't seem to mind.

"I would still accept it," says Pvt. David Bounds from the 610 Brigade Support Battalion in Baghdad. "They may not support the reasons why we are here, but

it's good that they still care in some aspect."

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