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## Care packages Program helps support troops

By **NANCY DE GENNARO**  
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Some want snacks, entertainment items or need toiletries, while others ask for toys for the children. And just about every one of the soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan asks for prayers and support.

A Rutherford County mother-daughter team and their families are working to make those requests come true for soldiers through a Web site called AnySoldier.com. And they want others to do the same thing.

"It spread (across the country) and we're trying to get it spread here," says Rachel Smitty, who is helping her mom, Susan Westerfield, send packages to soldiers each month.

At first, Susan and Rachel bought the yellow ribbon magnets for their cars in honor of soldiers. But they wanted to do something more than just say they were supporting troops. They both have family members who have served in the military, so they felt



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compelled to take action. And they know several local families who have loved ones overseas.

"I really wanted to do something for them. So I started surfing the Net. I knew I'd find something on there. I just typed in 'soldier' and (found) AnySoldier.com," explains Susan as she packs some items she's sending into a box: batteries, drink mix packets, shampoo and soup cups, among other items.

AnySoldier.com was started by Sue and Marty Horn as a family effort to help their son, Army Sgt. Brian Horn, who was one of the 1,000 soldiers who parachuted into Northern Iraq on March 26, 2003.

"We knew his unit (the 173rd Airborne Brigade) was living under very rough conditions, so whenever we sent care packages to Brian, we always sent enough to share with fellow soldiers," said Marty, a 20-year Army veteran.

The Horns also wanted to help others soldiers who were serving with their son, so they asked friends and neighbors to send support. The Horns began a Web site in August 2003 for their son's unit. The support was massive during the holidays, and many requests came to us to support other military units.

By January 2004, AnySoldier.com was launched and seven soldiers had been added to AnySoldier's contact list. Within six months Any Soldier Inc. was formed as a nonprofit charitable organization. And by January 2005, the list has ballooned to more than 3,500 contacts and the Web site has received almost 2.8 million visitors from around the world.

## What to send

Marty Horn, founder of AnySoldier.com, offers ideas on what to send:

- Anything that does not melt. Remember many have no air conditioning or refrigeration units.
- Good-quality dehydrated foods.
- Canned foods that are easy to eat (single-serving pop-top fruit cups, for example).
- Packaged fruits like those snack cups. And you might also want to include a plastic spoon.
- Powdered drinks like pre-sweetened Kool-Aid and Gatorade, for example.
- Do not send liquid stuff unless it is factory-sealed.
- Moist towelettes, baby wipes and antibacterial wipes — lots.
- Simple things like combs, shampoo, deodorant, body wash and soap, AA batteries, paper, pens, envelopes and other common, everyday items.
- Hard candy.
- Coffee and powdered creamer.
- Lip protection.
- Sunscreen.

"What they've done, they've opened the world up to the soldiers," says Susan.

One main reason AnySoldier.com is so helpful is because packages cannot be sent arbitrarily.

"It has to be addressed to somebody. Everything has to have a soldier's name," says Rachel.

So the list of names offers a springboard for citizens to get involved with sending soldiers care packages.

The Web site is extensive, offering tips on how to send, what to send and where to send items.

"We have researched other groups out there and there's nothing out there like this," says Susan.

But the most compelling part of AnySoldier.com is the correspondence from soldiers, say both Susan and Rachel.

"One unit is asking AnySoldier.com (supporters) to send Beanie Babies to the children," says Rachel. She read about one soldier who had given out some of the Beanie Babies to a group of children. And the next day the troop's unit was on patrol and a little girl stepped out in front of their tank, holding up a Beanie Baby. She wasn't just showing them her toy, she was warning the soldiers of an ambush up the road. "She saved them," adds Rachel.

Both women say stories like this are common and they are "addicted" to reading the correspondence on a daily basis.

- DEET insect spray.
- Surge protectors.
- Liquid, ready-to-freeze Popsicles.
- Sunglasses.
- Sports equipment like baseballs, old gloves and Frisbees.
- If you have the means, send electronics like GameBoys. They don't have to be new, either. Hand-me-downs work as well. But don't forget the batteries.
- Reading materials like car magazines, comic books, standard soldier-reading material and books.
- DVDs and CDs.
- If "stuff" is too expensive for your budget, a letter from you and your family are the best thing in the world to get when home is so far away.
- Do not send insured or registered mail. Soldiers must go to base camp to get these items and they often do not go regularly.
- Send in easy-to-handle boxes (say under 10 pounds) and wrap like Godzilla will handle it because he will.

"The hearts our soldiers have over there ... we just sit there and cry (while reading the Web site entries). It's not out of sadness, but because it's so touching," says Susan as she packs in some fruit bites, peanut butter and crackers, DVDs and a variety of other edibles and entertainment items. "If you read some of the posts there, you'll see what I'm talking about."

"To read those posts and know there's 18-year-old kids over there fighting for our country — and if they want a toothbrush, we'll send them a toothbrush or (whatever we can do) to help take their minds off seeing their best friend get blown up right beside them ... we'll do it," says Rachel.

Although the soldiers often ask for donations for the children over there, troops need personal items as well.

"They pretty much need deodorant, baby wipes, there's one unit that actually ran out of water to clean and bathe with. We love to send toothbrushes, too," explains Susan, stuffing in some shaving cream along with other toiletries. "And most units have access to microwaves."

Many people have the misconception the military provides everything the soldiers need. The military does provide the necessities — food and shelter. But everyday items like shampoo, soap and snacks must be purchased by the soldiers from the PX or commissary, explains Rachel.

"But with over 5,000 soldiers going, the PX is often understocked and it's hard to get things," notes Rachel. Soldiers must also wait in massive lines or walk long distances to get to the PX — and even the cafeteria tent where food is served. And in the hot desert sun, those long walks can be taxing.

Because of the intense heat, many soldiers have begun to request ready-to-freeze liquid Popsicles. Some of the camps do have refrigeration units, so the soldiers can freeze the pops — an especially refreshing treat from the heat. So Rachel and Susan organized a Popsicle drive recently. Susan's employer pledged to pay shipping charges and Bumpus Harley-Davidson served as a drop-off site.

"We sent 110 boxes (of Popsicles). And we've still got 25 boxes we're going to send off," says Susan.

On average Susan and Rachel will send a half-dozen or more boxes at a time on their own volition. Flat-rate postage boxes, which were created to send to soldiers, are \$7.70 and can be filled with anything, regardless of weight. In fact, they used the flat-rates to send all the Popsicles.

Though the flat-rate postage boxes make sending shipments less expensive, they still cost money to send and filling them with goods does, too.

But Susan and Rachel look for good deals. Several local discount groceries and department stores offer various deals on a regular basis. So each Sunday both women scour the newspaper for sales and coupons. Both women, however, consider their cost a small price to pay compared to the sacrifices the soldiers are making.

"Whenever we can afford it, this is what we spend our extra money on," says Rachel.

"If I hit the lottery, I know what I'd be doing," chimes in Susan.

Rachel and Susan explain they are not with AnySoldier.com and are not soliciting donations for themselves to send overseas. They are not asking for money and the mother-daughter team are not a nonprofit, although AnySoldier.com is.

"This is just something we'd like people to do on their own so people can make their own connections with soldiers ... and we're just trying to get the word out," says Rachel.

Even if you can't afford to send packages, letters to soldiers are sometimes they best thing people can do.

"We're just giving soldiers a piece of home," says Rachel. "And sending a box could give that soldier the last smile they've ever had."

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