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AnySoldier.com enables all to aid troops

Web site gets needed goods to soldiers in harm's way

By Beth Nissen
 CNN
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LA PLATA, Maryland (CNN) -- When it comes to supplying an army in the field, there are thousands of materiel specialists, quartermasters and supply officers. And then there are the "special forces" -- like the Horn family in LaPlata, Maryland.

"We're a family-run effort that's just trying to show our support, and we got a little more involved than most people," says Sue Horn, co-founder of AnySoldier.com.

The Horns' involvement began in 2003 when their son Brian was deployed to Iraq as a member of the Army's 173rd Airborne. Brian, a sergeant, was assigned to a forward location with no running water and only military rations to eat. He soon grew dirty, thin, haggard.

"He finally sent us a couple of pics," says Marty Horn, Sue's husband and the co-founder of AnySoldier.com. "When I showed Sue the pic, she gasped."

The couple sent Brian some baby wipes so he could clean his weapon and himself. They also sent food and favorite snacks -- enough for him to share with his unit.

Brian, who is now home between deployments, remembers that first shipment.

"Oh, it was great, it was a touch of home," he says. "I mean, it was everything from ravioli, to the Baby Wipes, obviously; toothpaste -- just the stuff that I couldn't get my hands on."

It was "stuff" that most troops in combat



The Horns say they were struck by how often troops ask for items they can give to Iraqi children.

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units, far from the nearest PX, still struggle to get their hands on.

The Horns realized they were on to something. So they devised a plan to get more of these "comfort" items to more troops -- by getting the word out on just what troops needed, and how to send it to them.

Marty Horn, a 20-year Army veteran who is now retired, built a Web site -- AnySoldier.com -- and began collecting the names of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who would accept mailed packages and distribute them to their unit. The service members' willingness to accept the packages was needed because, for security reasons, all boxes sent to troops must be addressed to a specific person.

"We currently have almost one thousand contacts over there," Marty says. "Those contacts tell us what they need and what they don't need."

Posted on AnySoldier.com are soldiers' notes of what is needed. And those messages provide a window on the war:

- A soldier with the 10th Special Forces asks for DVDs "to distract from the sounds of bombing."
- A sergeant working the night shift in a combat support hospital in Baghdad asks for "coffee, chocolate, things to help us stay awake."
- A specialist with the 25th Infantry writes that, since a bomb detonated inside his dining hall tent in Mosul, he's getting hot chow only once a day, so "snacks and food would definitely be a plus."

The requests show how eager troops are for distraction ... how young many of them are (one requests acne-fighting facial wash) ... how lonely they are.

"We don't need anything special, just someone to write to," noted a sergeant with the 1st Cavalry. "A simple letter will do."

A child's toy proves priceless

From the first, the Horns were struck by how often troops asked for items they could give to local children -- especially toys, and especially Beanie Babies.

"The soldiers love them because they weigh almost nothing, they fit into a knapsack or a rucksack or their baggy uniform pants, and then as the kids show up, they just whip one out, toss it to the kid, and it changes everything," Marty explains.

A Beanie Baby changed everything for one Marine convoy in Iraq. Marty tells the story:

"As they're going, there's a 4- or 5-year-old girl standing in the middle of the road. They had met this girl a couple days before and had given her some toys, Beanie Babies.

"She's standing there with a Beanie Baby in her hand. The convoy stops, like 'Why's this kid in the middle of the road?' They walk up to her, and she points -- there's an IED in the road."

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A Web site -- AnySoldier.com -- lets people donate goods to soldiers overseas.



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"She saved their lives," Sue says.

The Horns don't know who sent that Beanie Baby. They don't know how many donors there are; most mail letters and boxes directly to the contact addresses listed on the Web site.

Others opt to buy pre-assembled "treat" boxes that the Horns, their five children, their children's friends and their friends assemble, pack and package in the family's suburban ranch house.

Some items are always in demand.

"Pretty much they always need hygiene items, especially the women," Sue says. "I send a package of toilet paper. Everybody needs to have cookies and candy.

"Sunflower seeds, peanuts, beef jerky, slim jims -- stuff that they can throw in their pocket when they go out on a mission, and if they get hungry, they can whip out instead of a whole meal.

"I think more than anything, it's a taste of home," she says.

A boost for morale

Getting something from home, hearing from someone back home, keeps the troops going -- the Web site is full of photos and messages that make that clear ("AnySoldier.com really pumps our morale up -- hooah!")

Marty says the Web site is "about support, not just stuff."

"You can't have an army fight something as ugly as this and have bad morale -- anything that improves morale is going to get these folks back home."

And it also might give them some measure of comfort until they are.

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