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Web sites link generous Americans, service members' 1

BY OREN DORELL
GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

Americans are increasingly turning to high-tech methods to send gifts and supplies to U.S. troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Veterans say today's care packages are more numerous and creative -- and get to service members much faster -- than those of the past.

In previous wars, letters from home were sometimes accompanied by cigarettes or magazines. Today, several Web sites designed specifically for supporting the troops overseas allow anyone with a credit card to order cell phone minutes, snacks, books -- even armor and sniper accessories.

Air Force Senior Airman Hollis Verneti went through the Web site Any Soldier (www.anysoldier.com) to request hair conditioner and other items for herself and 21 other women in her group while they were stationed in Afghanistan last year.

"Sometimes, the PX, they do the best they can, but the high-priority items, like laundry soap and coffee, go fast," says Verneti, who is stationed at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq. She says she was deeply moved by the messages people included with their gifts. "The letters and the cards, they made me cry."

Allison Barber, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, says: "In today's environment, people like to customize everything they do. Back in the good old days you'd just write a letter to



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To lend support

Here are a few of the sites that offer support members. **Soldiers' Angels** (www.soldiersangels.org). This site, started by the mother of an Iraq war veteran, takes donations of blankets that can protect Humvee crews from bombs and sniper fire. It also provides "troop scarves" -- fabric filled with polymer crystals.

any service member. Now you have 225 choices." That's how many nonprofit support organizations the Defense Department lists on the Web site of America Supports You (www.americasupportsyounil), a program created to spread the word about such efforts.

"There's definitely more support now than there ever was," says Judith Young, national president of American Gold Star Mothers, an organization of women who have had children die in military action. Young's son, Jeffrey, was a Marine who died in an attack on his barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983.

"I think technology is the main difference," Young says. "These moms and the troops over there now, they get to talk to them every day. . . . I was lucky if I talked to him twice a month."

Marty Horn, a Vietnam-era military policeman, founded Any Soldier in 2003 when Brian, went to Afghanistan with the Army. Horn has 3,000 contacts in the military messages on his site about what their buddies need. Goods are distributed to 92,000 11 countries and at sea.

"These have to be the best-supported troops in history," Horn says.

Tom Clarkson, a Vietnam War veteran working in public relations for the Army C Engineers in Iraq, says that what the troops receive now is "completely different" from packages service members received in Vietnam. Those care packages typically carried family members and contained items like Kool-Aid, socks and popcorn.

"I can't recall anyone getting boxes and boxes of stuff," Clarkson says.

Robert Houston, a civilian working at Fort Monroe in Virginia, says the only packages received during his time in Vietnam were some cookies from his mother. "They were broken up by the time I received them," he says.

Horn says there can be problems associated with being able to send almost anything. He says many troops ask for synthetic Under Armour T-shirts because they're more comfortable than Army-issue cotton -- even though the Marine Corps banned synthetic materials this spring for Marines outside their operating bases. A Marine was badly injured when his synthetic T-shirt melted on his skin in a roadside bomb attack near Ramadiya.

Sometimes technology cannot improve on the old ways. Sgt. Brian Horn, 26, who returned from leading a sniper team in Iraq and Afghanistan, said the thing that's most appreciated is still an old-fashioned letter. "(There are) always smiles and some dis some teared up a little bit," Horn says in describing how troops react to a letter.

"It's kind of hard to explain," he says. "You have to go out for a week and get shot and not hear from anyone, from your family, and (you) come back and it's there -- someone who's (in the United States) right now -- and it's positive energy, it's 'than it's real.'"

provide up to 15 hours of relief from the heat by minute soaking in cold water. **Operation Uplink** (www.operationuplink.org). This Veterans program solicits online donations to members with prepaid phone cards to call **Freedom Calls Foundation** (www.freedomcalls.org). This nonprofit organization uses donations to videoconferences between soldiers and the Marine Sgt. Mitch Selco, stationed in Fallujah, Iraq; see his daughter by teleconference after she was born in Denver. Another Marine in Iraq, Cpl. Terrence, saw his daughter's birth in Jacksonville, Ala., on Father's Day. **Operation Gratitude** (www.opgratitude.com). The program is celebrating its 150,000th care-package delivery to service members on Father's Day weekend.

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