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From Drakes Island, with love

By Jim Kanak

Staff Writer

WELLS -- A group of women from Drakes Island have had an unusual occupation this summer. They've gotten together 15 times to pack boxes with all manner of supplies, goodies, and letters. Then, they ship the boxes to either Iraq or Afghanistan for soldiers there to use and read. The soldiers they target all have Maine roots.

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"I was in Florida this winter and I would get emails from people, chain letters," said Linda Perrault, who organized the drive. "I said why don't people do something useful and not waste people's time."

"I got on the computer and typed in 'how do I help a soldier?' It came back with the website anysoldier.com. That got me started."

Perrault said she originally thought she'd do this by herself. "I thought I could send one package a month and write a few letters," Perrault said. "I thought I'd do it alone. Then, some women on Drakes Island were interested."

That's when things started to take off. Perrault's colleagues include Maureen Maillet, Jan Shaw, Martha Banfield, Mary Ann Symanski, Leslie Robbins, Joanne Hall, Betsy Swartz, Cam Holdsworth, Lucy MacLeod, and Sandy McGill. McGill was a Lieut. Commander in the navy who did two tours in Iraq.

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Perrault said McGill's participation was a key to the effort. "She could tell us what the soldiers wanted," she said. "She said that letters were very important. They love letters. We learned to keep the letters general so they can send it around [for everyone to read]."

The women focused their effort on Maine soldiers. "We went in and picked Maine [on the website]," said Perrault. "There are four groups from Maine. They won't tell you exactly where they're from."

One of the first steps the women took was to recruit donations. "We met to organize a meeting at the community center," said Joanne Hall. "People donated things to send but some also donated money for the shipping."

"The whole island stepped up," Perrault added.

The group packed its 15th box load last week. The contents were representative of the other 14. There were snacks, books, DVDs, toothpaste, coffee singles, micro-wave popcorn, magazines, and fly catchers. As time passed over the summer, the group heard from some of the soldiers that received the packages, with suggestions for other items.

That's how the fly catchers got included. "They said they wanted old time fly paper," said Betsy Swartz. "They were getting killed with mosquitos and bugs. My husband owns a hardware store, but didn't stock it anymore. He had to order it."

Another request came in for toiletries that didn't have any scent. "Everything had to be scent-free," Swartz said. The group used a local source to help fill that request, Tom's of Maine. Hall said she was able to obtain a lot of □seconds' from Tom's for deodorant to fill the need.

Another unusual request was for children's toys. "One particular group of soldiers had taken on an orphanage [as a project]," said Hall. "We put things in the box, like beanie babies, they could distribute to the children."

Over the summer, the women have heard from several soldiers thanking them for their efforts. "First, I want to thank you for the letter and your gracious words," said one soldier in a letter. "Second, thank you for not only thinking of me, but my fellow soldiers. Your words of kindness and support follow me with every mission."

Another told of how the toiletries were being used. "We sent a few of them to our subordinate units in the field," the soldier wrote. "Soldiers in those units have very little for amenities, and we know that the hygiene products will be well received and certainly, put to good use.

"Your generosity hit the mark. Soldiers need to know that support exists for them on the home front, even though opinions may differ about being at war. Support from the home front keeps our soldiers in the right mindset to stay focused on their missions."

The women's last box of the summer will be sent around Labor Day. It will include a spiral bound notebook filled with letters written over the course of the summer along with the other products. As summer winds down, many of the women will travel to Florida for the winter, but the project may continue there.

"I think I'll continue this in Florida," Perrault said. "I committed a year to this last April."

Perrault said anyone who'd like to help or learn more about the activity could email



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