

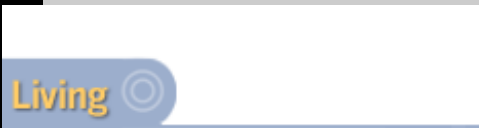
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Friday, February 22, 2008
 Club 'Adopts' Servicewomen
 Soldiers are sent hair-care products and other goodies

By Ann M. Simmons
 LOS ANGELES TIMES

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BAGHDAD

At a "packing party" in Los Angeles, Dawn Sutherland's living room was strewn with piles of goodies such as black hair products and manicure sets, T-shirts and the latest issues of *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines.

They weren't gifts for family and friends. They were to go into care packages for "sister soldiers" in Iraq.

Moved by the particular challenges that many black women say they face when deployed in war zones, Sutherland and her book club, a group of professional black women called Sisterfriends, have "adopted" about 40 servicewomen.

"We wanted to reach out as black women to other black women in need," said Myraline Morris Whitaker, a member of Sisterfriends. "We thought we were looking at our younger sisters. We wanted to get them

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what they need to make them feel comfortable and make them feel positive about themselves.”

Morris Whitaker, a hotel consultant, got the idea to help after a conversation with a former Marine who said that one of her strongest memories of being deployed was the struggle her black roommate faced in dealing with her hair.

So Morris Whitaker began surfing the military-support Web site anysoldier.com, a kind of clearinghouse for wish lists.

“I was amazed at how many requests there were, especially for black hair-care products,” Morris Whitaker said. “Almost everyone who identified herself as African American asked for hair-care products.”

But the appeals on the site sparked more than concern about hair. “We want to give them nourishment for the soul, as well as for their hair,” said Morris Whitaker, who, independent of her book group, has sent 25 boxes to black military personnel over the past year.

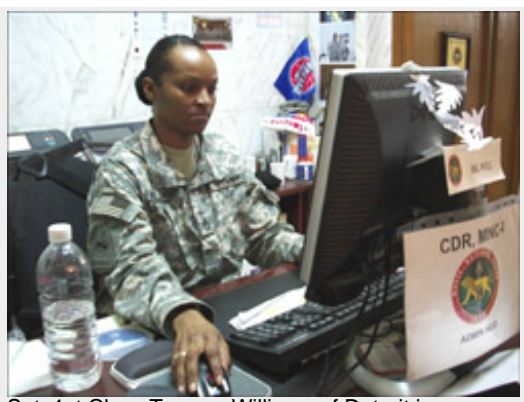
A request sent last spring by Sgt. 1st Class Tamara Williams, 39, of Detroit caught Morris Whitaker’s attention. Williams, who is based at Camp Victory in Baghdad, asked for “magazines (*People*, *OK*, *Essence*) anything to keep you sane or laughing,” and “DVDs (action, scary, comedy) again, anything to take your mind (off) our current plight momentarily.”

Williams had just learned of the Defense Department’s decision to extend the tours for all active-duty Army units in Iraq and Afghanistan from 12 to 15 months. “Needless to say, we have some very grumpy soldiers,” Williams wrote on the Web site.

Morris Whitaker promptly sent many of the items on her list.

“I’m forever grateful,” Williams said recently at Camp Victory, speaking about her experience in Iraq and the gratitude that she feels toward people such as the book club members.

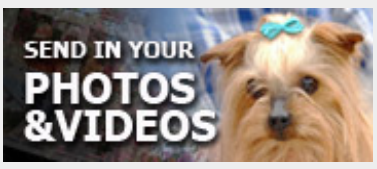
There are almost 8,000 blacks among the 25,600 or so women deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries supporting the U.S.-declared “war on terror,” according to statistics from the Defense Department.



Sgt. 1st Class Tamara Williams of Detroit is stationed at Camp Victory in Baghdad. She requested “anything to keep you sane or laughing.” (Los Angeles Times Photo)

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Many of the experiences, challenges and dangers that black women face are shared by all female soldiers. Many have left children at home. In such places as the Middle East, they have to deal with a culture that largely views men as superior. And female soldiers sometimes feel they must work harder to prove themselves.

Some black female soldiers, however, believe that certain challenges are more acute for them, such as learning not to take offense at the grins, awkward stares and sometimes overly enthusiastic attention from those Iraqis who have never had direct contact with a black person. They also must deal with some fellow service members' fixed notions about them.

And a factor not to be underestimated is the lack of products specifically designed for black hair and skin.

"My hairdresser back home would make a killing if she came out here," said Staff Sgt. Kathaleen Wright, 34, from Augusta, Ga., who is on her second 15-month tour in Iraq. A fuel transporter currently assigned as a noncommissioned officer in charge at Camp Stryker in Baghdad, she wore her straightened hair in a short bob.

The commissaries at the military bases typically have a section of goods such as hair oils and straightening perms for black customers, but these products fly off the shelves as soon as they are stocked, soldiers said. Making matters worse, they sometimes have trouble finding a hairdresser on base who knows about grooming black hair.

Cutting it short

Sgt. 1st Class Kerensa Hardy, 33, a public-affairs officer, wanted to make sure her hair would be manageable during deployment, so she cut her tresses into a short-cropped style.

Hardy also shipped tubs of her favorite Maison brand hair-care products to Iraq before leaving her home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Like many other "sister soldiers," she has learned to chemically straighten her own hair - a procedure typically done at a salon every month to six weeks.

Spc. Shani Lee, 23, a supply clerk from Queens, N.Y., has taken to wearing her hair in braids. She also was helping fellow soldiers who had decided to "go natural."

Many of the soldiers were quick to underscore that their concerns about hair care was not just a matter of vanity. Using an expression common among some young urban blacks, Wright said, "We represent for every black female."

The frustration, many of the women said, was their sometimes having to fight prejudice within their own ranks while fighting a war.

Eager not to "screw up anything" on her first assignment as a supply sergeant whose duties include keeping account of her unit's property, Quiannette Crowder, 30, of Palmdale, Calif., said she often worked 15-hour days without leaving her station even for lunch. As the sole female supply sergeant in an infantry battalion, she also said she felt like "a loner."

Back at home

Such accounts resonate with Morris Whitaker and her book-club friends.

"We feel a kindred spirit with them," said Sutherland, the leader of the group, which also serves as a support network for black women in Southern California.

Last year, the book club held two "packing parties" during which they collected enough goodies to fill 64 boxes. Some of the women scoured their closets for things they had bought but never opened, such as toiletries and stationery. Others shopped for T-shirts, socks and sweats. Many donated used books and magazines.

"We feel we are contributing to their well-being," said Sutherland, whose group hopes to hold four packing parties this year. "Usually the general population has more family support and more community support. And a lot of them (black soldiers) are over there because they don't have any alternative."

Williams, the mother of a 13-year-old daughter, Tiana, managed to complete her master's in business administration by taking online classes while in Iraq. She said family and friends had given her much support but that the assistance and generosity of strangers, such as the book club members, also boosted her morale.

"I've been blessed to have the opportunity to connect with some beautiful women who encourage without even trying," Williams wrote in a recent e-mail to the book club. "God bless you all, and thanks for everything you're doing for the African American female."

In a card Crowder sent to Sisterfriends after receiving a care package, she thanked the group for being so thoughtful "when we really need the support."

Receiving the packages, she wrote, "made my heart full."

She signed her card, "Sister Soldier."

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