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Local/Region

Posted on Sun, Jul. 17, 2005

Area residents keep busy shipping care packages overseas

At-home army aids troops with a supply line of love

By JASON NOBLE and LEE HILL KAVANAUGH The Kansas City Star

For Linda Relitz of Blue Springs, it started with just wanting to do something — anything — for the thousands of troops like her son, fighting in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

For Barbara Schroeder and Chris Lann, neighbors on the same Leavenworth street, it started with a similar compulsion to do more than just wait and watch.

All three know that improvised explosive devices, snipers and 120-degree heat are daily trials for troops in Iraq. But they also believe that boredom, bugs and “brown-bag nasties” shouldn’t be.

Relitz, Schroeder and Lann are part of a silent army of thousands of volunteers around the country, working in their own ways to support U.S. troops overseas. These patriots ship everything they can to help the troops — from cookies to bug spray to magazines — sending flat-rate postage boxes filled with love: tiny reminders that people back home still care.

An Army veteran, Relitz knows what it’s like to be a homesick teenager serving in the military. She knows how much it means to get a care package with familiar stuff when everything around you is foreign. She knows how precious it is to laugh at a joke in a place

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Efforts by Linda Relitz and her husband, Jeff, to send packages to their Marine son and members of his unit have morphed into a foundation.

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where laughter is truly a gift.

But what started as a way to express her love for Joshua, 25, her Marine son, grew into something much bigger. Soon, she and her husband, Jeff Relitz, also an Army veteran, were sending care packages not only to their son, but to all 187 Marines in his unit of the 2nd Assault Amphibian Battalion. As word of their generosity spread, other troops — not just Marines — began requesting letters and care packages, too.

The Relitzes' grass-roots campaign has morphed into the nonprofit, all-volunteer U.S. Troop Support Foundation, complete with a Web site and a 16-member board, thanks to some organizing help from the National Heritage Foundation. The organization's current mission, Operation Cool Troops, has a goal to collect and send special hot-weather undergarments that wick away moisture.

In two years, the group has sent about 7,000 care packages, along with thousands of e-mails and handwritten letters. It connects volunteers and care packages with troops. Linda Relitz is the middle manager of it all, never giving out individual names for security reasons.

She always writes the introductory letter. And unlike most letters from volunteers, the 45-year-old Marine mom's letters and packages have a distinctive edge in tone and content — and yes, blue metaphors that would make a sailor blush — all honed from her own military experience.

When a group of Marines and soldiers asked her whether she could send certain adult magazines their way, Relitz thought, *why not?* She contacted *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Each magazine responded by sending its own version of care packages for three months to troops in nonrestrictive areas of the Middle East where such "reading" material is allowed.

"Everybody seems to think these guys never smoke, never drink," she said. "They're 21, 22 years old, red-blooded American kids and, believe me, they've seen this all before."

But even mundane items like bags of candy take on new meaning when they are sent from someone who cares, she said, "especially if you can add a joke or a letter. Those are priceless."

The funniest items her troops have requested? Condoms. The troops use them to cover the ends of their rifles, keeping out the ever-present Iraqi sand.

Relitz won't stop sending packages until all the troops come home, she said. The letters and photos she gets back make her laugh, the same way she hopes her gifts and commentary make the troops laugh. She keeps all the letters they send her in a 55-gallon container. Three U.S. flags adorn her spare bedroom, with each covered with the written thanks of service personnel.

Relitz says she cherishes every 3 a.m. phone call from overseas, even if it's not from her son.

"To hear them laugh ... that's just great. They just want to know that somebody cares."

That care is also reflected by Schroeder and Lann, who package and mail goods from their Leavenworth homes. Together, they run Packages From the Heartland, a project that has sent nearly 250 goodie boxes since January.



At the Lansing post office, Brenda Brune (left) and Barbara Schroeder did paperwork to send items to U.S. troops. Schroeder and Chris Lann run Packages From the Heartland.

Each has a connection to the service. Schroeder's son is in the military and will probably be deployed to Iraq later this year; Lann's husband served in the Persian Gulf War.

Schroeder, 52, began sending packages shortly after the war in Iraq began in 2003, but stopped when the cost of postage became prohibitive. She began again last January, when she learned of flat-rate shipping from the post office and was encouraged by another military mother from California.

Unbeknownst to Schroeder, Lann, 43, was also sending packages to troops from across the street. Only in the spring were they tipped off to each other's work, when a deployed soldier noticed the similarity of the return addresses and suggested they join forces.

Working out of spare bedrooms in their homes, with money raised from donations and from their own pockets, the two women have assembled a vast collection of items to send.

"We're trying to send at least 50 packages a month. We try to kind of break it up," Schroeder said. "That way we don't have so many..."

"...Because you're looking at the packers, the haulers, the fund-raisers. We're it. Check 'em all off," Lann said, finishing Schroeder's sentence.

They send granola bars, cups of dried noodles, beef jerky and chips to supplement the prepackaged rations officially known as MREs and colloquially known as "brown-bag nasties."

They also send personal-care items, such as razors, bug spray and foot powder, to make the march of war in an unforgiving climate more bearable. And they send morale boosters: state flags and NFL merchandise for troops, and plush toys for Iraqi children.

The project has consumed Schroeder. When she is not working as floral manager at a Leavenworth grocery store, her life is a whirlwind of troop support. She solicits donations from everyone she can think of — local businesses, state governors and professional sports teams. She corresponds with the scores of "adopted" troops. She hand-stamps or prints on her computer greeting cards for troops to send to loved ones — 4,000 so far. She receives bundles of letters from schoolchildren across the country to forward to troops. And every couple of weeks, she and Lann go to the post office and spend two hours stamping and stickering packages bound for Iraq.

"I spend my days juggling my soldiers, my job, my home life. I catch myself coming and going," Schroeder said.

The effect of their generosity is palpable in the field, said Lt. Col. Bettina Moncus of the 317th Quartermaster Battalion, an Army Reserve unit based in Lawrence.

Mail call "almost reminds me of a WWII scene from an old movie," Moncus said in an e-mail from Camp Buehring, Kuwait. "The mail clerk is the center of attention and you are in the back of the crowd, just hoping your name will be called."

The benefits of Schroeder's and Lann's packages go far beyond the troops who receive them. The women find recipients on a Web site, www.anysoldier.com, where deployed troops register to represent entire units. When a soldier receives one of their boxes, it is understood that he or she will take a few necessities and pass the rest along to others, or give the whole box to someone who rarely receives mail.

Schroeder and Lann see no end in sight for Packages From the Heartland.

"We started all this, but I wouldn't really know how to stop it," Schroeder said. "I've gotten so used to run, run, run, run

that I couldn't go back to doing nothing. I enjoy it, and they do too."

Local groups

■ For more information on the U.S. Troop Support Foundation, contact Linda Relitz at (816) 224-4729 or (866) 393-8787, or go to www.ustroopssupport.org on the Internet.

■ To reach Packages From the Heartland, go on the Web to packagesfromtheheartland.com.

■ A grass-roots organization has been formed by several Fort Riley wives whose spouses are deployed to Iraq. This program, named "Adopt-A-Soldier," seeks volunteers to write letters to troops who have no family and to send packages. For more information, contact Emily McVicker at (785) 784-2284 or send e-mail to tonyemily@charter.net.

National groups

The Department of Defense has set up its own Web site to spotlight the extent of support back home for the troops. The site allows troops and civilians to post messages, and highlights about 150 other care-package and letter-writing programs. For more information, go on the Web to www.americasupportsyou.mil.

To reach Jason Noble, call (816) 234-5993 or send e-mail to jnoble@kcstar.com. To reach Lee Hill Kavanaugh, call (816) 234-4420 or send e-mail to lkavanaugh@kcstar.com.



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