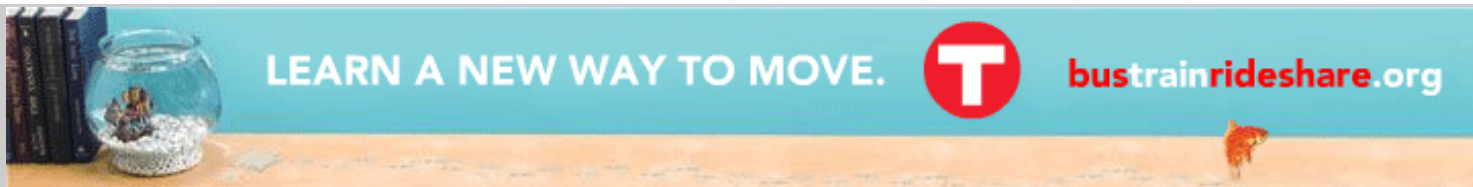


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- Obituaries
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anatomy of a care package

On Veterans Day, we offer some tips for sending service members what they really want.

BY STEPHANIE NERO
 Pioneer Press

For Tim Schirm of Minneapolis, receiving care packages while he was serving as a field medic with a military police unit in Iraq was "akin to opening presents on Christmas morning. You feel remembered, and, to a soldier, that is very important."

Schirm, a 25-year-old University of Minnesota student, spent 12 months in downtown Baghdad in 2004 and 2005. He estimates he received a care package every three weeks.

"I was a grateful and happy soldier with that amount of mail," he says.

Schirm says the best care packages contain personal letters, pictures or cards from loved ones, entertainment like DVDs or music, toiletries, food and items to share with others, like gum and candy.

"Good care packages are practical and sentimental," he says.

For Veterans Day, we offer some tips for putting together a service member care package with help from Schirm and the new book "Great World War II Projects You Can Build Yourself" by Sheri Bell-Rehwoldt.

According to Schirm, good care packages fall into three categories: toiletries, food and free-time activities.

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Toiletries

) **Toothbrushes**, toothpaste, body wash, shampoo, shaving cream, cotton swabs, baby wipes and razors are all good ideas.

) **Cotton swabs** are useful because most service members are required to wear earplugs, which build up earwax, Schirm says. Razors are important because "clean-shaven faces are strictly enforced."

) **Many toiletries** are available to service members at military post exchanges, but Schirm says service members prefer to get them free.

Food

) "**For some reason**, loved ones have an overwhelming urge to send candy in bulk," says veteran Tim Schirm, who sometimes received 20 pounds of candy at a time. Instead of candy, he recommends sending nonperishable foods that service members don't normally get in an MRE (Meals Ready to Eat). Canned soup and chili, tuna, beef jerky and instant macaroni and cheese are all good ideas. Just make sure to stick with foods your service member likes.

) **Homemade baked goods** often won't survive the trip because packages can take from three weeks to a few months to arrive.

) **If your service** member likes spicy food, consider sending spices or hot sauce. "A little spice can turn a terrible meal in the field into a less terrible meal in the field," Schirm says.

Entertainment

) **DVDs are** a popular choice because they remind service members of American culture, prevent boredom and are easy to share. Another benefit is "you can pause (them) at any time if you have to go on mission or work detail or run to the bunkers during an attack," Schirm says.

) **Other ideas** include books, comics, batteries, puzzle books, video games, headphones and cleaning kits to remove desert dust from electronics.

What not to send

) **Civilian clothes** (but a comfortable blanket is a good idea, Schirm says).

) **Pork or pork products** (Islam, the dominant religion in some host countries, forbids eating pork.)

) **Magazines.** Entertainment and news magazines are provided at the post exchanges, and by the time your package arrives, your service member probably will have seen the magazine already.

) **Expensive electronics.** Care packages sometimes get broken into, and service members can bring electronics with them when they deploy or return from leave.

For the holidays

Schirm says holiday packages should include "holiday-colored or -flavored anything to remind the service member that it is that time of the year." It's easy for service members to forget approaching holidays while working around the clock in a desert, and Schirm says he forgot his own birthday until he received a birthday card two weeks later.

Web sites, like www.anysoldier.com and www.treatanysoldier.com, that specialize in sending care packages to troops recommend that December holiday packages sent by parcel post be mailed by Nov. 13 and by Dec. 11 for priority mail.

Mailing instructions

To send a care package, call 1-800-610-8734 and request the free United States Postal Service "Care Kit 04." The kit includes boxes, envelopes, tape, mailing labels and customs forms. The kit should arrive in seven to 10 days. You must be at least 18 years old to call.

Decide if you're sending a food package or a hygiene package. Do not mix these items, because the chemical smell of soap and deodorant will ruin food. You can add items like books, photographs or movies to either box. Make sure to seal every box with plenty of tape, because many people will handle each care package before it reaches your service member.

Fill out the mailing label, making sure the package is addressed to an individual service member. Visit www.anysoldier.com to find names and addresses of service members who would like care packages if you don't have a specific service member to send a package to. You must also fill out a customs form so the post office knows what is in your package.

You will need to pay postage fees for your package.



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