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Spitz: Time for a small salute

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By Julia Spitz/Daily News staff
MetroWest Daily News

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Posted May 15, 2008 @ 01:23 AM

What's on your calendar for Saturday?

Chauffeuering to soccer or softball? Catching up on yardwork? Planning next weekend's Memorial Day cookout? Doing as little as possible?

Why not? It's a day off. A day to decompress. A day to kick back.

Unless it's your day to check for snipers. Or save someone with a gaping head wound. Or determine whether the thing in the road that looks like a clump of sand is actually a land mine.

Unless it's someone you love doing those jobs.

For families of soldiers, "it's not something in the paper ... it's something you live," said Kathleen Zagata, whose son is back in Concord after three deployments to Iraq.

For them, what's printed under May 17 in this year's calendar are words that matter.

Armed Forces Day.

It's not about honoring war or a president's political agenda.

It's about the people who serve.

Men, women, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Guard units, Coast Guard, overseas, at home, active duty or in a hospital, it's a day to honor them all.

As for how, you have the freedom to do so in any way you choose.

The care package drive at the Southborough Senior Center on Cordaville Road is certainly a possibility. Though Lisa Braccio has no immediate family in the military, she's been organizing the semi-annual drives since 2005.

Donations will be collected Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Non-perishable snacks and toiletries are high on the wish list, but there are other ways to help as well.

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"Put letters in. Soldiers love letters. Soldiers love cards from kids," said Zagata.

Put "a yellow ribbon on your mailbox for Armed Forces Day," she said. "Offer a prayer at church," or donate money for care package postage.

The important thing is "just to keep it in people's minds that there are people around the world deployed on our behalf."

And people missing them here at home.

"Many of us have faced deployment (of a loved one) but have been far from the base of deployment," which is why Zagata organized the Concord-based Military Family Support Group during Brian Zagata's first tour of duty in Iraq. "We're open to family members, friends, concerned citizens."

The next meeting is Tuesday, May 20, at 7 p.m. in the West Concord Union Church.

While Brian is "a veteran now," weighing what comes next, "after the first deployment, it's no longer about your son," said Kathleen Zagata.

"You realize it's about all our sons. It's about all our soldiers, all our sons and daughters."

Still, being a military family in Massachusetts can make you feel unique.

"You feel the isolation of being a minority."

Zagata said author Frank Schaeffer's books about his son's deployment, "Faith of Our Sons" and "Keeping Faith," really hit home with her and other local families.

Schaeffer's friends wondered what went wrong when his son joined the Marines, said Zagata, and she, too, fielded questions about her son's decision to enlist in the Army.

"Wesleyan College graduate? Infantry? Why? ... Back in World War II, those would not be questions.

"People (would) ask 'How's your son?,' followed by 'You know I'm against the war.'

"I value their expression" of opinion, but told people perhaps they should address concerns to their representative in Congress rather than to her.

"Our group is non-political, non-religious. We are looking to bring people together," she said.

Those interested in the support group can contact milfamilysg@aol.com.

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The Internet also offers a host of possibilities for supporting the troops and their families.

There are cellphonesforsoldiers.com, anysoldier.com, americasupportsyou.mil, soldiersangels.org and www.mass-localheroes.org.

You can support local USO efforts through usonewengland.org, or operationquietcomfort.com for ways to help hospitalized soldiers.

There are sites for Massachusetts Soldiers Legacy Fund, Homes for Our Troops, the Ahern Family Charitable Foundation, New England Caring for Our Military, and Kids for Our Troops. Some, such as noanie.com, have links to other groups as well.

Those and other sites are available 24/7. So are the people willing to serve.

That's something worth taking a moment to remember on Saturday.

Or any day.

Even if it's not listed on the calendar.

(Julia Spitz can be reached at 508-626-3968 or jspitz@cnc.com. Check metrowestdailynews.com for the Spitz Bitz blog.)

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