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Couple pulls together package of care for troops

By Janene Scully - Associate Editor

12/1/04 Sometime soon, somewhere in Iraq, 10 soldiers in the war zone will receive a piece of Santa Maria.

They are the servicemen that Richard and Sandra Chenoweth selected to receive items under an Internet-driven "care package" program for U.S. military members serving in war zones.

The Chenoweths, who will mark 45 years of marriage in January, wanted to help out, so they called up a Web site, www.ansoldier.us.

The site lists more than 800 contact names, with military addresses, information about their locations and conditions where they are assigned. With each name is the number of additional personnel with whom each of those service members will "share the wealth" - providing connections with more than 40,000 men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"My wife Sandra and I went out and bought a lot of stuff and mailed it to them," Chenoweth said. "What we did is we put together 10 individual packets. ... We actually had a lot of fun shopping for this stuff."

They chose the name to receive their items by looking at the numbers the soldier included in his narrative - they found one with nine others in his unit.

"I couldn't afford to do 100 men, but I could afford 10," Chenoweth said.

Over three days, the couple shopped for necessities such as toothbrushes, razors, shaving gel, foot powder, socks, soap, sanitizing hand towels, Raisinets, pistachio nuts, Blistex, hot cocoa, DVDs and small candy canes.

"Everything listed here is times 10," he noted.

Of course, the couple also provided some specific Santa Maria items, such as a picture postcard. And Chenoweth, the executive director of the Santa Maria Valley Historical Society, included a booklet about the history of the valley.

The soldiers will also get to learn about the city's centennial celebration, with its logo on a beachball, hackey sack and Frisbee.

"They should know something, a little bit of Santa Maria," he said.

For items to reach troops by Christmas, they need to be mailed by Saturday.

"It doesn't mean people who get things couldn't send something afterward too," Chenoweth said, urging others on the Central Coast to look at the Web site and do something for those serving in the war zone.

"They're over there defending us," he said. "We're wrapped up in Christmas. I feel badly about that."

He added that he had talked to men who served in previous wars about the value of a care package.

"I was told people have no idea how much this type of thing means to them when away from their family," he said.

"I read a lot of those letters, not all 800, and they're tear jerkers. They really will tug at your hearts when you read that stuff. Some of those kids don't get any mail at all. A lot of them don't have families."

The Chenoweths' choice, Army Sgt. Jose D. Chavarria, with the 1st Cavalry Division, wrote that some in his unit don't receive as much mail as others.

"For a soldier to receive something from home, it means so much to them. I wish I could take a picture when a soldier gets a package," he wrote, likening it to a 3-year-old "trying to open a present in a hurry."

The local couple's efforts are an example of public sentiment running somewhat at odds with official military policy.

The parents of an East Coast military member who was sent to Iraq in 2003 started www.ansoldier.us, which allows soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines to sign up to receive packages.

Military members provide their names, ranks and military addresses, which don't reveal specific locations. Donors can pick a person to receive a package, address it to a specific military member and add "Att'n Any Soldier" so the items can be distributed to others.

The program bypasses a ban on the once-popular "any servicemember" and "Operation Dear Abby" efforts that allowed strangers to send letters and care packages to troops. In 2002 Pentagon leaders called for an end to the anonymous mailings due to security concerns in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and anthrax scare.

But they underestimated the passion of the parents who developed the anysoldier.us site to skirt the rules against unsolicited mail. Anysoldier.us organizers say it's not unsolicited mail, since items are addressed to someone specific, and then made available to any soldier.

On Nov. 2, the Defense Department released a reminder that the "any servicemember" mail programs are still suspended and that the general public should not send unsolicited mail, care packages or donations to service members during the holiday season.

"During this time of the year, the number of donation programs increases and causes mail from families and friends to be mixed with mail from unknown sources resulting in delivery delays," the statement said. "DoD continues to emphasize that names and addresses of military service members must not be distributed by the media, Web sites, companies, nonprofit organizations, schools and individuals for the purpose of collecting letters of support or donations for mailing to service members."

Those serving in the military should receive mail only from friends and family members and addresses shouldn't be passed around for donation programs, the department's statement said.

"It's not our position to sanction or not sanction people's good intentions undertaken to support our troops," said Army Lt. Col. Joe Richard, a Pentagon spokesman.

The Pentagon tries to provide a venue to support efforts, recently launching www.americasupportsyou.mil. None of those programs gives out an individual military member's name or address.

"That is one example that we try to assist these groups in channeling support to our troops, which has been absolutely tremendous," Richard said.

Also in November, Army Gen. John P. Abizaid, commander of U.S. Central Command, asked Congress members for help in eliminating unsolicited mail to troops. Bulk donations are discouraged because of the added burden on the military transportation and distribution system and the "real threat" of bioterrorism and related security concerns, he said.

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