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## Chamber's AnySoldier Campaign gets heartfelt response

Angie Riebe  
Mesabi Daily News  
Saturday, January 21st, 2006 11:03:02 PM

VIRGINIA — Some wondered where in Minnesota Virginia is located. Others were more familiar with the state.

But whether or not they knew exactly where the care packages were assembled and sent from, the soldiers overseas appreciated the amenities inside.

They expressed their gratitude in handwritten notes, typed letters, e-mails, postcards, Christmas cards and thank yous.

A wall at the Laurentian Chamber of Commerce in Virginia displays the many gestures of thanks from servicemen and servicewomen in response to the local AnySoldier campaign.

*Story Continues Below*

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Chamber Administrative Assistant Pam Pilney, whose daughter is training to serve in the Navy, along with three other soldiers' mothers and a military wife, coordinated the benefit, which included fund-raising events last fall in Virginia and Forbes.

People throughout the Iron Range donated money, food, and supplies, including personal hygiene items, reading materials, candy, snacks, and letters.

In all, 454 packages — more than 1,800 pounds of supplies — were sent via AnySoldier.com, facilitated by a network of volunteer soldiers that distributes letters and boxes to soldiers in their units who never or rarely get mail from home; and more than \$18,000 was raised for shipping expenses and to buy additional care package items.

Soldiers from throughout the country stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait,

27  
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Kyrgyzstan, and Africa and at sea received the packages, which were sent out by Dec. 10 to arrive by Christmas.

Numerous volunteers worked at the benefits and helped fill and ship the boxes, Pilney said.

"The men and women have been so grateful," she said. "It's phenomenal. Many put in 12-hour days. They barely have time to eat and sleep and they still took the time to respond. It's great to hear that they appreciate the hard work that's gone into it."

Some even wrote thank you letters after returning home. Several included photos of themselves overseas.

One soldier said the care package brightened his day. Another said the beef jerky was the best he'd ever tasted.

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"We cannot begin to express our gratitude for your gifts sent to 'any female soldier.' Thank you does not seem to capture how much we truly appreciate your kindness and support," said Jacqueline Poteet, who was previously stationed five years in the Twin Cities. "Regardless of where we came from geographically, what branch of service we are in, how old, or even our differences in rank and gender, one thing remains the same; we are here to do a job in a 'not-so-popular' war and we will do that job to the best of our abilities.

"Being away from home and families during Christmas can be difficult for many of us. Our families will celebrate the holidays to some extent. Some will celebrate as if we are there in spirit and some will wait for our return.

"We want you to know that it is kind people like you who make any day, especially the holidays, brighter for us. What matters most is not the gifts that you send, rather it's the cards, letters, pictures and your prayers that touch our hearts so deeply."

She added: "I have to admit, I do not miss the winters" of Minnesota.

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Bronx, N.Y., native Sgt. Natalie Butler, 316th Postal Company, Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, also was thankful for her care package. "I know sending things to soldiers takes a lot of time and dedication," she wrote.

The 33-year-old, who has a 12-year-old child, said she has served in the military two years "and love every minute of what I have done and what I am doing...

"There are so many people today that feel that we soldiers are here for no good reason, but believe me, we are doing good things here. We have improved the economy, installed schools, provided food and adequate homes. We also provided humanitarian support to a lot of small cities.

"Believe me, there are people that think we are doing a good thing and I wish that Americans can see what we are doing here or spend one day in our shoes so that they would know the truth and understand firsthand.

"Once again please accept my thank you and feel free to stay in touch. I am here for another six months. May God Bless us all."

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"Thank you for sending us a couple boxes through the AnySoldier program," wrote Staff Sgt. Jon D. Vandeyacht in a hand-written letter. "Almost everything in them was grabbed within minutes of putting it in the community area. Great people, such as yourself, who take just a little time from their busy lives and send things that they think might be trivial, have a big impact on those of us over here."

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"Many soldiers are at major locations where things are plentiful. This location is remote so everything sent is always appreciated."

On the envelope, he added that in 1999 and 2000 he lived and worked in Willmar and in Oakdale, Minn. "Minnesota is a good state," he said.

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Nancy Stevens, a Reservist from upstate New York "where the pace is not too fast, not too slow and the scenery is nice and green in the summer and nice and white (we get almost 200 inches of snow each winter ) in the winter," was thankful for the books that arrived in her package.

"Thank your for the paperbacks! You must be a busy group of individuals, and we thank you for thinking of us when you have your own concerns there in Minnesota. We truly appreciate your generous outpouring."

Stevens, who has been in the military for 25 years, wrote of her husband and children — a 20-year-old daughter who is a cadet at West Point, a son, 18, and youngest daughter, 16.

And she told a bit of her service overseas.

"We are the Civil Affairs people, so we go out into the city of Kabul every day and perform our primary missions as liaisons to the Ministries (that is how the government is organized). I deal with the Ministry of Agriculture...

"As we drive around the streets we see all sorts of the human condition, and I suppose the best thing is that there are vendors all over the place, selling all kinds of fruits, melons, etc. ...

"The worst thing we see are children begging for 'one dollar' and literally hanging on our vehicles in unbelievable heavy traffic. We break the rules and give them candy and water. We figure that even if their parents are at the very best, wary of us, and at the worst, hate us, at least we can impress the children and hopefully they will remember that the Americans were kind to them."

The support from home "also amazes our Coalition partners, who are mostly Romanian officers," she continued. "They don't understand why 'strangers' would write and send gifts. We do our best to explain the concept of love of country and patriotism, but your outpouring is better than any word. YOU are a perfect example of those concepts."

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Major Paul Schmidt, from Indiana, wrote: "Believe it or not, I have been through your city many times and have even stayed there. My family has a place in Ontario and I travel annually through Virginia to get there.

"I know that people will understand not getting a response, but I felt compelled in this case to respond to your generosity. All of the items you sent were great and vanished in seconds. The food here is good, but it is always a nice little comfort to get hold of different snacks that we don't often see here.

"I will speak primarily for myself, but we are very committed to what we are doing here and we realize that tough there are those who disagree, there are many people like you who know that the freedom we enjoy was secured by the sacrifices of soldiers present and past. It really does make such a difference in the lives of people here to get reminders that there are many like you that go well out of their way to show support.

"The local governments are doing better, but still need help adjusting to doing business in a democratic society. There are still many problems, but these people are pushing through them at great risk because they know the importance of succeeding. Hearing them speak of hope with regard to the future and how grateful they are for the help and sacrifice we provide makes me know that this a worthy cause and one worth the sacrifice."



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