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Girl Scouts collect toys for troops in war zone

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By Meredith Wade
UNION-TRIBUNE COMMUNITY NEWS WRITER

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CARMEL VALLEY – U.S. military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan hope that the Beanie Babies they carry in their pockets will help warm the hearts of children in a war zone.

Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Mark Francis said, "On each patrol that we take through the city, we take as many toys as will fit in our pockets and hand them out as we can. The kids take the toys and run to show them off as if they were worth a million bucks. Most of them don't have any idea what is going on (with the war) and are completely innocent in all of this."

The Girls Scout troops of Carmel Valley have collected more than 750 Beanie Babies to send to deployed soldiers. They have also gathered 125 DVDs for the personnel to view in their downtime.

Julie Union, a mother and coordinator with the Carmel Valley Scouts, said that the idea for the service project came about after a friend told her about a stuffed animal that Francis credited for saving his convoy in Iraq. The Marine said a small girl holding one of the furry toys given to her by troops stopped U.S. soldiers on patrol and showed them the location of a land mine.



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“It was a heart of an American that sent that toy and that gave that toy to that little girl. It was the heart of an American that protected that convoy from that mine. It was a heart of acceptance, of tolerance, of peace and grace. Those attributes are what (keep) Americans' hearts beating,” Francis said.

The stuffed animal drive ran from March 21 to April 10 and was an opportunity for the girls to earn Girl Scout badges and learn more about the world.

Katie

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Buote, 10, said the collection drive helped her learn more about what life was like for people in Afghanistan and Iraq. “I didn't know a lot about people there before, but now we know we should help them,” Katie said. “Many kids don't have toys and had their homes destroyed so they don't have things to play with.”

Most of the Beanie Babies came from the girls' personal collections. Even though some toys were hard to give up, the girls felt like the sacrifice was worthwhile because they were helping children in need. “We have lots of things here, and we don't need them the way that other people in other countries do,” Katie said.

Isabel Barbosa, 12, agreed with her friend. “We have much more than we need and they barely have what they need,” Isabel said.

The Beanie Babies will be delivered to Miramar Marine Corps Air Station and will then travel overseas with the troops on their next deployment. Each toy will be accompanied by a card with a picture of the Girl Scouts and a troop mailing address.

“We hope that maybe some of the soldiers or even some of the children that receive the toys will want to write to us,” Union said.

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In the meantime, the girls are just happy to think that their furry animals could make another child happy.

“The kids there might be scared and sad and maybe this will help protect them,” Katie said.

Isabel added, “They have lost almost everything, so this could help make them happy.”

The Marines involved with the project feel that goodwill shown by the Girl Scouts is representative of the generosity of the citizens of the United States. Francis said that Americans who send items to troops “are a reason that Iraq has to believe in a better future.”

For more information about donating requested items to U.S. military personnel overseas, visit www.anysoldier.com. The Web site is used by the military to request materials that will help tours of duty.

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