

The New York Times

Raising Morale Far From Home November 12, 2009



Bottom left: Sandy Huffaker for The New York Times; top left: Dick Kettlewell for The New York Times; top and bottom right, Courtesy of Give2TheTroops

Clockwise from top left, Staff Sgt. Ryan Royer, of the South Dakota National Guard, spent a year in Bagram, Afghanistan. A thank-you note from care-package recipients in Iraq, and soldiers in Afghanistan with stockings sent by Give2TheTroops. Dr. Lester Tenney, left, and Dan May loading care packages for soldiers.

By KAREN JONES

A SURVIVOR of World War II's infamous Bataan Death March, Dr. Lester Tenney endured over three years of slave labor as a Japanese prisoner of war, with no word from home. "I would have been so happy to get a package of any kind," Dr. Tenney said. "I wouldn't have cared what was in it — just the fact that someone would think of me and send something. Oh Lord, that would have been exciting!"

Determined that today's troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are "not forgotten," Dr. Tenney, 89, started [Care Packages from Home](#) three years ago with his San Diego [retirement](#) community. He ships out 50 packages a week and is preparing 500 special holiday boxes filled with phone cards, holiday stockings, wet wipes, warm socks, blankets, games, gloves, personal letters to the troops and much more. "We veterans of yesteryear gave

then. The young ones of today are giving now, and we appreciate what they are doing,” Dr. Tenney said.

There will be no Christmas festivities this December for Maj. Gary Bourland, 39, a Marine who is on his fourth deployment. He said it would be snowing in Afghanistan on Christmas Day and he and his [Marines](#) would be “sitting in the dirt, cold and miserable.”

Even with Marine Corps training, he said, Afghanistan can be tough duty: “You are in 14,000-foot-high mountains and not bathing for 30 days. The dirt is like flour and gets in everything — your lungs, pores, everything. You defecate in 55-gallon drums, urinate in trenches and eat M.R.E.s (Meals Ready to Eat) at best.”

But getting a care package from home can work wonders for morale, he said. “It is the best feeling in the world opening up one of these packages,” he said, adding that basic necessities like nail clippers, foot powder, socks and wet wipes, which can be used to take a wet wipe bath, can “make or break you out there.” It also signals to his troops, many of whom are young and away from home for the first time, that they are not forgotten. “A simple letter that says thanks tells a Marine that somebody back there cares,” Major Bourland said. “If they know the American people are supportive, my troops will walk through fire for them.”

Care packages are beneficial for deployed troops any time of year, but during the holidays they can be “critical for morale,” said Adrien Starks, chief of civic outreach for the Department of Defense. “Service members are away from home and out protecting our freedom. Just to be reminded that, ‘Yes, we love you and are thinking of you’ is very helpful.”

Troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan routinely contact home-front charities like [AnySoldier.com](#), [Give2TheTroops.org](#), [SupportOurTroops.org](#) and others with requests for items from home. Depending on the organization, supporters can send products to the charity, which will package and mail them overseas, or obtain instructions on how to send a package directly.

Melissa Letizio, 28, is a master sergeant in the Connecticut Air National Guard who has been deployed twice to a United States-operated air base in the United Arab Emirates. She was part of a “force support squadron,” where her job was to “provide essential services for troops that are going into combat in Iraq and Afghanistan,” she said. This includes dining, lodging, fitness and community programs, search and recovery and mortuary operations.

Her squadron’s focus was to keep troop morale high, which can present a different set of considerations for female soldiers. The availability of female hygiene products and undergarments is always a concern, said Sergeant Letizio, and long tours of duty in the scorching desert heat can take a toll.

“You never feel like a girl,” she said. “You are in uniform all the time and you are sweaty, dirty ... Your hair breaks off in your hand because of the heat and you can’t wear makeup

because it just sweats off your face. You feel like you look terrible, and that can cause some women to get depressed.”

The remedy, she said, can be as simple as receiving a care package with facial products, hair bands or even a small pedicure kit. “It sounds ridiculous, but at the end of the day your feet are killing you, or you have been in combat for 14 hours and on your day off it is kind of nice to soak your feet,” she said. Sergeant Letizio encourages people to send holiday care packages this year: “Getting support from back home really makes a huge difference. Troops can’t get back those holidays, but we can do our best to make it more comforting for them.”

Ryan Royer is a South Dakota state trooper and has been a member of the South Dakota Army National Guard for 14 years. He spent a year at [Bagram](#) Air Base in Afghanistan as a staff sergeant in a military police unit. He says receiving care packages from home brings out the kid in even the most hardened troops. “You’d never seen a bunch of grown men and women get so excited about beef jerky or Girl Scout cookies.”

Part of his duty was to interact with the surrounding villages to determine if they needed humanitarian assistance, so he found himself making special requests to home-front charities for stuffed animals, which he gave to local children, and lemonade packets. “We liked the lemonade ourselves, but found out that children in the villages really liked it, too,” he said. “They aren’t used to having anything like that. They are used to dirty well water.”

Staff Sergeant Royer confirmed that care packages of any size are deeply appreciated by the recipients. “It gives soldiers the extra drive to keep doing what we’re doing,” he said. “Whether it is a bottle of water or a video game, pack it up and send it because I guarantee you whatever troop on the other end who gets that, it’s going to be the greatest thing that happens to them that day.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/12/giving/12VET.html?%2334:Karen%20Jones=& r=1&sq=&st=cse&%2334;=&scp=49&pagewanted=print>

<http://nyti.ms/HxebWS>