

Remember to support our troops this holiday season

BY DEIRDRE O'SHEA
Copley News Service

At Christmastime, sending cheer overseas to American soldiers stationed far from home is a tradition. In decades past, if grateful civilians could have boxed up snow and evergreen trees, they would have.

Instead, they sent packages with magazines, socks and candy simply addressed to "Any Soldier."

This year, many people want to give something tangible and familiar to thank the thousands of soldiers engaged in the Iraqi War. But the Department of Defense, faced with increased concerns about security after Sept. 11, has banned anonymous care packages in Middle Eastern countries.

Military personnel still receive packages addressed specifically to them. But

don't try to get around the rules by sending a bunch packages to an individual service member. This only creates logjams and delays.

One of the best ways to send a useful and much-needed gift to service members is through the United Service Organizations (USO), which has been coordinating Operation USO Care Package since 2002. As of summer, the USO had distributed more than 300,000 packages.

"Americans support the troops year-round," said Donna St. John, director of communications for the USO World Headquarters. "But during the holidays, we like to send out a special appeal. We know that people think more about the troops and want to do something."

The packages include items specifically requested

by soldiers serving in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, such as prepaid worldwide phone cards, travel-size toiletries (toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, conditioner, sunscreen, baby wipes, hand lotion, lip balm and cotton swabs), playing cards and wrapped snacks.

Endorsed by the Department of Defense, the USO relies on monetary donations from the public to provide the care packages — it can not accept items. But for just \$25, donors can sponsor a care package that includes a personal message of support and encouragement to a soldier.

In April last year, the USO also began Operation Phone Home, which needs donations.

"We are able to purchase bulk quantities of phone

cards from AT&T, a USO world partner," said St. John. "Those are distributed through our USO centers to deployed troops and they are used in our care packages."

For more information or to donate, visit www.uso-cares.org.

Another great idea this season is a "Gifts From the Homefront" gift certificate, offered through the Army and Air Force Exchange Service. These provide American men and women in the military with a little money to spend on themselves — a huge morale booster.

The gift certificates can be used at any military exchange retail store for health and beauty items, soft drinks, candy, snacks, prepaid calling cards, music and more. They can be purchased at:

www.aafes.com/docs/homefront.htm and are distributed by the American Red Cross.

Here at home, reaching out to military families during the holidays is a wonderful option for those looking to make a contribution. Deployed service members rest easier knowing that their families are being looked after.

The USO may be best-known for its celebrity entertainment tours, but this nonprofit organization does much more for the troops and their families through its 125 USO centers worldwide — 71 of them in the contiguous United States. They offer a wide variety of services, everything from family crisis counseling to libraries to nursery facilities to recreation. And volunteers are always welcome.

Military relief societies also count on the generosity of the American people. All are private, nonprofit organizations that help the families of service members with financial emergencies.

For more information visit their Web sites:

■ **Army Emergency Relief**, www.aerhq.org

■ **Navy/Marine Relief Society**, www.nmcrs.org

■ **Air Force Aid Society**, www.afas.org

■ **Coast Guard Mutual Assistance**, www.cgmahq.org

As Americans reflect on how much there is to be thankful for this holiday season, it's a good time to acknowledge our debt to the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces and find some small way to show gratitude for the sacrifices they make every day of the year.

Essay: Letters from Dad

BY MARGARET THOMPSON
Special to the Record-Eagle

When I was growing up, holiday family gatherings were festive, with good food and lively conversation being the order of the day.

With the end of World War II still fresh in their minds (though, in fact, nearly 20 years had passed), pre-meal chatter in the kitchen between Mom and my aunts always included memories of wartime food rationing and how holiday meals were less bountiful because of it.

Later, as the women cleared the table in preparation for dessert, Dad and his older brother shared their own memories of the war years.

Uncle Ralph, who served with the U.S. Army in the Philippines, told how much he enjoyed getting letters from home, though they were often received several months after being posted.

Dad, who served in the Navy aboard the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Wasp*, recalled how getting a letter from home was like getting presents on Christmas, or his birthday.

The conversations of war continued long into the evening with the two veterans in the spotlight of attention as they tried to describe the experience of living half a world away from loved ones, not knowing if they would ever see them again.

Though I felt sadness for what they had experienced, I never understood their loneliness until 1974, the year I enlisted in the Navy. What I thought would be an exciting, fun-filled adven-

ture started out to be anything but.

Navy boot camp in Orlando, Fla., was the closest thing to hell I had ever experienced up to that point in my young life (I was 18). During the first days of training, the skin of my face and neck was painfully burned from constant exposure to Florida's scorching summer sun, the pain surpassed only by the multiple, quarter-sized blisters that formed on the bottoms of my feet as a result of marching everywhere we went in brisk, military style.

My appetite was poor, too, though I doubt I would have had much to eat even if I had been hungry: the food was terrible (by my picky standards, anyway). I reached a point where I was certain I wouldn't survive another obstacle course, let alone another day. By the end of week one I was a physical and emotional wreck, as were most of my "new-recruit" sisters.

And then it came. A letter addressed to: Seaman Recruit Margaret Mary Shultz, Navy Recruit Training Command, Co. 3127, Orlando, Fla. A feeling of elation came over me when I recognized the sender's bold cursive penmanship. It wasn't necessary to read the return address label, but I did. It read: R. V. Shultz, 7320 Lighthouse Rd., Port Hope, Mich. It was from Dad.

"Hi sailor," the letter began. "It's been almost 30 years since I've written to a woman. Then, I was in the Navy and she was at home, now I'm at home and the woman is in the Navy. The world sure is changing."

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I continued reading, suddenly recalling those holiday gatherings and all the stories my father shared about his own time in the Navy. Dad's first-ever letter to his youngest child told how he and Mom were happy, but lonely for us kids in their suddenly empty nest.

It described in vivid detail the sweet joys of home. Mom's scalloped potatoes and ham for Sunday dinner; a night of cardplaying with close friends; a special "hi" from my cat, Harry.

By the time I finished reading, I remembered that I wasn't alone in the world, that those who loved and cared for me would be there to give support and encouragement even if only through a letter, or in cherished memories.

Every week for the next eight weeks Dad sent a letter. There were others, of course.

Mom sent a letter every week, but hers always followed Dad's so she would point out that Dad had told me all the gossip and that all she wanted to say was that she loved me.

Letters came on a regular basis, too, from dear friends, parents of friends, a former employer, a favorite teacher, neighbors and relatives.

I appreciated each and every letter from all who took the time to think of me, but only Dad's letters gave little tidbits of old-sailor advice that a new sailor needed to hear.

"Don't be a smart aleck or you'll find yourself scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush," he advised in one

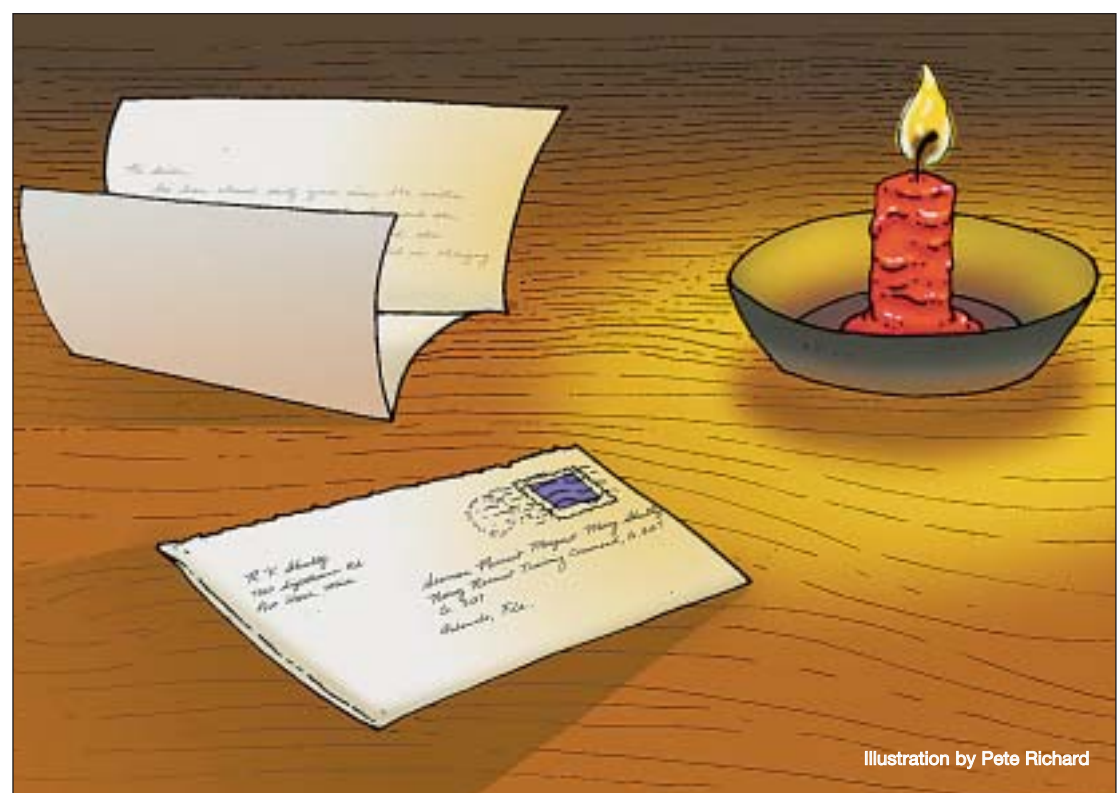


Illustration by Pete Richard

letter. Or "You'll be home soon, honey, and we'll be here," he wrote in another.

Dad's letters brought a homesick child home — if just for a moment — to all that had once been taken for granted but was now suddenly so deeply missed.

And only Dad's letters said the things a father needed to tell his daughter about how proud he was of her, how much he loved her and how certain he was she would make it through the challenge of Navy basic training.

In September of 1974, I graduated from boot camp

and reported to Navy Hospital Corp School Command at Great Lakes, Ill. Letters from Dad were replaced by phone calls and frequent trips home to Michigan to spend time with family and friends.

Dad died in 1978, shortly after my Navy "hitch" was up. Not a day goes by that I don't think about him and about the gift of love and encouragement he gave to me through the simple act of writing a letter.

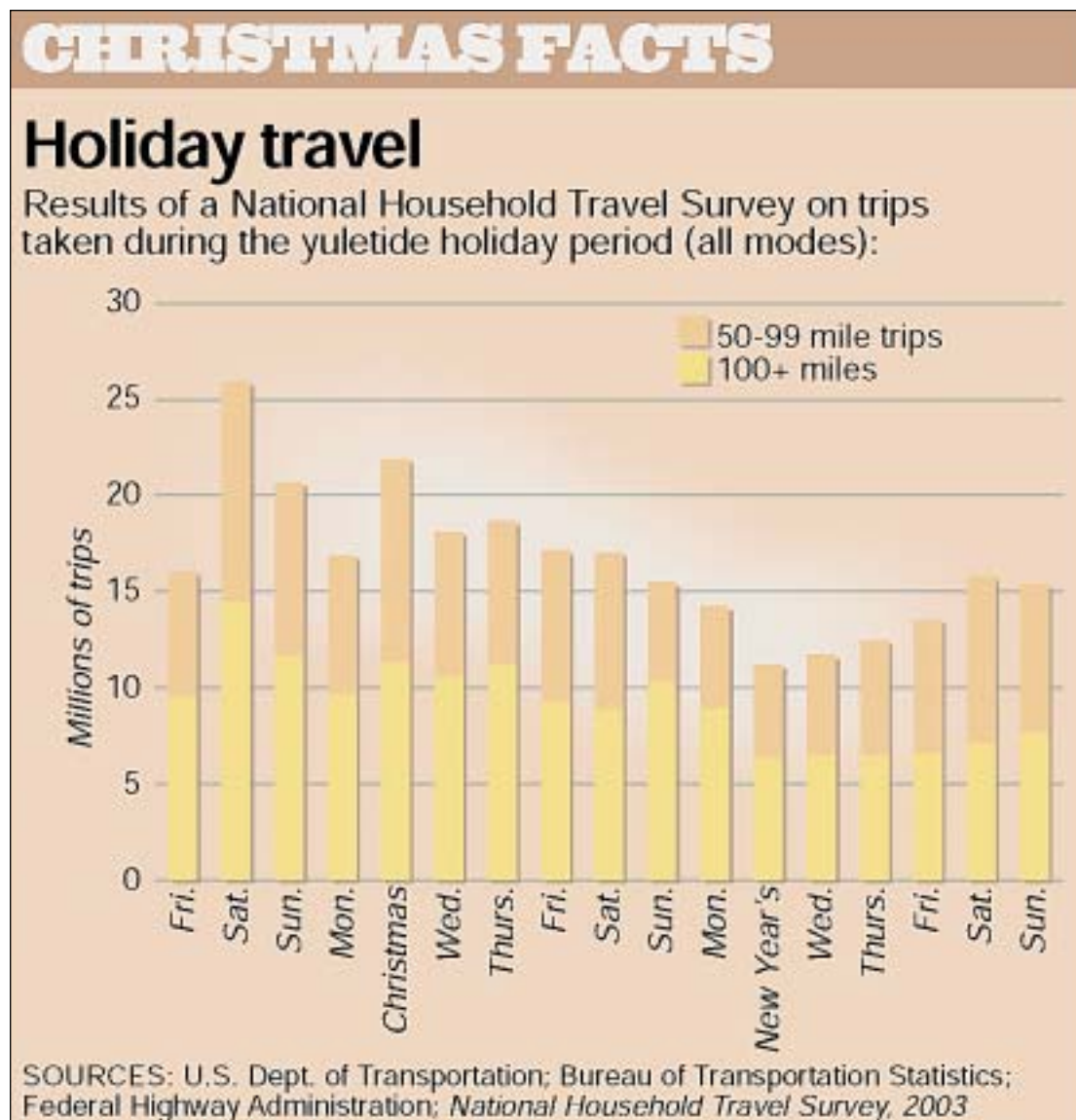
I've read and re-read them many times since they were first written; I expect I'll read them a thousand

times more before my life 'hitch' is up. Dad's handwritten gifts gave me strength and courage through those difficult days of Navy boot camp and they continue to provide strength and courage to this day.

When life gets too crazy I browse through the protective book where the letters are now kept and once again I know I'll survive. I know I'll make it.

Thanks, sailor. I love you Dad.

Margaret Thompson is a local freelance writer.



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