

# Signed, sealed, delivered

*How to keep those cards and letters rolling in*

BY MOLLY PARKER  
Copley News Service

They may deliver in rain, sleet or hail, but the U.S. Postal Service can't do a thing with your mail until you stamp and seal it for delivery.

Mail officials are suggesting that you mail any packages early if you want to ensure your letters and boxes full of holiday cheer will arrive by Christmas Day to destinations within the United States.

"Traditionally, the week prior to Christmas everyone realizes, 'Oh my gosh, it's here,' and the Monday prior is almost always our busiest mailing day," said Michael Clark, manager of finance for the U.S. Postal Service's Peoria, Ill., branch.

In the span between Christmas and New Year's, more than 20 billion cards, letters and packages will be shipped across the country and overseas, he said.

To ensure your mail reaches an out-of-town destination by Christmas, the Postal Service offers first-class mail, priority mail and express mail.

"Of course, if you're mailing in the local area, that's a lot different than if you're mailing (out of state)," Clark said.

For all mail, Clark said following a few simple mailing rules can help avoid unnecessary headaches for you and others as the Postal Service attempts to deliver your packages with care.

Most often that mail is rejected and sent back to you for repackaging. Instead, when sending bulky items, use a padded envelope, which can be purchased at the post office.

Clark also recommended making sure your packages are fastened securely.

"Don't use Scotch tape to mail a package across the

country," he said.

Most of all, Clark advised a little patience as millions of pieces of mail roam the countryside this holiday season. Postal employees are doing "everything we can to protect your stuff,"

Clark said.

Though Santa Claus may be able to traverse the world in only one night and swoop down chimneys by simply touching his nose, postal employees are, after all, only human.

## Tips from the mail room

- ▶ Use a sturdy box, strong tape and, if sending fragile items, proper cushioning. Do not use string or twine to put the box together.
- ▶ Inside your package, put a list of the things you are sending, as well as your address and that of the intended recipient. If your box falls apart during delivery, the post office will be more likely to reassemble it.
- ▶ Do not send cash. Sending a check or money order is safer and easier to recover if lost.
- ▶ Do not put odd-shaped items, such as pens or earrings, in first-class envelopes. Your mail will likely be rejected and sent back to you. Use a padded envelope instead.
- ▶ If you send a card in an odd-shaped envelope, remember that it costs 12 cents extra to do so. Most cards indicated whether extra postage is required, but if you forget, the recipient may end up being asked to pay the extra postage.
- ▶ Type, or print the complete address neatly.
- ▶ Always use a complete return address.
- ▶ Make sure you're using the ZIP code. If you don't know it, don't guess. Go to [www.usps.com](http://www.usps.com) to find ZIP codes and locate post offices — and any other place that sells stamps in your area, like grocery stores or ATMs.
- ▶ The only addresses on packages for mailing should be the delivery and return addresses.
- ▶ Remove batteries from toys. Wrap and place them next to the toys in the mailing box. If you are mailing framed pictures, disassemble and wrap the frame and glass separately.
- ▶ For questions regarding express mail or priority mail, call (800) 222-1811. For all other post office information, call (800) 275-8777 (ASK-USPS).

# How to prepare packages for loved ones stationed overseas

BY CHERYL WALKER  
Copley News Service

Making a Christmas list sometimes isn't an easy task. But when faced with buying and sending packages for loved ones stationed overseas, it can take a lot more thought as well as time.

There's no doubt about it — a package from home is always a welcome sight for men and women serving a tour of duty far from home.

So what's the best Christmas gift to send? "They like anything and everything," said Carol Grice, manager of the corporate offices of Operation

Interdependence Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, Calif. "They appreciate everything that is sent." To those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, a prime gift is food. Troops especially love energy bars, beef jerky and powdered drinks.

"They really like the sweetened powder drinks you can add to water," Grice said.

People like to send special gifts for their loved ones and while it may not be as much fun, practical items can mean the most to those stationed overseas. Most requested items include toilet paper, soap, writing materials, plastic utensils, socks, gloves and cough drops. For women, some of their favorites are bobby pins, shampoo and Midol as well as various feminine products.

Since packages need to start being mailed as early as October in order to

reach soldiers in time for Christmas, checking the Internet and ordering items online is easy and convenient. Many sites cater to the military with "Military Candy Survival Kits" that offer an assortment of sweets with a special connection to

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the military.

Since those serving overseas are almost constantly on the move, sending disposable items or things that will be used right away is a good idea. They especially enjoy getting disposable cameras. Wet wipes are also nice for them to have in the hot and sandy locations.

Think of small items that are easy for them to carry with their gear. Decks of cards and small video games are nice for them to have to enjoy when they're off duty.

With electronic items getting smaller and smaller, it's even possible to send battery-powered DVD and CD players. And

as John Michael Montgomery wrote in his song "Greetings From Home," messages of support mean more to service members than anything. Try sending voice greetings from home.

Some Internet businesses offer 50-minute recordings on a CD and will deliver to the military directly wherever your loved one is stationed.

Once your box of holiday goodies is complete, it's time to get the package in the mail. It's never too early to mail it.

Make sure to vacuum pack the box to remove all the air and preserve the freshness. Using bags to pack items will allow more space for gifts inside the box.

For those who want to send packages to any service member, the rules have changed. More than two years ago, the postal service stopped delivering mail and packages from the general public that were addressed to any service member. Because of security reasons, these packages need to be sent through Operation Interdependence. They sort through the packages to make sure everything is safe and repackage the items for mailing.

In addition to Operation Interdependence, the public can check with any military base in their area. Some bases have formed special committees to help with sending packages overseas. Other organizations that can help are the American Red Cross and local churches and veterans groups.

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