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Web Site Helps Soldiers in Need

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By Beth Ward

FOX NEWS

ANNAPOLIS — When their son was deployed to Iraq two years ago, Martin "Marty" Horn and his wife, Suzanne, started sending him packages from their home in La Plata. They soon found he was sharing them with soldiers in his unit who were not receiving mail, so the Horns started sending packages to these soldiers as well.

Today that simple gesture has become a Web site, **AnySoldier.com**, that helps packages and letters reach almost half the soldiers deployed in Iraq, or about 95,000 troops, according to the Web site.

"It's about increasing the morale of troops. It's about support, not just stuff," Marty Horn said. "The most requested thing is letters. We're not trying to re-supply the Army with what they don't have; it's not our mission."

The La Plata-based site helps soldiers who do not receive much mail get support from people who want to send packages to troops overseas but need help getting in contact.

Because of military restrictions, packages can not be sent to "Any Soldier." Through the site, soldiers can sign up to be a contact - which means the packages are addressed to them with "Attn: Any Soldier" in the address and they in turn distribute them to other members of the unit.

The contact soldiers act as intermediaries, not only distributing the packages but also posting messages on the site asking for needed supplies like socks, baby wipes, t-shirts and some of the comforts of home such as movies, magazines and snack food.

(Story continues below)

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Christine Cesca, of West Nyack, N.Y., a frequent visitor to the site since she heard about it on a radio station last year; has sent 63 packages to soldiers overseas.

"Although I don't have an enormous amount of extra money, I knew I could find some to do something good with, and this program was the perfect answer," she wrote in an e-mail. "I kept picturing troops who received little

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or no mail, and although I can't write every one of them, I can try to make at least some of their days brighter."

Horn said with the holiday season coming more people will visit the site and send packages to the soldiers.

"Interest does go up at the holidays - people remember we have guys over there," he said. "We know everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon during the holidays." Last year between Thanksgiving week and the last week of December the site was visited 463,403 times, triple the number of visits in October and double the number in January 2005.

The site started as a way for the family to provide support for the unit to which their son, Army **Sgt. Brian Horn**, was assigned. But it quickly took off, and within a year of the site's start in August 2003, had about 150 volunteer contacts. Today about 3,600 soldiers are contacts in 12 countries, according to the site.

In 2004, the organization became Any Soldier, Inc., and was given status as a nonprofit organization.

Marty Horn said AnySoldier.com is "not the typical Web site; it's very comprehensive." Beyond the basic function of providing soldiers a place to ask for things they need and for people to provide it, the site also includes a wide range of recommendations from what to send, how to package it and the best times to send it.

The holidays can pose a problem for the Army Post Office, which has to deal with the influx of packages. On the Any Soldier site, there is a section devoted to the holidays, giving recommendations for sending packages before or after the rush to help stem the heavy flow of packages.

"We want to remind people to hold off and don't send a mad giant rush (around the holidays)," Horn said.

Horn said the Department of Defense's mail service is similar to that of the regular postal system except "the DOD is trying to run mail through a war zone." This makes it more difficult for them to get packages to troops.

"Because it is the holiday season, people are in more generous moods and more is sent during the holidays," said Lt. Col. Pamela Hart, an Army spokeswoman. Hart advised sending mail early "to ensure soldiers get packages on time because of the overwhelming amount of mail."

The Department of Defense issues a list of recommended dates to send packages in time for the holidays. The dates vary depending on the type of

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mail being sent, but the range is from Nov. 12 through Dec. 19.

The Horns have expanded their enterprise to include specific pages for each branch of the military. Sue Horn runs TreatAnySoldier.com, which allows people to send pre-made packages to soldiers for people who want to help but may not necessarily have the time.

Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger, D-Md., an honorary board member of Any Soldier, Inc., said the site is doing "pretty good" considering it started only two years ago.

Ruppersberger founded Operation Hero Miles, which uses donated frequent flyer miles to allow soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to fly home for free.

"Whether you are for or against the war, you have to support the troops," he said. "People in this country are very patriotic and will do anything to help the troops and sites like this help them do it."

The Any Soldier site received more than 58 million hits from September 2003 to Nov. 15.

Marty Horn, who retired from the Army after 20 years as a military policeman, said he maintains the site with the help of an Air Force reservist. Horn said they have not gone longer than four hours without updating the site.

Beth Jones, of Chattanooga, Tenn., has a son stationed overseas with the Marines and has used the military's support Web site: AmericaSupportsYou.mil, and said she finds AnySoldier.com "more personal" but both are "excellent Web sites."

"The love, compassion and concern the Horn family has for the soldiers and their families comes through their Web site," she wrote in an e-mail. "Marty and his wife are both former military and so that gives them a unique insight and understanding into the military way of life and their families."

Capital News Service contributed to this report.

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