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Philadelphia & Suburbs



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The Philadelphia Inquirer

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A balm for the troops

A minister's soothing songs and words help calm the anxious.

By David O'Reilly
Inquirer Staff Writer

The CDs begin the same way, with Florence Duckett's soothing voice offering an introduction from thousands of miles away.

"You don't know me," she tells her listener, "but here is a song you might like... "

What follows is more than an hour of Christian prayer, words of encouragement, and eight or nine more songs about grace and love and peace and Jesus.

The music and prayers can't drown out gunfire, or shield a humvee from a roadside bomb. But in the war zones of Ramadi and Baghdad and Kabul, those gifts from the stranger in far-off Ambler are calming the jagged nerves and anxious souls of U.S. combat troops.

Day after day for more than two years, Duckett has been leaning into a microphone, recording songs and prayers and offering comfort to military personnel young enough to be her children - or grandchildren.

"Some of them are 19, 20, 21," she marveled recently, shaking her head. "Why, they're babies."

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A widowed ticket agent at Amtrak's 30th Street Station, Duckett is also a licensed Baptist preacher whose chapel, so to speak, is her home recording studio.

By her own count, this 60-year-old grandmother has shipped 437 CDs to American troops in Iraq and 48 to Afghanistan since that day in November 2004 when she got "the call."

"It's not like I heard a voice or anything," she recalled with a laugh. "I was waking from a nap when something deep in my heart told me I'd be ministering to our soldiers."

Later that day, she paid a visit to the nearby Church of the Acts, in Ambler. There, an usher handed her a photocopy of a widely circulated public letter written by Spec. Joseph Roche, then serving in Iraq as a humvee driver with the Army's 18th Combat Engineers.

In his letter - which President Bush had praised in a State of the Union address - Roche hailed the "amazing" progress and "vital" mission of U.S. troops who, according to Roche, were "transforming a once very sick society into a hopeful place."

"We can do this," Roche concluded, "as long as Americans at home keep faith with the soldiers in this war."

Duckett was also touched by Roche's admissions that "I'm scared every day" and that he prayed before every mission. A few days later, she sat down and recorded her first CD.

"I just started talking to him, and told him he didn't have to be afraid," she recalled.

Hundreds more CDs have followed. She finds the soldiers' names and military addresses at anysoldier.com, a civilian Web site devoted to soldiers overseas; she looks for entries from personnel who speak of being lonely or frightened.

Dozens of grateful letters from soldiers have flowed back to the modest, clapboard house on Highland Avenue.

"Your book, letters and CD was read, played and enjoyed [by] troops around my area," wrote one.

"You remind me of my great aunt," wrote another.

"I started crying as I read each page," Staff Sgt. Edwina Evans wrote in a December 2005 e-mail from Tikrit in north-central Iraq. Her e-mail's subject line read, "God [k]new I needed you."

"I'm not religious," one soldier wrote back, "but pray for me."

She asks for nothing in return from the military, but said the price of postage can be a burden. "This will cost \$3 or \$4," she said, hoisting one large envelope containing a CD and

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spiritual and autobiographical literature.

Duckett's ministry to combat soldiers is hardly her first. She has made 258 similar CDs for the elderly, and she has sometimes volunteered for janitorial jobs at 30th Street Station so that she can meet with, and pray for, the many homeless people who slip in late at night.

"There's nothing like giving of yourself. Nothing," she said. "I've seen [homeless] people just light up to see someone cared about them. I wouldn't give that up for all the money in the world."

Duckett said she had not dared to find out who among her recipients had made it home safely - and who had not. "Oh, it would hurt too much to know," she said, squeezing her eyes shut at the thought. "I just want them home."

The Inquirer tracked down Stephanie and Durwin Heater, a husband-and-wife team deployed to Iraq for 14 months in 2003-04, and for 12 months in 2005-06. Stephanie, then a 23-year-old Army mechanic, got a package from Duckett in December 2005.

"I do recall it," she said in a phone conversation from their home in St. Louis. "I was really impressed with her."

"We returned in May, and we're doing good," she said. Both served in combat but "neither of us was injured."

The Inquirer also located Joseph Roche, whose letters urging Americans to support the war started Duckett's special ministry. He returned home to Wilmore, Ky., two years ago, and is now a sergeant with the Military District in Washington, an elite rescue unit.

"There were many weeks when it seemed we wouldn't make it out alive. I know this sounds dramatic, but it happens when you're a soldier," he wrote in an e-mail. "Mrs. Duckett's CD was one of the few things that gave me resolve and purpose to continue each day."

Contact staff writer David O'Reilly at 215-854-5723 or doreilly@phillynews.com.

