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Web site brings comforts of home to any soldier

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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.

When they learned he was sharing them with soldiers in his unit who were not receiving mail, the Horns started sending packages to these soldiers as well.

Today, that simple gesture has grown into 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 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 can be addressed to them with "Attn: Any Soldier" in

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the address. Those contacts then distribute the packages to other members of the unit.

The contact soldiers also act as intermediaries, posting requests on the site for supplies like socks, baby wipes and T-shirts as well as some comforts of home, such as movies, magazines and snack food.

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

Between Thanksgiving week and the last week of December last year, the site was visited 463,403 times, triple the visits in October and double the number in January 2005.

"Interest does go up at the holidays. People remember we have guys over there," said Horn, who retired from the Army after 20 years as a military policeman. "We know everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon during the holidays."

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. Brian Horn is now in Afghanistan, according to the Web site.

Within a year of the site's start in August 2003, it had about 150 volunteer contacts.

That number has grown to 3,612 soldiers as contacts in 12 countries, according to the site with 2,508 contacts in the Army, 757 in the Marines, 209 in the Air Force and 138 in the Navy.

Horn said he maintains the site with the help of an Air Force reservist. The Any Soldier site received more than 58 million hits from September 2003 to Nov. 15.

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 Web site includes a range of recommendations on 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.

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.

A section on the Any Soldier site devoted to the holidays recommends sending packages before or after the rush to reduce

the heavy flow.

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

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

"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 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.

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

Ruppertsberger 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."

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