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Support troops with comfort of home

Thursday, March 10, 2005

BY KIMBERLY L. JACKSON
Star-Ledger Staff

You get the sense that Army Sgt. 1st Class Keith Lewis is a man accustomed to cozy and clean quarters.

Along with the toiletries, writing materials and other items he requests for his unit of 160 men stationed in Iraq near Baghdad, he seeks twin-size mattress pads and sheets in solid colors -- and rugs because "the floors stay gritty and dirty."

"A microwave would be nice," he continues, adding to the long list "wash towels dark in color please, black/green," dusting material, trash bags and "weapons cleaning kits for an M-16." He notes that they now have laundry service.

Lewis was among more than 50 servicemen and women who posted requests on Monday to anysoldier.com, a Web site created by an Army sergeant to help troop supporters send items soldiers really need and want. The site works by allowing one soldier to post the needs of others in his or her unit, listing his or her address for package mailings.

Many ask for items that would make their spartan war-time dwellings more bearable. Others just want letters, to make contact with someone at home.

The Star-Ledger's Iraq correspondent, Wayne Woolley, wrote Sunday that some soldiers also want, and have a difficult time getting, hammers, saws and



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drills to improve their living space. Woolley has noted in previous "Behind the Scenes in Iraq" columns that some soldiers have built cubicles within their barracks to get a little privacy.

Soldiers often live in temporary dwellings constructed by other military personnel. Some are tents, some are two-man rooms "about the size of a big storage shed," others are small wooden structures that sometimes have electricity and running water, according to those writing to the site.

Then there are the "cans," according to Lt. Cpl. Andrew Basara, a Marine stationed near Baghdad. "They are a metal structure that's about 15 feet x15 feet. I have five other Marines that live with me," writes Basara, whose military address is listed as the contact to receive care mail for his four-man unit.

For most soldiers, the need for comfort goes beyond toiletries and familiar snack foods.

"We currently live in wooden structures erected by Marines before us," writes Marine Gunnery Sgt. Timothy W. Holt, the contact for 45 men stationed in Al Asad, about 140 miles west of Baghdad. "We have cots and electricity (220 volt), with one microwave to share between all of us. Power converters are an invaluable commodity, since everything we have requires 110 volts."

With many stationed far from canteens and military supply stores called post exchanges, PXs for short, microwaves are the most common means of heating food.

"Since most of us do not have close family members to send us things, and because we have no access to a PX on our base, there are many things that we could use to make our tour here a little easier," writes Cpl. Alana J. Russell, an Army paralegal stationed near Baqubah, a town in east-central Iraq. "We would love to have things to fix breakfast together on Sunday mornings," she writes of the section's four men and two women. Military women are tough, she says, but "could really use some special little things to pamper themselves."

"We have a microwave and a toaster oven, but we do not have any food, spices or pans, etc. to cook with." Along with standard military provisions, "we are able to get milk and water and small amounts of butter, but no eggs," she writes.

You probably can't help out with the eggs -- it can take about 30 days for surface air mail to reach military personnel in Iraq and such perishables are unlikely to make it through customs and other checks. Due to security and transportation concerns, the Department of Defense also has asked the public to avoid clogging the military mail system with packages and letters. Instead, the military suggests donations through the USO (www.usocares.org) or the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org).

But for those who would accommodate a serviceperson requesting heavy items like tools or a microwave, be sure it is well packaged in a sturdy container with strong tape, military officials advise. It's okay to mail hammers, saws and drills, provided you have the name and address of a serviceperson who actually wants these items.

AnySoldier.com suggests including a stamped, self-addressed postcard with any package to make it easier for someone to acknowledge gifts. But as the site notes, don't expect a response, because soldiers have many other things to worry about.

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