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newszap.com *North Valley* News & Information

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'Toy' soldiers: Gifts inspire, save lives: PV lady wants to win war with toys, not guns

By Wendy Miller, Independent Newspapers

The CNN news item hardly made the local papers but the moment left an indelible mark on Christine Hess's heart.

A Marine convoy was driving in Iraq when they saw a 4- or 5-year-old Iraqi girl standing in the middle of the road. The Marines recognized her as a child they had given a Beanie Baby, the same one the tiny figure held in her hands that day.

The convoy walked up to her and asked why she was there. The little girl pointed to an explosive device in the road, and the GIs realized she had saved their lives.

"Did you hear about the saved soldiers? That little girl's Beanie Baby could have been one of yours," Christine Hess's friend told her.

The incident confirmed the importance of shipping the small, stuffed toys overseas, Mrs. Hess said. She has been sending packages to military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan since November, and now she'd like to develop a national toy drive.

"Let's try to win the war with toys, not guns," the Paradise Valley woman speculated.

Mrs. Hess's first packages contained personal items soldiers were unable to purchase at their bases in the Middle East. Thanks to the Web site www.AnySoldier.com, she obtained the soldiers' wish lists: soap, telephone cards, toilet paper, and more.

Helping to defray her initial shipments was a \$500 donation from the Town of Paradise Valley Women's Association. She also received merchandise donations from Town of Paradise Valley Independent readers, who read about her efforts in



Christine Hess of Paradise Valley has sent nearly 1,400 Beanie Baby stuffed toys to military men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. She'd like to expand her efforts to a national campaign. Independent Newspapers/Wendy Miller

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the paper last year.

Enclosed in each of the early packages were two Beanie Babies, chosen because they were inexpensive, pliable and small enough to fit in a soldier's or child's pocket.

Reading the CNN news story about the little girl and the Marines posted on AnySoldier.com, Mrs. Hess couldn't help but marvel at how big an impact something so small could have.

"If a \$5 item can save lives, then I was going to send more over there," she said with commitment.

She received almost 1,400 Beanie Babies from Independent readers during the months after a news brief ran in the paper, and has been sending them to Iraq regularly ever since.

Earlier this month, she heard from the soldier to whom she had been sending the packages. J. Andrew "Drew" Craig is the provost sergeant major for the 3rd Infantry Division, the multi-national division headquartered on Camp Liberty near the Baghdad International Airport.

Small toys, such as Beanie Babies, are welcomed on many levels, he e-mailed Mrs. Hess, a Paradise Valley resident.

"First, there is nothing as precious as the face of one of these innocent children when we give them a simple, little stuffed animal or other small gift," Sgt. Maj. Craig wrote. "They are a great tool for us in our effort to interact positively with the children here."

The children are often timid when the soldiers approach them but they "warm right up when we offer them the little gifts," he e-mailed the Independent. "I carry as many of them as I can fit in my assault pack when I go out."

Next, positive encounters, with the Iraqis and Afghans, such as gifting the children with toys, is "crucial to winning the support of the populous," Sgt. Major Craig emphasized. "I think it's a way of humanizing us to them."

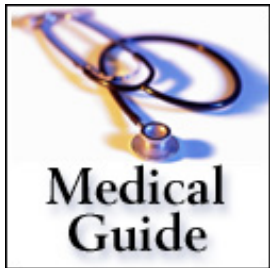
Lastly, handing out the toys provides the soldiers with a real morale boost.

"Sometimes when I come back to Camp Liberty after having seen some child that moved me, I call my wife and say, 'please hug (our) boys and tell them that I miss them so much,'" said Sgt. Maj. Craig, a father of three. "I sincerely wish I could hug them myself but this has to be done and so we do it."

The photo of a young Iraqi boy kissing Sgt. Maj. Craig (on today's front page) is his favorite. The youngster and his family were visiting an inmate being held at an Iraqi jail.

Sgt. Major Craig observed the boy sitting patiently on the floor outside the jail cells while his parents visited the incarcerated relative. With the help of an interpreter, the soldier asked the boy's parents for permission to give their son a small stuffed animal. His father said yes, and the boy kissed the sergeant major on the cheek as another soldier snapped the picture.

"It was a moment I will not soon forget," said Sgt. Maj. Craig.



Armed with these success stories, Mrs. Hess now wants to expand her efforts to send small toys overseas. She noted on June 12 alone, there were three postings on AnySoldier.com from soldiers asking for toys.

"Whether you are for, against or neutral on the war issue is totally irrelevant. We've got to support our armed forces. If there is a request for toys, I believe we should all participate."

To take her campaign to a national level, she is asking for resources of volunteer labor and small toys.

"I'm just little old me. We need to find more people to get involved," Mrs. Hess said.

To help, call Mrs. Hess at (480) 991-6678.

Post your comments on this issue at newsblog.info/0201. News Editor Wendy Miller can be reached at wmiller@newszap.com or (480) 483-0977.

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