

Operation Gratitude

By WO1 Marc Yablonka

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THE sounds of 1950s classics like Del Shannon's hit "Runaway" reverberated off the walls of the California Army National Guard armory in Van Nuys, home to the 746th Quartermaster Battalion, as hundreds of volunteers of Operation Gratitude reached an incredible milestone.

The group — a nonprofit organization that has been sending care packages and letters of support to service members serving overseas since the beginning of operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom — stuffed its 100,000th mailer in December 2005.

For 15 weekends in a row Operation Gratitude volunteers crammed packages full of items ranging from disposable cameras to pens, snacks and thank-you notes from school children.

The volunteers — from senior citizens with sons and daughters serving overseas to kids who might someday wear their country's uniform — have been spending those weekends with our nation's servicemen and women, if only in their thoughts.

Operation Gratitude founder Carolyn Blashek held back tears as she spoke to the several hundred volunteers and troops who attended the 100,000th-mailer event.

"This sends a very strong message to the troops," she said. "It expresses the appreciation, support, love and respect of millions of people who care."

Blashek has cared ever since Sept. 11, 2001, after which she went to work at the Bob Hope USO Club at Los Angeles International Airport.

Blashek said that in 2003 a Soldier came into the club and broke down at her desk. He was home on leave to attend his mother's funeral. If that weren't enough, his wife had walked out on him, and his only child, a baby, had died.

"I'm going back over there," the Soldier told her. "I don't think I'll make it back this time, but it really doesn't matter because no one would ever notice." It was then that Blashek knew she had to do more than she had been doing to support the troops. That was the beginning of Operation Gratitude.

Through her efforts, many corporate sponsors have been equally moved to participate, including the Chrysler Corp. — which agreed to allow its Jeep dealerships to become drop-off points for donations — and the Subway fast-food chain, which has offered food for the hundreds of volunteers who assist with the operation.



CSM Robert Liles presents a photo of the Multi-National Headquarters to SSG Elizabeth Cowie and Carolyn Blashek.

Someone she didn't have to apply the hard sales approach to was SSG Elizabeth Cowie of the 746th QM Bn., who, before meeting Blashek, had been doing a little personal "military stocking stuffing" of her own with friends serving overseas.

Together, Cowie and Blashek transformed the program from an "at-home" effort operating out of Blashek's living room to the nonprofit agency it is today. Along the way they enlisted corporate assistance from such companies as OceanSpray, Newman's Own, Coppertone, Dr. Scholl's, Universal Home Video and Sony USA.

These and other businesses donated either 10,000 items or \$10,000, Blashek said.

"The energy in this armory is overwhelming," Cowie said. "If you listen to the media, you hear that the people don't support the troops, but when you look around here, you know that's not the case. People have flown in from as far away as Hawaii to help out. One Texas couple even bought plane tickets for each other for their anniversary present so that they could fly out and volunteer."

The volunteerism was not lost on the Guard members, who drop by on non-drill weekends to help out.

"This is great, because when I was on active duty, we didn't have this program," said the 746th's SGT Dennis Murillo. "When we were overseas we got cards and packages from our significant others and friends. It's great to see the whole country supporting the Soldiers. That's what this program's all about. Showing support means everything."

Another Soldier from the 746th, SGT Sid Sayavong, who also served in Afghanistan, echoed Murillo's sentiments.

"It's great to help out the Soldiers. When I was in Afghanistan, I got a care package, and it feels great for me to be helping out the troops while I'm here at home," he said.

Someone who has seen the results of Operation Gratitude from the other side of the Atlantic is CSM Robert Liles, formerly with the 746th QM Bn. He's recently returned from Iraq, where he served with the 250th Military Intelligence Bn. When he first arrived in Baghdad, he said, there were about 250 Operation Gratitude packages in front of him on the ground.

"It was quite a sight," Liles said. "It's overwhelming that Americans are willing to take time away from their weekends to do this. It's more than just backing us."

As a token of his appreciation to Blashek and the entire Operation Gratitude organization, Liles presented her with a photo of the Multi-National Forces Building in Baghdad, as well as the American flag that flew atop it during his time in-country.

For Blashek, Cowie and the volunteers of Operation Gratitude, the care and understanding seem to have no end. They'll continue stuffing and sending out their packages until there is no one left to send them to.

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