

Bring a smile to a soldier's face

The firm that I work for, Bravo Strategic Marketing, Inc., in conjunction with Dewey Homes of Wayne, Penn., is participating in a holiday gift drive for soldiers of the 3rd Battalion, 116th Infantry, 29th Division, stationed in Afghanistan until October 2005. The battalion is stationed in the southern region of Afghanistan in a place called Camp Ghazni.

In addition to security, the battalion is also working on helping the children in the village find food and clothing. I've drawn the name of SPC Mike Combs and though I don't know him, it will be an honor to write and send packages to him as a way of thanking him for all he and the other members of his battalion are doing to bring peace to that war-torn country.

Holding our military dear for the sacrifices they've made in the past and continue to make today, I tend to support veterans' organizations throughout the year, particularly AMVETS, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Vietnam Veterans' organization that maintains their hauntingly stunning memorial in Washington, D.C., referred to simply as "The Wall."

During the holiday season, I add the U.S. Marines' Toys for Tots program to my list and a few others that feed the hungry. Somehow no matter what my monetary donations are, they seem so inconsequential compared to what our soldiers and volunteers do all year long.



*As I
see it*

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Thinking about SPC Combs and the other men in his battalion, my mind drifts back to the early 1960s when I wrote to another serviceman, a U.S. Marine stationed in Vietnam. I don't even recall how I got his name and address or why I started writing, but I do remember that his name was PFC Amato and he, too, was from Long Island, N.Y., which is where I was living at the time.

We started conversing back and forth and though he didn't write anything at all concerning the hardship he endured, from the news reports on television and in the newspapers, I envisioned that his safety was continually in jeopardy. To make matters worse, the war was escalating and the number of U.S. soldiers killed was creeping upwards on a daily basis.

Being a Roman Catholic and learning that PFC Amato was too, I decided to purchase a St. Christopher medal on a silver chain to send to him.

To give those unfamiliar with St. Christopher a little background on this patron saint, the pious legend centers around Offero, a powerfully built man who wandered the world in search of novelty and adventure.

One day, Offero came upon a hermit who lived beside a dangerous stream and served others by guiding them to safe places to cross. The hermit gave Offero instruction in the truth of God, and Offero eventually took the hermit's place. However, instead of merely guiding travelers, Offero carried them safely across the stream.

One day, Offero carried a small child across the stream and the child's weight nearly crushed him. When they arrived on the other side, the child revealed himself as Christ, and he told Offero that he was heavy because he bore

the weight of the world on his shoulders. Christ then baptised Offero with water from the stream, and Offero's service at the stream led to his patronage of things related to travel and travelers, people who

carry things, people away from home, etc.

For Catholics, it is customary to have a St. Christopher's medal blessed by a priest, but I wanted to do something special for PFC Amato. I decided I would write to Bishop Kellenberg of Rockville Centre, N.Y., and ask if he would be willing to bless the medal. A few weeks later, I received a nice letter from the Bishop's assistant advising me of a date and time.

My mother and I traveled into Rockville Centre, and I was instructed to kneel and kiss the Bishop's ring when he walked into the room, which of course I did, although the only thing I can recall today is that my knees were knocking in apprehension. A few seconds later, however, the medal was blessed, and the following day, it was on its way to PFC Amato in Vietnam.

I was glad to receive PFC Amato's letter a few weeks later advising that he had safely received the medal. He thanked me numerous times in the letter and told me that he would never take it off. Our letters continued, until finally, he returned home safe and sound.

I never met him face to face, but a few years later, PFC Amato wrote another letter to me. He was married, in a new home with his wife, awaiting the birth of his first child, and still in possession of the medal I had sent him. He went on to say that he had seen a lot of action during his tour in Vietnam — death and destruction, heartache and hardship — and that he held the true horror of war in until he arrived home on American soil.

He also told me that when he was afraid, when gunfire rang out in an otherwise still night or bombs could be heard in the not too distant terrain, he would reach for the medal and say a prayer, and somehow he'd escape injury. He considered the medal nothing short of miraculous and was anxious to pass it on to his firstborn child.

PFC Amato was spared, but there are too many other soldiers' names etched on The Wall in D.C. forever. I wish every U.S. soldier on foreign soil could have a medal around his or her neck for added protection, but that would be an impossible feat.

However, perhaps we can all help during this coming holiday season by finding out the names and addresses of servicemen and women overseas and sending cards, letters and packages to show appreciation for their valiant efforts. Even more important, this simple but kind personal gesture on your part will bring a smile to someone's face in a faraway, frightening place during the holidays and let him or her know that someone else at home cares.

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