Retirement community's care packages deliver materials and a message of support to the troops

by Peter Rowe

The other night, 88-year-old Les Tenney cruised his local 99 Cent Store's aisles. He was hunting for the right items:

Graham crackers.

Microwave popcorn.

Women's black underwear, 15 pair.

WAR BONDS - A veteran and former POW, 88-year-old Les Tenney knows what troops want in an overstuffed care package. For example: chili, fruit salad, tortilla chips and a pair or two of black panties. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. "What do you think those people in the 99 Cent Store thought when he came up with all those panties and graham crackers?" laughed Tenney's wife, Betty.

"I don't care what they thought about me," he shot back.

During World War II, Tenney survived the Bataan Death March and three years as prisoner of the Japanese. After that, other people's impressions no longer loomed large on his internal radar screen. Instead, he tends to focus on his mission.

Since August, that's meant leading more than a dozen La Costa Glen residents in a campaign to send care

packages to American soldiers and sailors serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dubbing their outfit "Care Packages From Home," they asked for contributions from their 900-plus neighbors in his affluent retirement community of Carlsbad, Calif. Bingo: in four days, $17,000 rolled in.

Then, they scanned the typical 21st century GI's wish list. Bang-o: This ain't your grandpa's military. In the 1940s, even Buck Rogers didn't have the high-tech products today's soldier relies on - CDs, DVDs, those microwaveable popcorn packets. Not to mention certain items coveted by the 26,000 women who make up almost 14 percent of the Americans serving in combat zones.

"Here," Tenney said, cracking open a jar of strawberry-scented salt scrub. "The women love this. Not me, but the women love this."

He was standing in La Costa Glen Activities Committee's storage garage, territory that Care Packages From Home more or less commandeered. Walls are lined with shelves - thank you, La Costa Glen Woodworking Committee!- and the shelves drip goodies.

Stacked against the wall are U.S. Post Office boxes, each the size of a TV cable box. Five mornings a week, retirees pack five or six boxes to units that have posted their wants at a Web site, any soldier.com.

Cpl. Christopher A. Mays, for instance, wrote on behalf of 20 men and two women from Marine Attack Squadron 542, now in Iraq. "We are living out of tents at the moment and would appreciate some soaps, wash cloths, deodorant, things of that nature, also some food that doesn't require cooking, maybe some snack items would be fine."

Dan May read that note, grabbed a box and stuffed it like a Thanksgiving turkey. He squeezed in:

Two cans of chili, no beans

One can of chicken Vienna sausages

One can of foot powder

One bottle of body lotion

Two sticks of deodorant

Two bowls of fruit salad

Two tubes of shaving cream

Two panty liners

16 tampons

Three packages of beef jerky

One pack of tuna salad and crackers

One pack of chicken salad and crackers

Two bags of tortilla chips with cheese dip

Two packs of body wipes

Two bars of soap

Two containers of floss

Three sleeves of cheddar cheese crackers

Four bags of cookies

Two trial-size bottles of mouthwash

Three disposable razors

One tube of toothpaste

One toothbrush

There's also a letter that reads, in part, "This box packed by a proud American who cares." Signed, "Dan."

The entire box can't weigh more than 12 pounds, but veterans say these small items have a big impact. Back in July, Tenney was chatting with his nephew, retired Marine Seymour "Si" Tenenberg of San Luis Obispo, Calif. Tenenberg mentioned that he'd just sent his 1,100th box to soldiers and sailors overseas.

"I never received a box" as a POW, Tenney said. "I couldn't have, but I just imagined how excited I would have been to receive a box. Then I thought, 'I bet we could be able to do something like that here.'"

At La Costa Glen, where almost 25 percent of residents are retired military, that's a safe bet. But the impulse to send a touch of home to Americans abroad is not limited to veterans. Care packages have been sent by North San Diego County Harley Owners Group, Contemporary Women of North County and other bands of civilians.

At La Costa Glen, these volunteers haven't been on active duty in decades. Bob Collins, for instance, left the Army after a stint in postwar Japan and became vice president for engineering at United Airlines. These days, he takes oxygen through a tube and gets around in an electric scooter, but that doesn't stop him from acting as Care Packages From Home's treasurer.

Phil Strick, the vice chair, is a former Navy pilot and an insurance executive. He's 87, a year younger than chairman Tenney, who's the walking definition of "spry."

"Here's a guy who was a POW and he's 88 years old and he's giving back to the community," said Richard Williams of the Marine Corps League of San Diego. "It's amazing."

Disturbed that that Care Packages From Home lacked nonprofit status, Tenney approached the League. Now, he asks would-be benefactors to write checks to "Marine Corps League-Care Packages From Home." That way, the donations are tax-deductible.

Another nimble move from a smooth operator. You know that cliche about senior citizens resisting change? Watch Tenney in his study, dreaming up new ways to accomplish his mission.

"Look," he says, pointing to his computer screen. At anysoldier.com, there's a letter from a Marine noncom in Iraq. The sergeant's name is Jessica and she wants wax strips so she and her fellow female Leathernecks can remove the hair from their legs.

"We'll go out and buy it," Tenney said. "They deserve it. That's something that will make them feel like a woman again."

WHAT THEY CAN USE

- Christmas packages are sent wrapped and contain such items as new socks, portable CD players, CDs, stationery, hand-held electronic games, Christmas decorations, books, hair accessories for women, phone cards.

- All year round, send nonperishable food, clothing, personal care items, eye drops, baby wipes, socks, unscented soap, individual toiletry items, Handi Wipes, letters and cards, powdered drink mixes, magazines, puzzles, toys to pass out to the kids.

- Other suggestions: instant cups of soup, instant coffee, tea bags, cocoa, and packs of tuna or chicken. Prepackaged items include cereal bars, granola bars, sunflower seeds, nuts, cookies, crackers, beef jerky, Slim Jims, pretzels, hard candy, Tootsie Pops, Pop-Tarts, fruit snacks, fruit roll-ups, dried fruit, instant lunches and oatmeal. Packages of powdered iced tea, Kool-Aid and Gatorade are needed.

- Don't send perishable food, and avoid sending chocolate because of heat.

OFFICIAL RESTRICTIONS

The following are prohibited in the region of Operation Iraqi Freedom:

- Obscene articles (prints, paintings, cards, films, videotapes, etc.), including any matter depicting nude or semi-nude persons, pornographic or sexual items, or nonauthorized political materials.

- Bulk quantities of religious materials contrary to the Islamic faith. Items for the personal use of the addressee are permissible.

- Pork or pork byproducts.

For specific restrictions and mailing rates to an APO (land-based military location) and FPO (military aboard ships), call 800-ASK-USPS, consult your local post office, or phone the Military Postal Service Agency at 800-810-6098.

Source: United States Postal Service Web site at USPS.com

MAILING DETAILS

- The USPS will supply free packaging boxes for priority mail. Packages are normally shipped in either the No. 7 box, which is 12 inches by 12 inches by 8 inches deep, or the flat rate No. 1 box, which has a 20-pound maximum for international shipments. The flat-rate box is 11 inches by 8.5 inches by 5.5 inches.

- The contents of the flat-rate box must be neatly contained inside the box with adhesive packaging tape.

- Sending the standard No. 7 box priority mail anywhere overseas is $9.50. The flat rate for the No. 1 box is $7.

- All military packages should be postmarked by the first week of December to ensure Christmas delivery.

Making sure nonprofit groups have good records

Every year, hundreds of nonprofits across the country collect millions of dollars for the stated goal of helping active duty or retired military. But how is that money used?

Care Packages from Home is run entirely by La Costa Glen's unpaid corps of retired volunteers; you can see where each dollar is spent. Unfortunately, not every military-oriented fund can boast such a squeaky-clean track record.

How do you ensure that your contributions actually reach the intended recipients?

Several steps you can take:

1. Find a computer.

Web sites that grade nonprofit organizations include Charity Navigator (charitynavigator.org), Guidestar (guidestar.org) and the Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance (give.org). All maintain easy-to-read databases; each is different. Charity Navigator, for instance, focuses on where the money is spent. The Bureau follows the money, too, but also examines how often the board of directors meets and other governance issues.

2. Read Form 990.

Most nonprofit organizations are required to file this Internal Revenue Service form, an annual accounting of income and expenses. If you are considering donating to a charity, ask to see its most recent Form 990.

3. Insist on openness.

Nonprofits are not legally required to open their books to private, outside evaluators. Normally, a charity's willingness to subject itself to scrutiny is a good sign.

4. Remember that even good people can make bad decisions.

Nonprofits can have good intentions and bad business sense. At the Former Military POW Foundation, which helps ex-prisoners of war acquire their military retiree benefits, officials say they were victimized by unscrupulous professional fundraisers.

"They could have raised millions of dollars," said F. Paul Dallas, president of the North Carolina-based nonprofit, "but we would only get a small percentage."

Out of every $100 given to the foundation in 2005, for instance, fundraisers raked off $89. Administration ate up another $7. That left a measly $4 for "program expenses."

That multiyear contract ended in June 2006. The nonprofit, which has changed its name to the Military Ex-Prisoners of War Foundation, now conducts its own fundraising.

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