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My view: Support a soldier

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There is a lot of debate these days about whether the United States should have troops in Iraq, and how they should be supported. As part of that debate, politicians (and we citizens) have been arguing over the difference between "supporting the war" and "supporting the troops." I suspect we will continue to see that being debated ever more strongly as our nation's 2008 election campaigns continue for the next 16 months.

I strongly believe that, despite our individual positions on supporting the war, everyone should be able to support the morale of the troops. I would like to share with you how I recently did just that — with my primary goal being that I may inspire others to do so as well.

This all started for me quite accidentally. I stumbled upon a link to the AnySoldier.com Web site from a nonrelated Web site I was reading. Once I read the content on AnySoldier.com, I felt suddenly inspired to utilize their services to connect with a handful of in-theater soldiers, in hopes of providing them some moral support from a stranger back home.

AnySoldier.com pairs folks back home who wish to send letters and care packages to U.S. troops, with volunteer military in-theater representatives. These uniformed volunteers agree to deliver any mail delivered to them with "Attn: Any Soldier" in the address to soldiers in their unit who may not get much mail. The site allows you to search some 3000-plus of these uniformed volunteers' profiles to decide whom you would like to send your letters or packages to. Another key bit of information found within each of these uniformed volunteers' profiles is a count of the number of male and female soldiers they represent. Thinking I could afford to send about two dozen care packages, I looked for a contact representing at least that many soldiers. I found the posting of Staff Sgt. Cornelison, with the Army's 28th Combat Support Hospital, stating he represented 25 male and 25 female soldiers. His profile implied that all care packages sent to him were being delivered to wounded soldiers who were being treated at the 28th's in-theater hospital.

I read through the Web site's "What To Send" information and several other soldiers' profiles to get a sense of what items would be best to include in the care packages. Snack requests were basically anything that wouldn't melt in transit, with a few postings suggesting high-protein snacks were considered favorites — tuna, beef jerky, nuts and seeds were specifically mentioned. Entertainment requests included stationary, novels, magazines and puzzle books. Following the advice of AnySoldier.com, I obtained 24 priority-mail, flat-rate boxes from the local post office. I wrote a three-page letter addressed to "Dear Soldier," and put a copy of it in the top of each care package. The letter told a little bit about how I came to send the package in the first place, and offered each recipient the opportunity for further correspondence from me in the future, if so desired. I included my mailing address and e-mail address. I understand that many soldiers have at least occasional access to e-mail, and many prefer email to writing. As per an AnySoldier.com suggestion, I included a self-addressed note card with each letter to facilitate a reply from the soldier, and stated in the letter that a reply was strictly optional. I also offered each soldier the opportunity to use that note card as a means to request any specific items they would like me to try to send to them in the future.

At this point my care packages are off to Iraq, and I feel as if I did some small part to brighten the day of 24 of our country's in-theater soldiers.

I will end this column on the same thought I started it with. The country is divided on support for the war in Iraq. I do not write to debate that issue. Rather, I suggest that we can support the morale of our troops, as they are individual citizens of our country, despite our personal stance on the war.

Rod Thomas lives in Cary.

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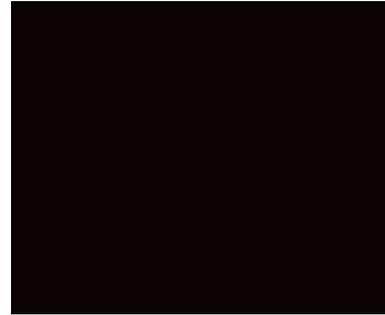
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