



U.S. Army Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division unload mail on Christmas Eve on Combat Outpost Mokista in Muqadadiyah, Iraq. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Shawn M. Cassatt)

## A Gift of Hope

By Jacqueline Davidson

What makes the gift-giving season meaningful and memorable? For some, it would be driving your children through neighborhoods decked in candy-colored lights. “Visions” of turkey, ham, and second-helpings of pie may “dance in your head”. Or, you may enjoy the merriment of friends and family during football games. Universally, reconnecting with loved ones and faith is what makes the season joyful. But, then, there is that gift-exchange part of every Christmas party...

We’ve all been there. Gathered by the blinking tree, we wait. The once boisterous room quiets. Children are eager, but most adults are now somewhat stiff—even nervous. We smile with a

metaphorical “cocktail” of excitement, anxiety and a splash of hope. Hope that our present from grandma isn’t another frumpy, banana-hued sweater or cartoon necktie. Then our thoughts turn to what we’ve bagged, boxed and wrapped. We hope that our gift to Dad-in-law isn’t a flop. Or realize, “Uh-oh... I bought her shirt a couple sizes too large. I hope she won’t be insulted.” If you feel that your hope in gift-giving has fizzled, perhaps it’s time for a little Holiday tradition-tweaking.

Consider this... Adopt a troop. Think of your “adopting” as taking in a new family member—a family member who will never ask for much, but who is willing to give you everything. Ask a friend or family member to give to an Adopt a Troop organization, or to directly sponsor a service member, instead of giving you something that might end up in your re-gift closet. Or, at your next gift exchange, take a holiday card, and in it, write the name, rank, and service branch

of the troop whom you have sponsored. Tell your gift exchange partner—say, it was a veteran uncle—that you have adopted a service member in your uncle’s honor. By doing so, you will have put a very meaningful twist on gift-giving this Holiday season—and throughout the time of your troop’s deployment.

Major Jon Custis, USMC, believes that “adopt a servicemember” programs significantly boost the morale of young, forward deployed men and women. He himself has been “adopted”, and Custis has adopted other Marines while he, himself, was not deployed. “Imagine that you were coming off a patrol or returning from a long convoy. You’re tired, dirty, and hungry. But then, someone passes you a package that came in with the mail. To receive something like this—especially from a stranger—lets you know that not all of America is ‘at the mall,’” Custis said.

No one can predict that what lies beneath that shiny Santa paper is something that will be appreciated. But you can be sure that anything you send in your FPO-addressed cardboard box will be a “perfect fit.” When you adopt a troop, you can show your support by sending packages, being a dedicated pen pal, or by doing both.

There are a number of organizations dedicated to the morale support of our deployed service members. AnySoldier.com is the largest organization that promotes the “adoption” of not only Soldiers, but Marines, Sailors, Airmen, and Coast Guardsmen. “Any Soldier” was launched by Sergeant Brian Horn, an Infantry Soldier who wanted to help care for his fellow Soldiers. This site has served over 1 million U.S. troops. Click on the “Where to Send” page and select the name(s) of the troops you wish to sponsor. Then, for a list of what your troop(s) may need, click on “What to Send”. Visit: [www.AnySoldier.com](http://www.AnySoldier.com)

RyanRust.com is a website solely dedicated to Marines. Ryan Rust is a patriotic high schooler who—with his father, grandfather and family—promotes the Adopt a Marine (AAM) program as a racecar team. Adopt A Marine has received much accolade from the Marine Corps for AAM’s continued success in facilitating the delivery of more than 100,000 articles of mail and supplies to deployed Marines.

You’ve landed at Ryan Rust’s Adopt A Marine site when you will see a gold “Eagle, Globe and Anchor” and the young driver, proudly standing behind his “Adopt A Marine” logo-bearing racecar. Simply click on “Adopt A Marine” and sign up to sponsor your Marine(s). Visit: [www.RyanRust.com](http://www.RyanRust.com)

“Treat Any Soldier” is a type of fast-track giving. Simply send your money and someone will send a troop a package for you. Visit: [www.TreatAnySoldier.com](http://www.TreatAnySoldier.com)

## Quick list of What to Send

*The Adopt sites will have hefty lists of what to send, but if you have adopted a tank crewman, infantry, or artillery troop, check out Marine Infantry Captain, Matthew Peterson’s quick-list of things you can pick up while you’re out shopping.*

Duct tape

All-purpose tools

(Leatherman, Gerber, etc.)

AA batteries

Razors/shaving equipment

(Mach 3 razors or better—good razors are difficult to come by in the field.)

Resent Magazines: Economist, Time, Outside, Newsweek, Kiplinger’s Personal Finance, etc.

Beef jerky

Bungee Cords (dark colored)

**Tip:** *Always include a thank-you note and tell your troop about yourself. Include a self-addressed (unstamped) envelope, paper and a pen. Writing supplies can be difficult to come by for some service members.*

## Letters From Our Troops

“To all whom this may concern: I would like to personally thank all of those who have recently contributed their time and efforts in what I believe to be an awe-inspiring display of support from the home-front. The ‘Any

Soldier’ campaign has seen tears from some, given hope to most, and has been an inspiration to us all. Your relentless support has provided the simple reminder that anyone of us would proudly die for a grateful nation in our ongoing fight against terrorism.”— Sergeant Brian Horn, USA.

The following is an excerpt from a letter that was sent to Adopt A Marine from a deployed Marine Colonel. He requested to remain anonymous for security purposes.

“I have been a Marine for 28 years. I have served in Beirut Lebanon during the ’83 bombing. I was in Monrovia, Liberia, Desert Shield. I made three trips to Bosnia, and been to Albania and Kosovo, twice. This is my second trip to Iraq. In all that time, I have not experienced the home-front support that you and your network provides. To those of us who remember Vietnam, your hard work renews my faith in the American people. I am grateful that my young men and women do not have to experience the conflict that those before us suffered... Thanks for your support. Our motto says it all: Semper Fidelis or “Always faithful”. Thank you for your faithful watch. You have our backs.”  
—Colonel N., USMC.

Add a new fond memory to your holiday. Perpetuate the giving season while supporting troops, year-round. Your gift will help renew someone’s hope while they are serving abroad. “It’s extremely uplifting and, yet, so easy to do,” says Custis. “It takes so little time to write a letter and toss a few comfort items into a package... We should help prove that we haven’t forgotten about them.” ●

*Jacqueline Davidson is a freelance writer living in Virginia.*