



By Jennifer G. Williams

The military issues much of what you will need while deployed overseas. And with many of today's deploying service members headed to Afghanistan, certain "extras" are becoming common requests.

A little something extra from home can help make your deployment more comfortable, but do you really need it? Can you get it in theater? And what would be a waste of time and money? What to know before you go:

One thing service members who have deployed several times emphasize is knowing the climate of the area where you will be—year-round. While the majority of the photos from Afghanistan show hot, dry deserts, it can unexpectedly get very cold in the winter in many areas. Be sure to plan for not only the 140-degree heat, but also the below-zero temperatures, and bring (or have sent to you) warm gloves, wool socks and stocking caps. Many service members mistakenly believe they will not need the cold-weather gear they are issued — and can be difficult to get once you are in theater.

Another good-to-have item is an LCD or LED flashlight. The batteries and bulb can last about 10-20 times longer than a normal flashlight, and soldiers say you can literally use it every day for a year's deployment and not have to replace either—a real plus if you are in the field a lot or are stationed in a remote area where such items are hard to get.

At the remote forward operating bases (FOBs), even a haircut can be hard to find. The Police and Army training teams are issued barber kits,

which most team members scoff at — until they get eight hours away from the nearest barber. Then a self-taught soldier/barber comes in very handy, often with more "business" than they can handle.

One luxury item that's nice to have in Afghanistan is a laptop with a built-in camera, which makes communicating with friends and loved ones back home a little easier, if you have access to the Internet. Be sure to check with your insurance company about coverage — some offer coverage for electronics ... even from sand damage.

And speaking of electronics, digital cameras and today's mini video recorders are also handy, and do not add much weight to your gear — an important consideration. They sell electronics in theater, but they tend to be very expensive and it's better to bring along something you know. Plus, you can load your music, photos, and movies before you get there as a way to pass the time during what can be lonely time off. MP3 players can also come in handy, traveling to and from assignments and in your down time.

As far as friends and loved ones sending care packages, several soldiers spoke of the joy in receiving home-baked cookies or other food items to remind them of home — such as barbecue sauce from a favorite local restaurant. Movies on disc are always nice, say service members, along with digital music or photos from home. Veteran service members suggest having friends and loved ones use a photo sharing site, such as Kodak or Snapfish, to upload digital photos to share. It cuts down on the time to download pics from email (even with an Internet connection, downloads in theater can be achingly slow), and the service member can choose which pics to print.

Other little extras great to have include a month's worth of lip balm, sunscreen, toothpaste, shaving cream and razor blades. Yes, you will be able to get more once you arrive and you don't want to weigh down your ruck with excess items, but you really do not want to run out on the way to your destination.

Those who have a deployment or two under their belts caution against taking or requesting large items that must then be carted around or even sent back from theater.

But not to worry if you yearn for those larger luxuries — service members who cannot bring televisions, mini refrigerators, space heaters and pieces of furniture home after their deployment will usually sell them to newcomers at bargain prices, so they do not have to ship them home.

Phone cards are great, but keep in mind that some areas have MWR phones that you can use to call home for free. Don't buy hundreds of dollars worth of these cards before you deploy — wait and see what they have where you are stationed.

Besides, you can also see if you can use the Internet to make calls home for much less.

Pillows can be picked up at the large bases where you in-process, as can blankets and sheets, just remember to pick up these little extras before you leave the big bases — they can be next to impossible to get once you are in a remote location. Again, you may be able to pick up a bargain on these items from those heading home.

Your goal may be to travel as lightly as possible, but as one Infantryman told me, "it's easy to be hard; it's hard to be smart." Just be able to carry what you pack. ●