



Tears and Joy Mark Soldiers' Videos Back Home; Camp Anaconda Launches "Day in the Life of a Soldier" and Volunteer Group Makes a Difference Supporting America's Troops

January 2007 - An Army captain and his wife shoot their video in front of the Christmas tree in the Baghdad hospital lobby. Some soldiers stand in a group with their buddies and "cut up" for their wives and girlfriends. Another soldier reads a bedtime story to his children.

It's all part of 'Operation Holiday DVD' – a project that took nearly a year to complete – to send blank DVDs and camcorders to touch 25,000 American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and countless thousands of friends and family here at home.

"It was exciting to think we could impact so many lives," said Alan Krutchkoff, president and co-founder of the grassroots organization known as Adopt-a-Soldier Platoon (AaSP), which coordinated the operation. "One of our 'adoptees' in Iraq suggested this ambitious project, so we gave it a try."

Adoptees are friends, relatives, neighbors and co-workers of AaSP members and are deployed in the Middle East. Since its inception in April 2003, the grassroots group has supported more than 50 units and impacted thousands of America's bravest. But Operation Holiday DVD is the most far-reaching project the group has tackled to date. And if a picture is worth a thousand words, what is a DVD worth to the families and friends of these brave Americans?

A video is powerful. It allows a family to see and hear a loved one far from home. It's better than an email and a picture, not distorted like a webcam and until this year, not available to this many troops.

After 11 months of planning, fund raising and coordination with the U.S. military, more than 23,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines on Camp Anaconda in Iraq will get the opportunity to make DVDs to send home. In addition, 500 soldiers of the Connecticut National Guard in Afghanistan, 400 soldiers at the 28th Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad and another 400 in the 324th Integrated Theater Signal Battalion throughout Iraq are also being given this opportunity.

At Camp Anaconda, there are three recreation centers on base with camera systems. In addition to the DVDs, Adopt-a-Soldier Platoon sent 25 digital camcorders to make it easier for the troops to make their videos.

SSG John Gumataotao is the NCOIC of the MWR (Morale Welfare Recreation) program on Anaconda. That means he supports programs such as the DVD project to improve the morale of the troops on base. He described how the camcorders are used. The project allowed SSG Gumataotao to launch his "Day in the Life of a Soldier" program.



"A unit/command can sign out the camcorder for a maximum of 30 days," says SSG Gumataotao. "They are also issued DVDs based on the size of their unit (as reported to the garrison command) and a few extra boxes to accommodate. They also receive envelopes, children's books, instructions and a waiver (for preventing unauthorized recording of the Base and General Orders violations).

"Once a unit signs out the equipment, their soldiers can either read a book or bedtime story to their child, send a shout out to their families and friends or make a mini-production of their "Day in the Life" (recording their "Day" here in Iraq). The program is well publicized – at staff meetings, on the Anaconda MWR program local website and a story will be published in the Anaconda Times newspaper on base as well."

One soldier, SFC Kelly S. from the 67th Signal Battalion "Cable Dawgs" was one of the soldiers enjoying the new program. "Soldiers are not able to talk to their loved ones as frequently as they would like," he said. "But with this program they are able to send something back home to show everyone they are doing well and make it more personal than an email."

At the 28th CSH at the Ibn Sina Hospital in Baghdad, 300 soldiers and medical staff have already made their videos and sent them home.

"Everyone who participated was extremely grateful and touched by the generosity of this project," said Captain Michael Cullen of the 28th Combat Support Hospital. "Most shed a few tears as they recorded their message home. We also sent 100 DVDs and a camcorder to our unit in Tallil to spread your gift."

The 324th ITSB is spread out throughout Iraq. The DVD project provides its soldiers the means to connect with family and friends. SPC Terrell V. is one such soldier. Stationed at Camp Anaconda, he has been deployed for the last five months. He, like many other soldiers deployed to Iraq, is anxious to be reunited with his family.

"The last time I actually saw my family," says SPC V., "they were all crying ... and I'm just ready to see them again." The DVD project allows for his family to "see" SPC V., his friends, and his livelihood in Iraq. After learning of the AaSP program, he said, "I see that Adopt a Soldier Platoon cares about us and, more importantly, cares about our families."

A video sent home by one officer kept his wife Sherrie busy by constantly replaying the scene where her husband is telling his two boys that he loves them and will be home soon. The youngest, Ryan, kept yelling, "play it again!"

The 102nd Infantry Regiment from the CT National Guard in Afghanistan is spread out amongst 13 different locations in a mountainous and desert country. Both units are forwarding the DVDs and camcorders throughout their units to enable their soldiers to send these special holiday wishes home.



All 25,000 DVDs were donated by Fujifilm U.S.A. of Valhalla, NY.

"We heard about the program and thought it was something we'd like to be a part of," said Gene Kern, Director of Advertising and Marketing for Fujifilm. "Sending home a video is a natural way to bring the soldiers and their families together, which is especially important around the holidays."

Getting the several thousand pounds of DVDs to Afghanistan and Iraq was costly. The Army and Air Force wouldn't ship the DVDs, even after requests from Congressman Steve Rothman's office (NJ-9th Dist.) and emails to the Defense Department and Vice President Cheney.

"It was getting a little depressing," said Krutchkoff. "We had the DVDs but couldn't afford to get them to Iraq, even with the special rate DHL was giving us. And it was getting close to Christmas. The runway was getting shorter, so to speak. So, I made one last plea to our more than 200 members for help."

That's when another generous company stepped in – the Pepsi Lipton Partnership (PLP), a joint venture of global consumer products marketer Unilever and Pepsico. PLP makes all the Lipton branded ready-to-drink teas.

"We had a great year," said Joe Bigos, chief financial officer of PLP. "We wanted to share our success with America and the troops."

Bigos' wife Suzanne works in the same IT department where both Krutchkoff and co-founder, Holmes Brady, work. And it was a former Unilever IT director, Mike Pellegrino, now a VP IT at Fujifilm, who heard of the project and recommended that his company pitch in to help.

"We saw Mike at a going away party for one of our good friends and a core member of our Platoon and several people asked him to help us," said Krutchkoff. "It was fate. And later, when we thought we'd never be able to afford to ship these DVDs to Iraq, Pepsi Lipton came through. There's a big Unilever connection in this project."

One of AaSP's associated sponsors, Firestone Complete Auto Care of North Jersey, answered the call and sent in a significant donation. And members began pouring donations in at a record pace. Atlas Air of Purchase, NY, became an associated sponsor and sent in a significant cash donation. And with PLP picking up the freight costs, the now healthy AaSP treasury could be used to buy camcorders and also spread the project outside the one large base in Iraq.

"Thanks to everyone's generosity, we'll have helped these brave Americans send messages home, share their feelings, show they're okay and connect with those who love them and miss them," said Krutchkoff. "Now that's a great picture!"



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