

ORADELL

Mission accomplished: 25K DVDs delivered

BY LAURA ANNE REGA
Staff Writer

The patriotic phrase "Support our Troops" has been printed to bumper stickers and ribbon pins and posted on billboards.

Everyone's goal is to make a difference. One group succeeded.

"Bumper stickers are nice, but they don't support the troops; actions do," Allan Virginia said.

The Adopt-A-Soldier Platoon (AaSP), a grass-roots initiative launched by Unilever USA, has given more than 25,000 troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan the opportunity to make DVDs to send to loved ones back home.

Virginia, a Unilever retiree and Oradell resident, currently serves as director and treasurer of AaSP.

"The mission of AaSP is to lift the morale and support the welfare of active members of the United States Armed Forces," Virginia said.

Unilever President Alan Krutchkoff and Vice President Holmes Brady organized the initiative in April 2003.

"I first heard about the 'platoon' from Alan K. during lunch in the company cafeteria and wanted to help," Virginia said.

AaSP has since helped over 50 military units through the group's latest project, "Operation DVD" that started almost a year ago. This is the "most far-reaching project the group has tackled to date," Virginia said.

The DVD idea came from one of the platoon's adoptees, Army Captain Frank Bauman of the 35th Infantry Division, in January 2006. (Adoptees are friends, relatives, neighbors and co-workers of AaSP members and are deployed in the Middle East.)

"[Bauman] thought it would be a great idea if every American on LSA Anaconda, the largest American base in Iraq, could make a video and send it home for the holidays," Virginia said.

"A video is powerful," said Krutchkoff in a Jan. 22 press release. "It's better than an e-mail, a picture or a distorted webcam image."

AaSP currently supports more than 24 Army and Marine units in Iraq, including the 28th Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad and the 102nd Infantry in Afghanistan.

After the idea was solidified, the platoon then asked FUJIFILM U.S.A. if they could help provide blank DVDs to the 25,000 troops stationed at Camp Anaconda in Iraq so they could make videos and send them home for the holidays. FUJIFILM U.S.A. responded by donating 25,000 DVDs.

The Platoon adopts soldiers from all over the tri-state area. A recent adoptee from River Edge was Marine Lance Corporal Michael Cronin. Another local adoptee was Sergeant First Class Frank Maciel, from Dumont, a former Bestfoods [now Unilever] employee who serves in the Army

Reserves. Oradell resident and Vietnam veteran Dennis Malooney, a Unilever retiree, is an active AaSP volunteer.

Although the original DVD project reached completion, AaSP continues to deliver DVDs and cameras to other units in Iraq and Afghanistan. FUJIFILM U.S.A. has continued to provide AaSP with additional DVDs after the initial 25,000 were exhausted, according to Virginia.

Usually, Krutchkoff purchases the cameras and makes arrangements for the shipments, according to Virginia. However, sending several thousand pounds of DVDs to Afghanistan and Iraq is costly and the shipment had to be paid for privately, according to Unilever.

"It was getting a little depressing," Krutchkoff said in a press release. "We had the DVDs but couldn't afford to get them to Iraq, even with the special rate DHL was giving us. So, I made one last plea to our more than 200 members for help."

The Pepsi Lipton Partnership (PLP) stepped in.

"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," Krutchkoff said.

To complete the project, AaSP sent troops an 82-inch screen and projector, DVD sound system, 32-

inch TV, karaoke machine, keyboards with stand and bench, a laptop, a boom box and an X-box to Iraq to help enable the troops to make homemade DVDs.

Here's a snapshot of products that the troops received: Caresse, Dove, Ponds, SunSilk, Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion and Suave products, NASCAR racing hats, Country Crock products, promotional watches from Promise, books, CDs, magazines, TV series box sets on DVD, souvenirs from the Pittsburgh Steelers, Seattle Seahawks, NY Yankees, Florida Marlins, San Francisco Giants, Green Bay Packers and Miami Dolphins, Pringles, Goldfish, Slim Jims, tuna, chili, macaroni and cheese, Ramen Noodles, beef jerky, cookies, trail mix, cashews, almonds, gum, cough drops, aspirins, Tic Tacs, Life Savers; bug repellent, Lipton teas, pens, cigars, Q-tips, socks, sweatpants, hand-warmers, batteries, phone cards, greeting cards and playing cards.

AaSP is also in the process of applying for status as a charitable organization under IRS section 501(c)(3).

"This will enable our supporters to claim their donations as a tax deduction," Virginia added.

To participate in the Adopt-a-Soldier Platoon initiative, e-mail Alan.Krutchkoff@Unilever.com or visit the www.adoptasoldierplatoon.org.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLAN VIRGINIA

Soldiers at the Super Bowl party's "souvenirs table" at Camp Anaconda. AaSP sponsored the party. Numerous NFL teams provided souvenirs.