

Christmas on the Frontlines
World Trade Center Family Group Adopts Soldiers
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CAMP TAJI, Iraq, Dec. 27, 2004 — The colorful message written in crayon with the innocence of a child's script betrayed the power of the words written; "Dear Soldier, my daddy was on the 103rd floor of the World Trade Center when the terrorists attacked, he was killed. Thank you for all that you do. Love, Caitlin," read a letter tucked inside one of the many Christmas presents under the tree.

On Christmas day, soldiers of the 39th Brigade Combat Team opened more than 80 Christmas presents sent to them by the World Trade Center United Family Group, a group made up of survivors and family members of the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001.

"I was initially contacted by 'Home Front Hugs'," explained Maj. Russel Betts, assistant operation officer for the 39th Brigade Combat Team, "seeking names of soldiers in which they could send care packages to.

"Within weeks, packages full of essential supplies and goodies started filling the mailroom from this award winning organization. "Home Front Hugs" works as a facilitator, putting volunteers from the states in contact with deployed soldiers. Shortly after the initial communication, Betts was approached by "Home Front Hugs" with an offer of adoption.

"I got an email asking if the 39th would like to be adopted by the World Trade Center United Family Group," he said, "which of course I agreed to.

"All of a sudden the team's mailroom was overflowing with packages and cards destined for needy soldiers."

The amount of packages filing in got to be so much that I had to seek assistance from the brigade chaplain to get everything down to the battalions not located on Camp Taji", said Betts, a resident of Benton, Ark.

Even with the huge volume of packages steadily flowing into the brigade, nothing could have prepared Betts, or the soldiers of the 39th Brigade Combat Team, for the flood of items the holiday season brought.

"Every soldier I've talked to is honored to be a part of this. We all want to thank the wonderful people and families who do this for us. Our love and prayers are with them as we all stand tall together in this fight against terrorism," U.S. Army Maj. Russel Betts
Hundreds of handmade Christmas cards from children began arriving, each message of support and love more poignant than the last. "My daddy worked in the NYC Port Authority," and "My mommy was killed in the towers. Good luck soldiers, we love you." Along with the cards, over 80 wrapped Christmas presents arrived, enough for every soldier in the Headquarters Company to open one, each with a letter inside.

"Just knowing what happened to the individuals that sent us these presents and the link we know have," said Betts, "it's just awesome to know there are people back home who think of us on a daily basis."



Spc. Jessica Stacy of McRae, Ark. assigned to Headquarters Company, 39th Brigade Combat Team, displays one of the hundreds of Christmas cards and greetings sent to brigade soldiers by members of the World Trade Center United Family Group. U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Benjamin Cossel



Over 80 Christmas presents were placed under the Christmas tree inside the 39th Brigade Combat Team's Tactical Operations Center. The presents were sent to brigade soldiers by members of the World Trade Center United Family Group, an organization made up of survivors and family members of those killed on the World Trade Center attacks. U.S. Army photo courtesy 39th Brigade Combat Team

Thousands of miles away from families and loved ones, the holiday season is an especially rough patch in a soldier's deployment. The love and support of families from the states goes a long way towards making this tough time a little easier for everyone

."It's always hard being away from friends and family but Christmas time can really be rough," explained McRae, Ark. resident Spc. Jessica Stacy. "I'm lucky in that I have some family members here. Seeing a tree with presents underneath it, knowing what those families went through, helps make it a little easier for everyone.

"Expressing sentiments echoed by all, Betts took a minute to reflect on what the WTC United Family Group's support has meant to him and soldiers of the 39th Brigade Combat Team. "Every soldier I've talked to is honored to be a part of this," he said. "We all want to thank the wonderful people and families who do this for us. Our love and prayers are with them as we all stand tall together in this fight against terrorism."