

OCTOBER 15, 2023

# Family

[familymedia.com](http://familymedia.com)

*The Magazine For Military Families*



## Small Items, Big Comforts!



**Florida-based Nonprofit Operation Shoebox Sends  
Weekly Care Packages to Deployed Troops**



## Small Items, Big Comforts!

Florida-based Nonprofit Operation Shoebox Sends Weekly Care Packages to Deployed Troops

**S**ocks, toothpaste, coffee, candy, and golf balls may seem like trifling little things that no one thinks much about, but for deployed troops, these seemingly trivial supplies can translate into

hugely comforting reminders of home.

A Florida-based nonprofit organization, Operation Shoebox, has been sending care packages filled with small daily necessities and hard-to-get treats for more than 20 years. The brainchild of founder and president Mary Harper, Operation Shoebox now sends between 600 and 1,000 care packages every week through the hard work of some 500 volunteers.

"Our main purpose for Operation Shoebox is to show our troops that they are

cared about and appreciated," relates Harper. "Each care package contains a handwritten letter and handmade items, along with snacks and hygiene items to give the troops a little taste of home, and let them know that someone took the time to write them, make items for them and that they cared enough about them to do it."

Harper founded Operation Shoebox in 2003 when five of her children were deployed to Iraq at the same time. The following year another son and her son-in-law deployed, so the family had seven members serving; she now even has a grandson in the Marines, carrying on the family military tradition. "We started with them and it soon turned into way more," she recalls, adding "So many troops needed support, and we needed to do what we could to help them; 20 years later and we are approaching 2 million care packages!"

Initially, the volunteers shipped care packages in shoeboxes – hence the name

– to conform to wartime shipping requirements. Today, the volunteers make cloth bags with drawstrings, which keep the shipping weight down and also give the recipients a nice keepsake.

Any deployed military member, family, or friend can request a care package on the organization's website, <https://www.operationshoebox.com/>. Care packages are sent to deployed troops on a first come, first served basis. "Word of mouth goes a long way and we get a lot of sign ups that way," Harper notes. "Also a lot of our volunteers also have family members and friends serving, so we are never short of troops to send to."

Operation Shoebox funds the approximately \$14,000 monthly shipping costs through its thrift store and used furniture store located in Belleview, FL. "We also run fundraisers and receive donations from generous supporters; some supporters leave donations to us in their wills; we also

receive donations of cars and golf carts that we have sold to raise funds," Harper explains.

Harper says it is hard to imagine the impact the care packages have made. "In 2009 I received a letter from a lieutenant that said his troops had gone out on a mission and when they returned the care packages were waiting for them," she recalls. "One of his soldiers had not received anything from home since they had been deployed, and he said he was happy to get that care package...the next day he was killed.

"You just never know when you are going to make the last impression on someone, so an act of kindness and appreciation is so important to our troops," Harper continues. "This is a lot of work but when I get tired I remember him, and will always remember him. You never know in some of the areas that they are in are going to become volatile and what's going to happen. You hope and pray they will have an uneventful deployment, do their rotation and come home safe, but that's never guaranteed for them.

"We have received hundreds and hundreds of letters and emails telling us how much it means to them to know they are cared about," she adds. "We also ship golf clubs and golf balls over to them. Most don't have any kind of golf course to play on but they hit the balls for stress relief. Some of them build nets to hit into so that they can retrieve their golf balls and keep practicing."

Operation Shoebox also has had an impact on veterans, hosting fundraisers and occasionally providing care packages to those on the home front. These actions also have had a ripple effect, touching and changing more lives and military families.

"We had a Vietnam veteran that mailed us a large priority box with enough stuff for two care packages and he asked that we split it and send it to two troops," Harper reminisces. "He wrote that no one had ever sent him anything when he was deployed and that he was spit on when he returned. So one of our volunteers at the time, Joanna, said, 'Why don't we send him a care package?'"

"It was around Christmas so we sent



### Captions

him a stocking filled with stuff," she continues. "A couple weeks later we received a three-page letter from him. He told us that he and his mom had gone shopping, and when they came home his box was at the door and he brought it in and opened it. He said once he realized what it was, he cried. He read the letters and cards we put in it and he said I want you to know I finally feel welcomed home! So you just never know when you are truly making a difference in someone's life. We have made tons of friends through the years and it has been life changing."

The care packages to the troops also make an impact on the families left behind at home. "With the economy the way it is today and families struggling to make ends meet, it's nice to have someone like us to be able to send things to their loved ones; it helps the families with costs," Harper points out. "Our focus is on those deployed because they need the support and to know they are cared about. They are in stressful environments and away from their families and friends. I personally don't think we can ever do enough for them. They sacrifice so much to keep us free."

