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Pentagon faces flood of gifts for troops overseas

By K KAUFMANN, Capital News Service

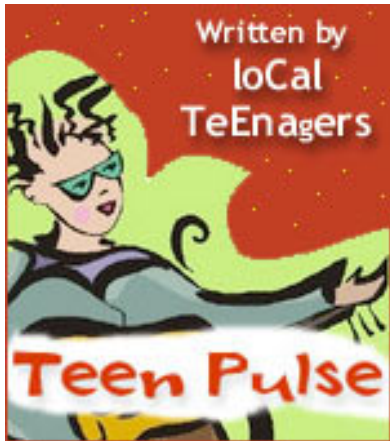
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WASHINGTON -- It's hard to say no during the holidays, even for the Department of Defense.

The department is trying to stem the avalanche of mail and care packages sent by individuals and groups who get soldiers' names from nonprofits or Internet Web sites. The catch: DefendAmerica.mil, a Defense Department Web site, has links to the very groups the department is trying to restrain.

Written by loCal Teenagers
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"The DoD can't win on this," said Marty Horn of La Plata, founder of Attn: Any Soldier, one of the groups listed on the department's site. Mr. Horn estimates his group now sends mail and packages that reach about 31,000 soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan and other overseas bases.

The Defense Department's official holiday mail policy, according to a recent news release, is no letters or packages addressed to "any service member" or individual soldiers who have been "adopted" by nonprofits, schools, churches or other groups.

"Service members should receive mail only from those friends and family members to whom they personally give their address," the directive said.

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The Schooner
 Woodward



Part of the reason is sheer volume, said Mark DeDomenic, chief of operations for the Military Postal Service. Last year, the service delivered 8.4 million pounds of holiday mail to troops overseas, he said.

The service is now bracing for a 10-million pound Christmas, and Mr. DeDomenic is concerned about the impact on military supply lines.

AND CHILDREN



Too much mail "clogs up transportation," he said.

But the popularity of groups like Attn: Any Soldier has effectively overpowered military policy. Mr. Horn started the group in August 2003, when he began sending packages to his son, Army Sgt. Brian Horn, in Iraq.



Sgt. Horn shared the packages with other soldiers and asked for more.

The group's Web site (www.anysoldier.us) now lists soldiers' names and requests for clothes, equipment or, sometimes, toys for Iraqi children. It logs about 8,000 visits a day, Mr. Horn said.



And it is one of several groups - with names like Operation Gratitude and Soldiers' Angels - listed on DefendAmerica.mil.

Air Force Lt. Col. Ellen Krenke, a Pentagon spokesman, said the department does not want to discourage groups like Mr. Horn's. Rather, she said, the holiday mail policy is aimed at ensuring "family members are able to reach family members."



"We just want people to know there are other ways to show support," she said. "There are programs that benefit families of deployed troops, veterans, and communities."



Mr. Horn, himself a veteran, said he worries about soldiers who may not have family. But even he is asking for a bit of restraint from the troop-supporting public.

"Troops can get too much," he said. "They don't even have the space to use this stuff."



"The most important thing is to show that you care. Send a letter, don't send a TV."

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Published November 15, 2004, [The Capital](#), Annapolis, Md.

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