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'Stranger Angel' sends treats to Iraq

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SO MANY troops. So few people to help her send them handcuffs and X-ray machines.

That's been the story of **Tiffany Wilson's** life since last March. Back then, in a lather of empathy for U.S. soldiers in Iraq, Wilson dashed off an e-mail to the Web addresses of 200 military ships and various platoons, offering moral support.

"I felt so bad about them being shipped out," she says.

She closed her note with the enticing words, "If there's anything you need, I'll try to get it for you."

Here's how the Tiffany Wilsons of the world are different from the rest of us.

When our troops went to war last spring, most of us got weepy at the televised images of them saying goodbye to their families.

We dabbed our eyes and said, "Godspeed, young soldiers!"

Then we turned on "Entertainment Tonight."

But Wilson, a single, 30-year-old mom on a part-time salary who lives in a small Southwest Philly rowhouse with her mother and son, cried from the depths of her big heart: "I HAVE TO FIX THIS SADNESS!"

Her can-do empathy must have oozed off the e-mail she sent that day, because her in-box was literally bombarded with mail from hundreds of troops, who poured out their fear and loneliness. She felt well-equipped to respond with words of comfort because, as she says, "I'm a nurturer."

But Wilson was hopelessly unprepared for the other notes that flooded her e-mail in-box, from soldiers with requests that kept her awake with worry.

Like what, you ask?

Like T-shirts, underwear and socks to replace those lost by Desperado Troop, 1st Squadron, First U.S. Cavalry when their hangar burned to the ground.

Fleece blankets, requested by the 172nd Chemical Company, to combat chilly desert nights.

Medical supplies - including X-ray machines and monitors - to outfit the medical platoon of the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

And handcuffs - yep, handcuffs - for troops policing Kirkuk.

"I was overwhelmed!" said Wilson. "I had no idea how much these guys needed."

Nor how hard it would be to fill their orders, which she now felt obligated to do.

Despite her pleas for help, no discount retailer, police organization, medical-supply outlet or elected official would donate the items her troops needed.

Then again, she figured, corporations and politicians probably aren't in the habit of using a regular person like herself as a go-between for multi-pronged U.S. military operations taking place behind enemy lines.

So, without the connections needed to fill her troops' big-ticket orders, Wilson has since been doing what she can for them, all on her own.

It usually involves crafts.

Last fall, she sent hundreds of cute Halloween and Thanksgiving packages to 15 or so soldiers with whom she's become regular penpals, who then distributed the items among the troops.

At Christmas, she made felt stockings, filled with candy canes and encouraging notes.

And last week, she mailed hundreds of dollar store valentines, hard candy taped to each.

"I learned the hard way not to send chocolate," Wilson says, leaving to the imagination what can happen to a mailbag of Hershey bars in the Iraqi heat.

It's in the nature of people like Wilson to fear their efforts are never enough. But 1st Lt. Mary Alicia Verdecchia - a penpal who refers to Wilson as "a stranger angel" - begs to differ.

"Mail call is the highlight of our days, and the soldiers' faces light up when they get it," says Verdecchia, of the Kuwait-based 172nd Chemical Company.

One soldier was so grateful for Wilson's friendship, he sent her the U.S. flag that flew on his ship as a token of his appreciation.

Others hope to thank her in person for her cards, books, videos and support when they return to the States this summer.

It wows her.

"These people have become my life," she says.

"They share their sadness and hope. Their letters show me a world I'd never get to see otherwise. I appreciate them so much."

And she'll keep showing it - no matter how many craft runs to A.C. Moore it requires, or how many hours it takes to answer their notes at her kitchen table - until the last troops are home, with their families, where they belong.

"Even," she says, "if it takes years." *

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