

Quincy

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campfire; and a post office all rolled into one and compressed into the confines of a 12 x 18 cardboard box addressed to military personnel in Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, Syria, Kuwait. As these outposts may seem to us in Nashua like the furthest outposts of our imaginations, an OCT package is nothing less than a portable – and potable – attitude of gratitude.

As of January 2018, in the past 14 years, OCT, with its way station headquarters housed four times a year at the Armory in Nashua, has shipped 100,569 boxes to our military overseas. Typical items include toothbrushes and dental items; trail mix; hot chocolate; oatmeal; tuna; dried fruit; candy; Girl Scout cookies; power bars; hand warmers; playing cards and small games; gun-cleaning materials; hand-screened new T-shirts; new white socks; new pens and new writing paper; and cards and letters with supportive messages.

But like a well-nourished flower, OCT continues to blossom and change its shape as its leaders continue to open new pathways for giving back to deployed troops – through four primary projects and numerous smaller projects throughout the year.

First, OCT volunteers – approximately 120 of them each quarter – gather on prescheduled dates at

the Armory in Nashua in February, May, August and November to produce, pack and ship quarterly care packages to the troops, items designated by theme. In February, it is personal hygiene items; in May, “spring to summer” items like sun protection and protein snacks; August is “Bag of Bare Necessities” including drink mixes, canned fruit, beef jerky, trail mix; and November is “Holiday Stocking Packing.”

An Air Force captain wrote to OCT: “I’m not a very good author but let me describe Christmas Eve to you. A bunch of smelly, grumpy A-type troops with automatic weapons are passing around this giant box of Christmas cards and messages. For a brief little while, we were all laughing and smiling and cutting up, based on some of the cards. I sat back and had to take a moment to reflect on how a simple card like that can change morale. It’s easy to get detached out here, and those cards your students wrote brought back a human element to the real objective behind being here.”

In response to an increase in requests by deployed female personnel, OCT puts together personal hygiene packages for female troops – including items like lotions – Eucerin, Aveeno, Bath & Body Works; powders (Gold Bond); razors, shampoos, conditioners. In addition, OCT works with local veteran organizations and businesses who donate some requested items.

One battalion captain in his sixth deployment wrote OCT: “I just

wanted to take a minute to give you a sincere thank you for the care package that your organization sent to us...Knowing we are supported means the world to me...and I have to say the notes and drawings included are by far the best. Thank you for everything you have done for myself, and my brothers and sisters in arms. It is because of people like you that I enjoy my service to this Country so much.”

As another extension of the packing project, OCT created its “Holiday Stockings for Children of Vets” program across Southern New Hampshire, in collaboration with VASH (VA Supported Housing) Program in Manchester. Homeless/displaced veterans and their families are in a five-year program to access help in obtaining housing, and acquiring life skills and employment opportunities. Each year the names of children are placed on a tree for the holiday season with a requested gift item. Five years ago, OCT began making holiday stockings by age and gender for each of these children. The program began with 60 stockings, but has now doubled in size. Case managers report how overwhelmed and grateful families are when they see the stockings and gifts for the children, reinforcing the work and mission of VASH.

In addition, OCT supplies gender-specific care packages for homeless veterans distributed on “Stand Down Day,” a free human services-one-day event held annually at Harbor Homes in Nashua

for southern New Hampshire homeless and displaced veterans.

Not surprisingly, OCT is clearly a two-way street, as the process of giving – of time, energy and product – means a lot to the volunteers themselves who welcome communication about how their work matters to deployed military men and women. As a 22-year Air Force Officer: “I received your package this morning and ALL of the items were a Big Hit! You reenergized my faith and love for my country when I opened your box! I cannot thank you enough for the joy you placed on these troops faces. ... This is why I’m so passionate about what I do and I cannot do this without the kind of people back home such as yourself.”

OCT collaborates with schools and scouting programs, community, veteran and business organizations who donate and serve in packing days and are open to any creative ideas to help deployed troops. One resident facility rolls socks and makes drink mix kits when needed. Local schools and groups write letters to troops. “Treats for Troops” collects left-over Halloween candy for OCT packages.

Operation Care for Troops is a grassroots 501(c)(3) organization run entirely by volunteers. The next packing days at the Armory are May 16-19, 2018. All volunteers must register ahead of time. To learn how to donate goods, services or money, or to add a soldier or unit to the OCT mailing list, contact Operation Care for Troops. www.octnh.org.