

STARS AND STRIPES

Thursday, November 15, 20018

Stateside groups use computers to keep Any Servicemember programs going

By [Greg Tyler](#) and [Carlos Bongioanni](#), *Stars and Stripes*

Traditionally, Nov. 15 kicks off the two-month holiday mailing program dubbed Operation Dear Abby.

But today, for the first time in 17 years, military postal workers will not be sorting through tons of morale-boosting letters.

The Defense Department's decision last month to halt all its "Any Servicemember" mail programs because of the ongoing anthrax scares has disappointed many Americans.

But the suspension has prompted others to find alternative ways to reach servicemembers with greetings of holiday cheer.

Jack Coffey is one of many people who have created Web sites where people can post e-mail messages to the troops.

Since Nov. 6, Coffey's site, www.anyservicemember.org, has received about 1,500 hits and has dozens of messages addressed to any airman, sailor, soldier or Marine.

Coffey, an Army veteran, purchased and registered the domain for the Web site, solely to continue the tradition of the suspended Any Servicemember mailing programs.

A public affairs official who works for the U.S. Army Forces Command in Atlanta, Coffey routinely hears from people wanting to know where to send letters to troops.

He thought of the idea for the Web site the day the DOD announced it had put the programs on hiatus.

Want to send a letter? Want to get a letter? Here's who to contact

- **Operation Enduring Freedom Support user group:**
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/OEFS>
- **OEFS Web site:**
www.dayngrzone.com/americana/oef.htm
- **Friends of Our Troops mailing program:**
www.militarymail.org

In Miami, computer consultant BiBi Melguizo decided to get the 121 members of her Yahoo user group to send e-mails of support to the crews of ships such as the USS Essex, USS Carl Vinson and USS Champion.

“So far, there are no reported cases of anthrax circulating via e-mail,” Melguizo joked.

“A group of friends and myself wanted to do our part and help make a difference, so we started an Internet group called Operation Enduring Freedom Support on Oct. 18, and we decided we would write to those serving our country,” she said.

More than 30,000 soldiers have been sent to the Persian Gulf region to support the U.S.-led war on terrorism.

The Pentagon was expecting a high volume of mail, especially during the upcoming holidays.

“We just can’t move that amount of mail, especially with the safety concerns and new procedures being added because of anthrax,” Lt. Col. Jim Cassella, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a recent news report.

That makes the Internet options that much more important, said Art Izer, an Army veteran who spent two years in South Korea in 1958-1959. Though it has been 42 years, Izer said he still “tears up” when he thinks about the time he served in the 15th Quartermaster Company at Masan.

“The letters I received from several families stateside were like a lifeline ... like a gift,” he said.

The letters came from unknown families and reassured him he was doing a worthwhile job, he said.

“Sometimes they would talk about the weather and sometimes ... the family. It really didn’t matter to me. It was news from home.”

Mailing programs like Operation Dear Abby benefit American society in more ways than just building troop morale, advice columnist Jeanne Phillips said.

Phillips, 56, co-writes the Dear Abby column and shares the pen name Abigail Van Buren with her mother, Pauline Phillips, 83.

Since 1984, the daughter-mother duo has encouraged readers to write servicemembers during the holidays. It gives people a sense that they’re doing something positive, she said.

“Writing to our military makes people feel like they are doing

something proactive, like they are part of the war effort,” said Justin Beach, who owns the Yahoo group writing to sailors.

A lot of Yahoo enthusiasts who participate in user groups seem to agree.

“When I read that the letter-writing programs were going to be halted, I thought, ‘Why not e-mail them?’” Melguizo said. “I got in touch with a couple of PAOs (public affairs officers) on a few ships, and before I knew it we were growing.”

Yahoo group members regularly correspond with more than 40 military pen pals. And the number of letter writers has quickly increased. The group’s membership was about 130 Thursday night; the prior Monday the tally was 70.

The group has members from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Mexico, and one from China.

“The people who want to send e-mail letters outnumber the military members we write to,” she said.

The group sends letters primarily to sailors, such as crewmembers on the Essex, which operates out of Sasebo Naval Base in southern Japan, and several other ships — the Champion, Vinson, USS Yorktown, USS Arctic, USS Osprey, USS Peterson and USS Robert Bradley.

H. Devon Craig, another member of the group, thinks the e-mail letters to servicemembers may have more of a positive impact on the troops than sending gifts and goodies through the mail.

“I am so happy to be a part of OEFS ... especially in the wake of all the tainted mail scares,” Craig said. “It is so much more important now than ever to have a safe way to get messages of support to the troops.

“Maybe we can’t send food and other gifts, but we can send the most valuable gift of all: the gift of caring,” he added.

Mailing programs also serve as a good educational tool for children who, in today’s culture, have a very limited knowledge of the military, Phillips said.

Michelle Chartier’s Cub Scout pack in Blackstone, Mass., sent 50 postcards through Operation Dear Abby last year and planned to do the same this year until they heard the DOD suspended the program.

“Our Cub Scouts enjoyed sending the Christmas cards last year,” noted Chartier. “We heard back from several servicemen, and the boys were

amazed that their cards actually reached people as far away as Korea. One of them was an Eagle Scout who encouraged the boys to stick with scouting.”

Chartier said her group was disappointed to hear about the suspension of Operation Dear Abby this year.

“But we understand the concern. We are looking for alternate ways to send cards to the troops. If that doesn’t work, we will try doing something via e-mail.”

But the DOD decision to suspend the mailing programs won’t deter Friends of Our Troops, an organization that has collected and forwarded mail to troops since 1975.

Each year, the organization receives bulk mailings from thousands of groups throughout the United States, rebundles the mail and sends it to military units around the world.

The Fayetteville-based organization still plans to send mail this year despite the anthrax scare, said its executive director, Benjamin Wiser.

The organization has had a standing policy for years that all mail must come in unsealed envelopes, providing a measure of control to ensure that the bundled packets of mail contain no threatening material.

Wiser said he is aware of postal directives warning people not to accept mail that is not addressed to an individual, but his group will send its mail anyway.

Typically, the organization sends out hundreds of thousands of pieces of mail during the holiday season. It’s very possible, he said, that their mail might not even get opened this year.

“Once we take it to the post office and mail them, it’s out of our hands. All we can do is do the best we can for our troops.”

[Back to November stories](#)

[Page Two news roundup](#)

[Stories from October, 2001](#)

[Stories from September, 2001](#)

[Stories from August, 2001](#)

[Stories from July, 2001](#)

[Stories from June, 2001](#)

[Stories from May, 2001](#)

[Stories from April, 2001](#)

- [Stories from March, 2001](#)
- [Stories from February, 2001](#)
- [Stories from January, 2001](#)
- [Stories from December, 2000](#)
- [Stories from November, 2000](#)
- [Stories from October, 2000](#)
- [Stories from August and September, 2000](#)
- [Stories from June and July, 2000](#)
- [Home](#)