

STARS AND STRIPES®

Fire fueled by heavy winds destroys Camp Udairi tents

Page 6

Chase for prep soccer titles begins Thursday

Page 33



Web celeb sends sizzling e-mails to front lines

Pulse magazine

Estelle Reyna

STARS AND STRIPES 05.21.03

Estelle

With love, Estelle

The Net's most downloaded woman takes time out for the troops

INSIDE: Erotikmessen are bizarre bazaars; 'Indiana Jones' to make DVD debut

who's hot

for the boys

The 'Net's most downloaded woman finds fans, friends in U.S. troops

Ward Sanderson/Stripes

Estelle Reyna wants to be your pen pal.

The model whose Web site gets a bazillion hits a day is on a campaign to cheer up troops with the power of the pen and, OK, the pinup.

She says she's gotten to know legions of troops serving overseas after months of exchanging letters and e-mail.

"I love 'em so much," Reyna says from her home in Los Angeles. "It sounds funny. People would say, 'You don't know them.' But they've taught me so much I didn't know before. I'm really humbled and grateful and fascinated there are men and women who would live this very different life."

It started a few months ago. Reyna read an article about reservists, ordinary folks with kids and dogs and jobs and not killers, heading off to the Persian Gulf. This intrigued her at a time so many in Hollywood were critical of the coming storm.

Reyna, who says she supports the war, was motivated not so much by wanting to see troops give Saddam a wedge of mass destruction, but by wanting to comfort Americans being sent away from friends and family.

"Nobody likes war. I'm sure the soldiers out there are the ones who least like the war," Reyna says. "... But there are courageous people who step up to the plate. I couldn't live my life the way I do without them fighting for my freedom."

She began putting together care packages containing her photos, a Walkman, cookies and key chains, and sent them off to the Gulf.

It took a while for the replies to roll in.

When they did, the 26-year-old was surprised at the messages. They weren't lurid come-ons, though she's been asked to dinner a few times. Instead troops wrote about how they felt about the war. Some were depressed that so many Americans seemed against it. Some told of the rigors of military life.

"It's very tough," she says, "even for the toughest guys."

Others told Reyna about their family problems or asked for advice on what to do about a cheating wife or girlfriend. They sent her messages about what they wanted to do with their lives after the military. Some, men and women alike, began asking her how they could go into modeling or start a business.

And soon she realized how many, mostly sailors and Marines at sea, had

e-mail access.

So Reyna switched to electrons. She found troops who had asked for notes via www.emailourmilitary.com. She began a daily digital newsletter containing photos and a poem. Some of the boys dub her their modern Rita Hayworth, though Reyna says she's not sure if she deserves the comparison.

"Suddenly, it became huge. I would just get hundreds of e-mails back ... it became really this wonderful conversation."

This conversation takes up maybe four or five hours each day. She'll send 50 to 100 care packages via snail mail. And she'll send thousands of e-mails. Out of all these exchanges, a few sailors and Marines have become regular names.

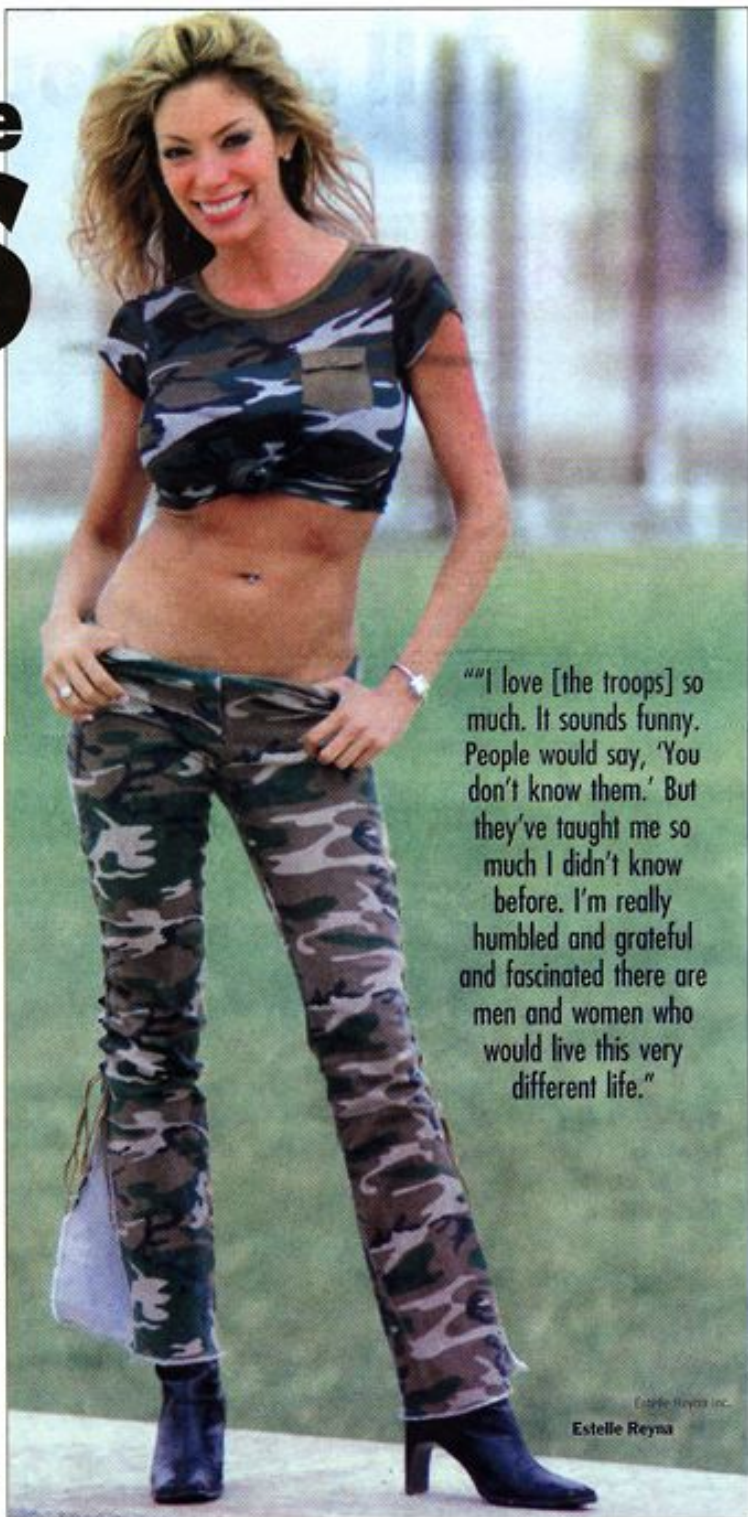
This may all seem doubly unlikely considering Reyna's cosmopolitan origins. The model moved to the United States four years ago from Switzerland, had lived in France and was born in Venezuela. Reyna arrived in California to pursue showbiz after tassing her job as a translator in Europe.

When she arrived in America, she spoke very little English. Now she speaks with an accent that's all L.A. with a faint Latina tinge.

"A lot of people say, 'You're not even American.' But I have really fallen in love with the U.S. It really is the country where you can make your dreams come true."

Soon, she hopes to become a citizen.

Sound like schmaltz? Well, it certainly seems true for her. She owns her own multimedia company. She produces a new television show, "Estelle's America," where she travels from sea to shining sea in search of vacation. She's the Internet's most downloaded celebrity; Esteller Reyna.com sees 250,000



Estelle Reyna Inc.
Estelle Reyna

"I love [the troops] so much. It sounds funny. People would say, 'You don't know them.' But they've taught me so much I didn't know before. I'm really humbled and grateful and fascinated there are men and women who would live this very different life."

visitors each day. Her ever-changing screen saver is a hit with the lads. She's published a cookbook. She even owns a search engine, SearchEstelle.com.

Reyna wants to master her own rise. In a business sense, her plan isn't unlike that of Oprah Winfrey or pre-stockgate Martha Stewart. Only Reyna looks the Ferrari to their SUV.

Reyna says she hopes her sudden arrival on the public radar will inspire troops to pursue their aspirations as

well. One sailor, an enlisted mechanic, wrote her and said he had always loved aircraft but felt wrenches were as close as he could get to a control stick. His heroine wrote him back and urged him to try to become a pilot.

After all, it's about as likely as a girl from Caracas becoming a famous L.A. model and corporate diva. And Reyna figures the sailor must have the right stuff.

"To me, all those guys are heroes. And they don't see it themselves."