



*From Here
To There*

Holly Aho

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May no soldier go unloved.
May no soldier walk alone.
May no soldier be forgotten,
Until they all come home...

SoldiersAngels.org

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PSALMS 55

1 Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;

2 hear me and answer me.

My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught

3 at the voice of the enemy,

at the stares of the wicked;

for they bring down suffering upon me

and revile me in their anger.

4 My heart is in anguish within me;

the terrors of death assail me.

5 Fear and trembling have beset me;

horror has overwhelmed me.

6 I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!

I would fly away and be at rest-

7 I would flee far away

and stay in the desert;

Selah

8 I would hurry to my place of shelter,

far from the tempest and storm."

9 Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech,

for I see violence and strife in the city.

10 Day and night they prowl about on its walls;

malice and abuse are within it.

11 Destructive forces are at work in the city;

threats and lies never leave its streets.

12 If an enemy were insulting me,

I could endure it;

if a foe were raising himself against me,

I could hide from him.

13 But it is you, a man like myself,

my companion, my close friend,
14 with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship
as we walked with the throng at the house of God.

15 Let death take my enemies by surprise;
let them go down alive to the grave, [b]
for evil finds lodging among them.

16 But I call to God,
and the LORD saves me.

17 Evening, morning and noon
I cry out in distress,
and he hears my voice.

18 He ransoms me unharmed
from the battle waged against me,
even though many oppose me.

19 God, who is enthroned forever,
will hear them and afflict them—
Selah

men who never change their ways
and have no fear of God.

20 My companion attacks his friends;
he violates his covenant.

21 His speech is smooth as butter,
yet war is in his heart;
his words are more soothing than oil,
yet they are drawn swords.

22 Cast your cares on the LORD
and he will sustain you;
he will never let the righteous fall.

23 But you, O God, will bring down the wicked
into the pit of corruption;
bloodthirsty and deceitful men
will not live out half their days.
But as for me, I trust in you.

Prologue

March 2005

How It All Began for Me, Journey of an Angel

Ok, so I don't feel like a real angel. Don't even feel particularly special really. I've read of all the nice things other people do for their fellow man, and I'm really not even in the running for niceness. But I am glad to be a Soldiers' Angel, and will take the halo, even if it sits a little crooked. I just wanted to get out the beginning of how I got started, in my own words, for the sake of posterity I guess.

It all began with a late Thursday night bout of laziness. I was too tired to cook dinner for myself, and too lazy to care. I decided to head to the local Subway for dinner instead, pajamas and all. Jumping back in my car for the quick one mile drive home I caught the very end of talk radio station AM 1500's show with host Chris Krok. To say I caught the end of the show is pushing it. I caught the last 15 seconds I think. I've always been in support of our troops, have the magnets on my car, all the 'usual' stuff, but that was the extent of my awareness that more was needed. Chris mentioned and I caught the last half of "...if you want to visit this soldier who was injured in Iraq and is currently in the VA Hospital go to our website for more information."

I thought about that for the rest of the mile home and decided to check out the website. Ever have the 'instantly forget' problem? You see a commercial on television, or hear one on the radio that peaks your interest, and they mention a website. You think, "I should check that out", and then forget all about it. Well lucky for me it was only a mile, so my forgetter

didn't have time to remove the interest from my head. Besides, I was more curious than usual. Who doesn't want to meet an honest to goodness hero?

So down at my computer I sat, followed the links, and found information on visiting this soldier. I have to admit, although the website gave out visiting information and room number, it did seem geared more towards family and friends needing information or catching up on Kyle's status. It was sort of in an internet blog format with written updates by his parents. It did say, however, "If you come to visit and Kyle's parents are not there, feel free to ask the nurses if you have any questions about Kyle or his condition." It also mentioned his injuries, which were traumatic and severe, mostly brain injury. So I'm sitting there trying to process what I think and what I'd like to do. I'm admitting here that a bit of creative reasoning went into this, but I figured that despite the format of the website, it was mentioned on the radio (ok, I admit I only caught the last half of the last sentence), but they wouldn't say it if they didn't mean it right? I also felt very compelled to learn more. I'm usually not really compelled to do anything this out of the ordinary, so that went into my creative reasoning too. I decided that there is no such thing as coincidence, and God often motivates us by giving us a strong desire to do something, even if it seems to have no context at the time (more creative reasoning).

The website did not however, give out a phone number to call, or even an email address. I felt stuck in how to proceed. I did have the address and relevant information to visit, but no one to ask if it would indeed be ok. Considering that we live more than 60 miles from the hospital and gas prices these days can make you gag, and I'm looking at a conundrum. My husband usually leaves for work at 5am and doesn't return home until 11pm, sometimes 6-7 days a week. We only had one car, and I'm thinking, "When could I visit anyways?" Even if my husband came home early, after more than an hour's drive surely visiting hours would be over. Patients would be asleep in bed at the hospital even before I arrived. Nevertheless I still remained interested.

The very next day my husband came home at 3pm from work, just out of the blue. Having had no chance to mention any of this from the night

before, I wondered how I could explain the sudden impulse to visit a soldier in the hospital so far away. Not lacking in foolish courage I fired away. Did he mind if I went to visit a strange man in the hospital in the cities while he watched the 4 kids, since he was home early? I admit I was worried he might find this question really mean, considering it was also an opportunity for me to see him during the daylight hours for a change. But no, he was all for it, didn't even look at me weird. So off I went.

I must admit I get jitters and shakes like a naked Eskimo in the dead of winter when I'm nervous. A two hour drive through rush hour on a Friday evening was plenty of time to destroy all of my creative reasoning and work me into a state. However I'm nothing if not a stubborn coward, with a fool's courage, so I parked and headed my jittery self into the hospital. Of course now I have to find the correct room. Finally arriving at the correct wing of the hospital I find it's arranged in a circle of rooms, and I of course start at the wrong end. Working my way back to the nurses' station I find his room is right there on the other side. All the while I'm ready and waiting for "what are you doing here?" looks from the nurses and aides. Nothing. Huh. I then noticed a little clipboard for visitor sign-ins. Ah Ha! "Something to procrastinate with" I think as I fill out the form. I then noticed a nurse and trying to feel the waters I ask if Kyle's parents are currently visiting him. She told me they were! Whew. So on I head to his room, trying to think of an explanation for my presence without sounding like a nut.

Needless to say the ice was broken when I headed in, said I was here to visit Kyle and told them my name, and they promptly asked if I was a friend of his from school. Kyle's 19 and I'm 30. My big grin must have looked friendly because after I explained how and why I was there they were so warm and friendly, very glad to see me. We stood and talked for a few minutes, and a group of more relatives arrived. Deciding this group was too big for the small hospital room the dining hall was suggested. I was included in the invitation to socialize, so off we went.

Now, I'm not a nurse, although my mother is. I can't gauge how well a person is, and can't necessarily guess what they are able to do. With a brain injury this is even more difficult. Kyle couldn't speak, which made it most

difficult to guess his abilities. I decided to just be myself, in all my kookiness, and figured I wouldn't be here if God thought I would screw it all up. It went well. Everyone was nice, and I didn't feel like a stranger intruding on a family tragedy or get together. During the chit chat one of Kyle's relatives happened to mention that Kyle is lucky to be close to home, as he gets many visitors. They continued to say that several other soldiers in rooms near his never get any visitors, they are from out of state and family can't afford to come. That was the saddest thing I'd ever heard. I filed it away for future reference. I had to be going, but as I was leaving they mentioned that I was welcome to visit again. I decided right then and there that I would.

Back home I wanted to find out more about visiting these other soldiers that have no visitors. Considering hospitals are boring at their best on a short stay, perhaps during a long stay far from home even a visit from silly me would be better than nothing. I did internet search after internet search and found nothing. No group, no organization appeared to exist for this specific purpose. In my searching I did find an online organization with the purpose of providing personal letters and mail to soldiers in Iraq. The reason stated for the creation of this organization was many soldiers never get any mail and are lonely. This was the second saddest thing I'd ever heard.

Care packages were mentioned on many websites I found, but frequent care packages seemed beyond my financial means. However a few websites mentioned sending just letters, stating letters were the most important thing that could be sent. I decided to get involved in writing letters, while continuing in my goal of finding a way to visit the injured soldiers at the hospital, with or without official information.

My first thought was, "If this was my son or daughter serving over there I would send them really nice letters." Off I headed to buy pretty paper. I also really wanted to make them feel special and give them something really special with my letter to make them feel loved and cared for. Pretty paper wasn't going to be enough to serve my purposes. I'm an artist and always have plenty of art supplies on hand, the only thing we have that we can

afford to part with. So I thought about sending little miniature paintings - originals - with each letter.

Now I admit this sounds silly. I felt silly sending them at first. Original paintings sent to soldiers I've never met, currently in a war zone, manly men soldiers, macho marines, getting little tiny paintings? Would they live it down if their buddies knew they'd received a tiny miniature painting as a gift? I determined to ask an ex-Marine friend of mine. He thought it was a great idea. I admit I still felt really silly, but decided to trust him and started sending them out with my pretty paper letters. I also thought this might be something I could do for Kyle and other soldiers in the hospital. Hospital art is not a trip to the Louvre, more like a crappy motel where art is concerned.

So from the website Kyle's parents wrote I learned he was interested in wrestling. I decided to do a large painting with a wrestling theme and give it to him as a present on my next visit. Since that visit, I am now introduced on every visit as, "Holly - the girl that did that painting for Kyle." It hangs on his wall across from his bed in the hospital (stealing thumb tacks from the nurses' bulletin board and pushing them into the wall as hangers). He loved it. I guess that's putting it the wrong way. He was shocked and had to touch it to see it was a real painting created for him. That experience clinched the art thing for me. I had yet to hear back from the letters I'd sent, but if this Marine thinks it's cool, I can't stop now.

So now I'm a Soldier's Angel, writing my adopted soldiers and still sending out my little paintings to each new soldier I write. I continued to visit Kyle in the hospital until his release seven months later (he's doing great by the way), and am ever so glad that one night I was too lazy to cook dinner.

Kyle

In October 2004 Kyle was hit with an IED bomb while serving in the Marines in Iraq. An IED is essentially a homemade dirty bomb that is very destructive. The shrapnel went through Kyle's helmet into the back of his head, crushing his skull and ripping from the back of his brain to the very front, causing extensive damage to the entire left side of his brain. Due to the nature of a dirty bomb he subsequently suffered infection and fevers that were as life threatening as the initial injury itself. In order to save his life the left side of his skull and brain were removed. In effect, this kind of injury is called a Traumatic Brain Injury or TBI.

Kyle was kept in a coma for about a month, fighting continuous infections and fevers. He was finally well enough to be transferred to a VA Hospital close to home about six weeks after his injury. Although Kyle did come out of his drug induced coma, he still seemed a person only half awake. His type of injuries made it impossible to tell if this was a result of his injuries that would remain permanent or just a path taken on the road to recovery. Let me explain a bit. He was by all accounts awake and responsive to the people around him, but he still seemed in some respects to be a sleep walker. He could answer yes or no questions with an up or down turned thumb, but still, he was easily confused and at times groggy. The left side of the brain controls memory so he had difficulty at first recognizing even close family. When I first began to visit him in the winter of 2005 he was able to remember who everyone was, but still seemed adrift. He has been like that with every visit I had made since, with progress slow and minor. Kyle had lost the ability to speak, read or write, and it was difficult to tell how aware he was of his surroundings.

Before I tell you about the amazing visit I had with Kyle in May, let me tell you a little more about Kyle the person. He was the State Champion in

wrestling his senior year of high school. He was one of very few kids who make it to the state competition five years in a row - including 8th grade. Kyle is not a huge guy in size - just a regular 19 year old kid. Before his platoon left for Iraq they had a beach party with sporting competitions. One of the competitions was wrestling one on one, the winner to 'hold and subdue'. Kyle wrestled for two straight hours against other Marines, some as large as 6'5", 250 pounds. He never lost one match and was declared the winner. He is humble, a good person. Not inclined to brag he is forced to listen slightly embarrassed as his parents brag about his accomplishments. Accosted with college recruiters offering wrestling scholarships out of high school, he opted to become a Marine instead. He said he'd rather be somewhere 'honest', his opinion of the recruiters was 'ass-kissers'. When approached after his tentative recovery from his injuries about receiving his medals, including the Purple Heart, he became very upset because he didn't want any medals. He was just doing his job.

In the beginning of May 2005, the first steps toward a dramatic recovery for Kyle became evident. The change in him was so dramatic it is not one easily described in words. In his own 'words' he said it was like he just woke-up two weeks previous. He was back to his old self, fully aware, excited to be here, and just plain fabulous. Walking again, trying really hard to communicate with so many things to say, and just performing a breathtaking speedy recovery. The grogginess and confusion were gone. Sitting outside with him, smoking cigarettes and trying to guess what his hand charades meant (he really rolled his eyes at us idiots playing the guessing game), he was amazing, just take your breath away amazing. In the space of a day Kyle seemed to return to his old self. While he still couldn't speak, read or write, mentally he otherwise seemed whole.

At the end of May I took my oldest son to the VA Hospital to visit Kyle. My son is a wrestler and wanted to meet this cool Marine. When we arrived at the hospital I realized Kyle would probably be out on a weekend pass with his family, as it was Memorial Day. Sure enough he was not there. The nurses were nice enough to call his mom from the nurses' station and she told us Kyle was with his dad - down at the horse races at Canterbury

Downs. Awesome! That was on our way home. So we called Kyle's dad on his cell phone to check about stopping to visit and off we went.

We arrived just as the second race was starting and found Kyle, his brother and dad sitting outside by the track. I took the time to explain the (as I call it) 'horsey book' to my son so he could place a few small bets himself - informed.

I don't know what excited my son more...meeting a real Marine, the state wrestling champion no less, or the opportunity to win money. Needless to say my son was vibrating with excitement and his eyes glowed the entire time. He's such a good kid, a great kid. He parked himself next to Kyle and proceeded to chat away with him, not put off in any way by Kyle's injuries and not shy or timid. I was worried that my son would be at a loss for conversation with Kyle unable to speak. How many 10 year olds can talk to an adult who can't reply, one they've just met, and not feel awkward? Often Kyle couldn't hear him because he has a slight hearing loss. The hearing loss mixed with the noise of the crowd made one to one conversation difficult. Kyle often leaned closer to hear my son, and my son was happy to say it louder. I never saw my son look uncomfortable in the least - just glad to make a new friend and ready to put Kyle at ease.

Children have an amazing ability to see the sick and injured through unbiased eyes. My 2 year old saw wheelchairs as he sees anything with wheels- cool. The bigger the wheels an object has, the cooler it is. Adults that couldn't talk were a welcome relief for him - he couldn't talk very much either. My 5 and 6 year old sons were shy upon their first visit to the VA Hospital, but only because it was a new and unique experience for them. It didn't take long for them to be taking rides in Kyle's wheelchair or telling him all about their day. My eleven year old son saw this experience as a unique opportunity of a different kind. Kyle and the other patients he met never interrupted him, and he had their undivided attention.

I went to visit Kyle again the first week in June. It was a very interesting visit. One of Kyle's commanding officers was there to visit Kyle as well. I

have to admit that I was so amazed and honored, struck stupid, nervous and speechless that I can't remember his rank. It was either Brig. General or Lt. Colonel, something along those lines. Let's just say that if he had taken off his uniform I think it could have stood stiffly at attention all by itself with all those ribbons and pins on it.

He was a man who commanded authority, attention and respect without needing to command anything. Ever have one of those moments when you remember all the things you should have said, long after the opportunity has passed? That was me in the car afterwards on the way home. Like an idiot I didn't even tell him it was an honor to meet him when I shook his hand. I just said it was nice to meet him. Nice?!? What kind of lame thing was that to say? It was more than nice, it truly was an honor.

Despite the fact that I felt stupid and overwhelmed I did manage to squeak out a few questions. He brought with him some movies he and his troops made while serving in Iraq. The first was a 3 minute video of them arresting an insurgent. The insurgent had been ousted by his friend whom you could see in the background nervously standing and watching. The insurgent sat and watched as his entire bomb making stash was taken out of this building and placed outside in front of him. Of course at first he had 'no idea where that stuff came from....never seen it before'. Eventually he admitted it was his. I was surprised by my anger and the total calm of the Marines in the video. I wanted to go beat the crap out of that guy, something to make him stop looking so smug, which is why the total calm of the Marines as they continued to drag mortar caps and other supplies out of the building while this guy sat with his hands behind his back denying it all was...well I wouldn't be that calm.

The next several videos included Iraqi children. I asked if the children speak English at all. He said that some do speak it quite well, as opposed to very few adults who speak it at all. "We know which kids are the well educated ones by their ability to speak English. They've been to school." After watching the first video with the bomb maker I had to ask if they had any fear of the children. After all, with their apparent innocence they would make excellent killers. He said this, "of the children, we don't have to

worry about them killing us personally, but they are often used as a distraction for adults to kill us.” I asked if the children are aware they are being used in this way. He replied with a very grim look, “Some of them do.”

He told me that he had just finished his second tour in Iraq and was not going to be going for a 3rd tour, but that many Marines under his command were leaving next January for their 3rd or 4th tours to Iraq. He said “If you had any swagger in your step the first or even second time over, you lose it by the third tour.” Sleep deprivation is high, leaving soldiers stressed, tired and often scared of the next patrol.

This guy looked so tired himself I think he needed at least 24 straight hours of sleep. But the signs of fatigue were only apparent in his slow walk and desire to sit in a chair. I think something inside wouldn't allow him to give in to the fatigue or show it in any outward way. I might have missed the signs if I hadn't been told his schedule of the past several days before he arrived.

This was the man who was with Kyle when Kyle was hit by the IED. Later Kyle's mother told me of their previous talk with Kyle and his commander. Of Kyle's initial injuries he had said, ‘I never thought Kyle would live. I thought he was dead before I even reached his side, and as I held him waiting for medical help to arrive his brains were all over my hands and the ground.’ He is very happy to have been proven so wrong...Kyle is better than ever. The human mind is a medical marvel.

So I watched this man who was so amazing himself, the man who was with Kyle when he was hit, whose ribbons and pins on his uniform were not a sign of pomp and ceremony but of a quiet proof that he had been there, seen it, and tired as he was had come to see Kyle - the 19 year old kid whom he'd feared for dead. Kyle, who was now so wonderfully alive. It truly was an honor to meet this man.

Late in July I drove into the cities for a get together with other Soldiers

Angels in Minnesota. Afterwards I thought, “I drove all this way (more than an hour) and am only 10 minutes away from the VA Hospital...how can I not stop there to see my friends?” As I walked to my car after saying goodbye to the other local Soldiers Angels I quickly glanced at my watch. It was 8:40pm and I had 20 minutes to get there, park my car and run to the door before 9pm, when visiting hours ended.

I drove as fast as possible and arrived in record time, signed in at 8:50pm and crossed my fingers that Kyle would still be awake. It was a weekday, and on weekdays patients tend to be more tired because of the exhaustion from physical therapy. I arrived at Kyle’s room and hoped that he would still be awake. I hadn’t seen him in more than a month, about five weeks or so, because he was doing so well that he left every weekend to stay at his parents’ house. I was rarely able to make the drive in on a weekday.

As I arrived at his room the lights were off, the door mostly shut. I asked a nurse if she thought Kyle might still be awake. The nurse opened Kyle’s door and in we went, to find Kyle awake and watching television. I turned on the lights and Kyle and I were able to visit for over an hour. The nurses were kind enough to let me stay after visiting hours had ended (thank-you wonderful nurses!), and so I stayed until 10pm. Kyle looked better than ever, he was doing so well!

We looked at pictures he had in his room taken while he was in Iraq as well as photo albums his mom put together of recent events. When I first began to visit Kyle I thought that it would be very difficult to visit someone who couldn’t talk. I’m a talkative person just full of questions for everyone, and he couldn’t reply verbally. What could I say? I have since learned a thing or two. For one, body language speaks volumes. We don’t realize how much we gauge other people’s meanings from their body language. As I sat with Kyle that night and pummeled him with my usual questions it didn’t even occur to me that I was talking to someone with an injury. It was like chatting with an old friend. I’m just trying to explain that you don’t have to act different, try to be something you’re not, or feel uncomfortable when visiting someone with a severe injury, even an injury that prevents them

from speaking. After a few visits you both forget together that there is any difference between yourselves.

Kyle was learning to read again, so I had to ask what that was like. Brain injuries are so difficult to understand. I wanted to understand what it was like to learn these things again. I asked him if learning to read again felt like remembering what he'd once known, or if it was like learning it for the first time. He told me it was like learning it for the first time. Kyle had no memories to grasp to help him remember reading. I then asked if it's the same with writing. Kyle told me it was. He showed me the books he using to learn how to read again. They were children's books of course, but again, the brain is so amazing! My son was in kindergarten that year and learning to read as well. What took my son a year to learn Kyle had mastered in a few months and even surpassed.

There were other interesting things that he was able to answer despite his injuries. I asked him when the Marines he had served with were going to return to Iraq (his Marine group had recently returned to the states and many were returning for a 2nd, 3rd and even 4th tour). He had on his wall a plastic calendar with changeable months, two months to each card, one on the back and one on the front. I gave him the cards and he held three up, making sure to show both the front and back of all three cards - a six month break before his buddies return to Iraq. He's great at being able to find a way to answer questions that he can't just 'say' the answer to.

In mid-August I learned that Kyle wasn't feeling well and went to visit him again. He'd had recent surgery to begin the cosmetic fixing of his injuries and he was in pain. Kyle was alone in his room when I arrived, and was very happy to see me. He wanted to refuse pain meds because he had been in a coma or out of it for 8 months recently. Now that he was alert he wanted to stay that way, but the pain was too much so he agreed to very low dosages. He was hurting, but doing well. And he was doing better than ever in his recovery. His pain meds ruined his appetite so I told him the following weekend I'd bring him a super-sized meal from McDonalds to make him feel better. He smiled and then tried to tell me something I couldn't understand. As Kyle's recovery progressed the things he wanted to

express became more complicated, and the harder it was for us to understand without speech.

I told him I wished I could read his mind. He told me he wished I could read his mind. He pointed for paper and a pen. Now this was something new. He'd never tried to write out anything for me in the past. He was learning to read and write again but he had never before written anything out for me. The effort took too much work for him. I was extremely curious and glad I would figure out what he wanted. He drew a stick figure with a dress, told me that was me. Then he drew 4 smaller boy stick figures, each progressively smaller than the last. My boys!! He wanted me to bring my four boys again to visit him this weekend. I wanted to keep the picture but he wouldn't let me.

I did indeed return several times throughout the next week, and did bring with me the promised McDonalds dinner. He ate the entire meal and looked so happy to have it. The following weekend I brought my children to see him as he'd asked. It was a wonderfully nice day outside so we went out for a walk around the hospital grounds. My children took turns sitting in his lap for a wheel chair ride, while the others excitedly climbed trees and generally ran their little legs off.

At the end of the summer, Labor Day 2005, my family had the privilege of joining Kyle's family for a cook-out and bonfire. This was the first time my husband was able to meet Kyle, so even though the drive was a long one it was definitely worth the trip. In fact, just telling the kids we were going to see Kyle inspired them to behave, no kicking, screaming or fighting despite the close quarters and long drive.

Kyle's grandparents, his uncle and aunt, as well as a few cousins were there. It was a big family style get together with us as the only non-family to arrive. We were treated just like a part of the family however. His grandmother was wonderfully nice. Everyone was so much fun to visit with and no one minded the non-family visitors who showed up with four kids (all boys).

Kyle was there without his wheelchair. The backyard was very big with a large hill to get to the bonfire so it was exciting to see Kyle walking around and doing so well. It was really impressive to say the least. My kids had to pull their little lawn chairs as close to Kyle's as possible, and Kyle didn't mind. He was doing well and once again I heard the remark afterwards, this time from my husband, "It's amazing. After just a few minutes I forgot Kyle wasn't verbally communicating. He does so well with hand gestures and body language you forget he isn't speaking. It was so easy to visit with him and a lot of fun." Of course!

So we sat around the bonfire, cooked smores, and chatted about everything and anything. I just really can't think of a better way to spend a holiday than with a family such as Kyle's and with Kyle himself.

Kyle is my personal hero, and represents to me why our US troops are not just men and women with a different job...in a different uniform, but a cut above the rest. His injuries would have killed most people, and left the rest of us floundering in serious disability. He wasn't even able to make the conscious decision to 'fight to live' for the first several months after his injury, really not even up until now. But he chose to live, to fight, and to recover, from his soul. Many of us would have given up and died if we'd been conscious and able to choose, facing what he was. Kyle didn't even have to think about it - in fact he couldn't - but he struggled and won and recovered, his soul and heart refusing the alternative.

This is why they are heroes. This is why I want them fighting for me, thank God for them, and pray for them every day. Young adults, many of them just out of high school, and braver, with more courage, than most of us learn in our lifetimes. They have strength and determination not only in words and deeds, but from the inside out. They are not just soldiers, they are not just heroes because of their sacrifices, dangerous jobs, and willingness to protect and fight for strangers. They are heroes because they are a cut above the rest.

Epilogue

Kyle was released from the hospital a year and a month after sustaining his injuries in Iraq. In November 2005, Kyle left the hospital for the last time, to continue his recovery at home. While the extent of Kyle's ability to recovery from his injuries is still unknown he continues to make great strides, beating the odds and proving that the human spirit is stronger than a doctor's predictions.

The Movie Store Owner and \$500 Worth Of New Releases

It all started with a desire to send my adopted soldiers some DVDs and my very flat pocketbook (I think my George Washington is on E-Harmony. com looking for a little company). I had nine adopted soldiers through Soldiers Angels as well as about 10 others I met through AnySoldier.com and had become friends with. I wanted to send them all some DVDs.

I had learned from corresponding with my soldiers that VHS tapes were too fragile for the hot Middle East summers and they quickly melted. Most soldiers had a DVD player or a friend who would share theirs, and a movie after work was one of the few entertainments a soldier could look forward to. Many of my pen pals had only one or two movies with them and with nothing else to view on television these movies had been played till they practically wore out.

I searched through my own DVD collection and found that while ironically I had a huge collection of VHS movies in all genres including many new releases, the only DVD movies I had were war movies. Wonderful. As if they really wanted to watch “We Were Soldiers” or “The Sum of All Fears”. I considered purchasing a few new movies, but at \$20 per DVD this option would allow me to send only one DVD to just one soldier, not what I had in mind. Then I remembered the local video store in my small town often sells extra copies of their new releases as the interest in a movie dwindles and they no longer need so many copies of it. They sell their used DVDs for \$10 each. Great - now I can buy two, but still not what I had in mind.

So I thought I’d call the movie store and ask for a discount price on their used videos. I had hoped that perhaps if they knew what the videos were for

they would be willing to give me a 50% discount, bringing my movie purchasing ability up to four movies. That was about as good as I was going to get I guessed, and four was better than none. With this plan of action in mind I called up the local video store owner.

I had never met the owner of the store; she was a complete stranger to me. Nevertheless I felt the worst that could happen was she'd say no. It never hurts to ask. She wasn't at the store when I called, but I was given her home phone number. It was Friday and she'd taken the weekend off from work. Giving her a call at home I learned that she was expecting out of town family to arrive any minute for a weekend vacation. What wonderful timing I had. Still, I introduced myself and explained the reason for my call, expressing my desire to buy DVDs for deployed soldiers at a discount so I could afford more than one or two.

Less than four sentences were out of my mouth before she said, "I don't need to hear any more. Come down to the store on Monday and I will have a bag of DVDs for you - no charge. I was going to go through them this weekend anyways to get the sales rack ready." I was amazed! So I went down to the store the following Monday. Her video sales rack was empty - all of the videos that had been in the rack were now in my bag, along with ten others she had intended to add to the rack, more than twenty DVDs. As I was trying to think of a way to adequately express my thanks for such wonderful generosity she said "Would you like help in paying for the shipping so you can afford to mail them all to the soldiers? Just bring in the receipts from the post office and I will pay you for them." I was completely floored.

I decided the best way to properly thank this woman was to put an 'Announcement' in the classifieds of our local newspaper. I wanted everyone to know what a generous person she was, giving so much from a phone call received by a complete stranger. So my children and I headed to the local newspaper's publishing office.

I explained to the girl at the counter what I would like my announcement to

say, and the next thing I knew I had been kidnapped to the conference room and held hostage by a reporter. Ninety minutes later she finished up, took our picture (we look as windblown and unprepared for the picture as we were). I wondered if this story would ever make it into the paper. It was a positive story after all, and that's not always popular.

The story came out two days later and to my total embarrassment was on the front page with our windblown picture in color as well. What really amazed me was the wonderful article that had been written. No bias, no spin on the story, nothing negative or sensational, just a wonderful positive story encouraging others to also support our troops.

Each of my adopted soldiers and pen pals received one or two movies and upon hearing the story of their donation the video store lady was hailed as a hero from Iraq to Afghanistan. The newspaper story highlighting her generous spirit was hung on bulletin boards at several military bases overseas so that all soldiers could read for themselves how strong the American spirit was supporting them.

A Mother's Day Story

The Wednesday before Mother's Day I checked into the Soldier's Angels online message board and found this message: "Any soldiers who want a gift sent to their Mom or wife for Mother's Day contact me, we got a Large donation from Cejon, can send a beautiful scarf, all colors, all very large and beautiful materials, so email your soldiers and send me the address to send to. These scarves, are silk, chiffon, faux fur, the minks are way cool."

I quickly sent off emails to my soldiers with internet access. It was so close to Mother's Day I hoped they would receive the email in time to respond. Wednesday afternoon in the US is early Thursday morning in Iraq, a few short days remained before Mother's Day. I then headed out to do some errands with the kids. Two hours later I returned home and checked my email to see if any of my soldiers had responded yet. I found my email flooded with letters from Marines I'd never met. I was pretty darn confused. I scrolled up to find an email from a Marine I'd sent the Mother's Day email to. This is what it said: "That's such a nice thing that Cejon donated all those scarves. That would be a perfect gift for her. I sent an email out to my whole unit with your email address if they wanted to have a gift sent to their mother or wife. Hopefully someone will take advantage of this. Smile.....Well, I better get to work. Hope your email doesn't get too over loaded by the emails for Mother's Day gifts. But then I hope it does. Smile." And it did!

Now I was worried about the reaction from Soldiers Angels. After all, it is a non-profit organization with rules, and none of these soldiers were adopted in the program as far as I knew. Would they spend the money on shipping for soldiers not in the program? After all, it wasn't just one soldier....my email was flooded with requests. As I sat there wondering how to compose this email to Soldiers Angels explaining why I had so many names to

submit I decided to read some of the emails requests first. Here are excerpts from just a few: “Holly, I just received your message and thank you so much for what you’re doing!!! I hate not knowing if I’ll even be able to call my wife and mother, and there were no more mother’s day cards here left, the only thing they had left was from mother to daughter-in-law, and since I am neither a mother or a daughter-in-law, it didn’t really help me any, but thank you again from the bottom of my heart! God bless you!”

“I would really appreciate it if you could send one of your beautiful scarves to my wonderful mother. Her address is...Thanks a million, take care. What you are doing is a good thing.”

“I received an email today informing us on the gifts that your organization is sending to our mothers for Mother’s Day. I was delighted when I saw this. I have already sent her and my sister mother’s day cards but I wanted to get them some gifts too. Being that I’m in Iraq with no credit card or anything my options were few. To make a long story short I would like for you guys to send my mother and sister a gift for me, if not both, one of them. I would so appreciate that. I know seeing my face on Mothers day would be the gift my mom and sister need but since I can’t be there I wanted to send something with my wishes on it. If you could do that, that would be awesome....Thanks for your support and kindness, being over here in Iraq really lets me know why I love this country. If you could see the support we get from families and businesses in the states you would be amazed. Let your people know that we are very appreciative of the services and support you all are doing for us.”

“Hello- I was informed that you may be able to assist in sending a mother’s day gift. With the exception of the usual card and gift certificate I was unable to send anything due to access. If you are able Thank you very much.”

That was just the tip of the iceberg. By the time I finished reading the email requests I had received so far (as my Marine put it when I told her “That isn’t bad for the night crew, but the morning crew hasn’t opened their email

yet so expect more”) I began to cry. I was thinking at this point that if Soldiers Angels wouldn’t send the gifts to the families of these Marines not in the program than I would head to the store myself to do it. I couldn’t let these Marines down.

So I wrote an email to Soldiers’ Angels and explained the situation. I made sure to let them know I had more than 50 requests for Mother’s Day gifts from Marines and that there would probably be more coming. I also mentioned that the requests weren’t just for wives and mothers but for aunts, cousins and grandmothers as well.

This is the response I received from Soldiers Angels: “...send me the names...I will get them sent It is ok, that is why I put the call out. This is some thing we can do for our heroes.”

Greatly relieved I decided to call Patti Bader, the founder of Soldiers Angels, to say thank-you. I happened to mention concern that these gifts would not get to these women in time for Mother’s Day. This is what Patti told me. “We have decided to send them all Priority at \$15 per box to ensure no woman is left wondering on Mother’s Day if they were forgotten.” I almost fell off of my chair in surprise. At this point I had received many more additional requests from soldiers. Expenses to ship the requests I alone had submitted would easily be more than \$1000.

I quickly sent out emails to let these heroes know their emails had been received and the presents would indeed be sent out to the addresses they submitted. If I wasn’t crying hard enough before, these next emails put me over the edge:

“I appreciate you!”

“Thank you very much. I greatly appreciate it. You can be sure I will smile big.”

“Wow! Thank you again.”

“THANK YOU VERY MUCH,

IN FACT, I AM APART OF THE SOLDIERS ANGEL. MY ANGEL HAS BEEN VERY WONDERFUL TOO ME. WITH HER SUPPORT, I TELL HER ALL THE TIME SHE IS A TRUE ANGEL. SHE'S PROVIDED THINGS I REALLY NEEDED AND THEY SHOW UP RIGHT ON TIME, IN THE TIME NEEDED. YOUR PROGRAM IS OUTSTANDING AND YOU HELP EVERY MILITARY PERSONNEL GET THOUGHT THESE TRYING TIMES. YOU ARE INDEED MAKING HISTORY YOURSELVES. IF IT WASN'T FOR THE LOVE, BLESSING, AND SUPPORT FROM YOU ALL, WE COULD NOT CONTINUE TO DO WHAT WE DO BEST HERE AND THAT'S COMPLETING OUR MISSIONS"

But the very best email I received was this one:

"That's awesome. My mom would love silk – she had a neck surgery for cancer when I was in middle school (seems like a hundred years ago!!!) and she often wears silk scarves to cover up her scar and to look smashing. Apparently, she wore scarves a lot when she and my Dad were first dating, so it's a fun thing for her.....I'm including some of the message from my mom ... she was SO WOWED with the bouquet of scarves she received – arrived in time for her to wear one to church on Mother's Day... awesome! Of course, she cried tears of joy and was really touched. THANK YOU so much for getting me connected!!! You kick ass!!! Hope your week is going well."

Included with her email was a letter to her from her mother.

"Good Afternoon,

WOW! Did you ever surprise me! I had received the gorgeous packet of beautiful wraps. You may know exactly what you sent from Soldiers' Angels, but here's a list of what was in your abundant Mother's Day greetings: a delicate lavender wrap with embroidered flowers with sequin centers, a fancy lavender small soft purse with pretty bead & needlework blossoms, a plain sheer black wrap, a pastel blue & green double layer light-as-air "poncho", and an elegant orange long sheer wrap with cylinder

beads sewn in lines to trim each end. I wish you could see and touch each gift. How will I decide which to wear with my Sunday dress tomorrow?! I'd so like to hear the story behind shopping through the Soldiers' Angels - being able to send something to me instead of fellow soldiers. I looked under the Soldiers' Angels then Cejon and the Cejon website was under construction. Troops in Iraq must have a secret connection! I was thinking of different ways to wear the wraps - traditional shoulders/arms, as a sash, as a scarf - many possibilities for these sumptuous accessories.

Yes, tears of joy streamed down my face. I am so very grateful that you are my daughter. You started my journey through motherhood! I miss you sooo much. God knows that I'd like to hug you and say 'Thank you' in person. I'll just trust the Spirit to communicate the overwhelming appreciation and love I feel.

You certainly made my day - again!

I love you!

MOM

xoxoxo"

You Finally Get To Meet a Celebrity....

I was chatting one day with one of my adopted soldiers and he had this story to impart. Makes you feel certain Murphy's Laws are still predictable. I asked him if any civilians and/or celebrities had come to visit his camp since he'd arrived in Iraq. He said most of them don't come out to his camp, they stay at the airport, except for one...and the timing of that visit was too ironic.

He and a buddy were watching the movie 'Out of Time' one evening after work, and the subject of Dean Cain's career (Superman, Ripley's Believe It Or Not) became the topic of conversation. They began discussing whether or not Dean's portrayal of Scott Peterson was bad for his career and came to the conclusion that it caused a downhill slide in Dean's career. After the movie they decided to head for chow and the guy at the door says, "Did you see Superman?"

"Who?" they asked. Maybe the guy has been out in the sun too long. Superman? The guy at the door replied, "Dean Cain."

Just then they turned to see the very subject of their not quite complementary conversation head into one of the rooms nearby. My soldier told me, "We were just talking about how his career had gone in the toilet and there he is standing there!"

To be on the fair side who expects to be talking about Superman and Dean Cain in the middle of a war zone and believes he will show up while you are in the middle of your conversation? I told him perhaps Dean had

stopped on the outside of their door, heard their conversation, thought better of stopping in and moved on to visit someone else.

Soldier Support in a Tough Neighborhood

In August I made a visit to the VA hospital to ask the soldiers I visit if there was anything they would like to have or anything they needed during their hospital stay. Most patients require four month stays or longer, and as the VA here specializes, most patients are from out of state receiving specialized care. Most have no family or friends close by to visit and help provide a distraction from boring hospital life.

Previous to 2003 VA hospitals were not used to providing care for many young soldiers all at once. The recent combat in Iraq and Afghanistan is unique from previous conflicts with a dramatic rise in Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI). As a hospital specializing in TBI the VA hospital in Minneapolis found itself with an unusually large influx of younger patients from the war. I think they were caught offguard and were unprepared for the new and pressing need of dealing with young patients. The televisions in the hospital were older than me and had no hook-ups for a VCR or DVD player. For those patients with TBI reading was often an ability they had lost and recreation was relegated to minimal television channels.

On this visit there was a new soldier who had just arrived. I stopped in first with the intention of asking him what he would like or need and found his parents were there visiting as well. They had driven up for the weekend to see him. I explained my visit and who I was, then asked if there was anything he'd like to have to make his stay more bearable.

I got a few ideas from him on things to purchase and started to leave for the store when I heard him sadly asking his parents if they could stay longer. They were getting ready to head home and he was really sad to see them go.

I determined I was going to get this soldier everything I could think of that would help.

Soldiers Angels had provided me with \$200 to purchase items for these soldiers in the hospital to make their stay easier. I determined that \$200 was going to stretch like it never had before and thought of where to go for the best deal ever. I wanted to get this soldier a Playstation 2, DVDs, PS2 games, and a television with proper hook-ups, big enough to enjoy these things with. The regular cost for such items would be well over \$500 total, a new PS2 alone costs around \$200. Finding a place to purchase all of these items for \$200 or less would be a big challenge.

I headed to the roughest neighborhood I could think of reasoning the best deals on these items might be found in a pawn shop. Parking in a neighborhood my mother would never let me walk around with company, not to mention alone, I found a pawn shop with a security door and bars on the windows. Entering the store I was greeted with jaded looks and disinterest. Instead of searching the store I decided to ask for help in finding what I needed. I told the guy at the counter what I wanted and asked for his help in selecting the items. When it came to choosing games for the PS2 I didn't know what to buy. I explained that these items were not for me. Since the man helping me looked to be the same age as the soldier I was buying these games for I asked his opinion in helping me select a game or two. I told him who the games were for and why they were needed, in order to help him make the best selections possible.

This young man instantly started browsing the game titles as if he was buying a gift for his best friend, cautiously pondering the wisdom of a war game purchase and considering the long term fun of racing games. Choosing a few games he scoured the racks to find the best looking cases and studied each disk for scratches. I suddenly found myself with a free game, \$30 knocked off the price of a television (so that I could get a 19" for the price of a 13") and 5 free DVDs. I managed to purchase everything on my list for only \$180! The pawn shop employees even solicitously carried my purchases out to my car.

You should have seen this soldier's face when I came in with a huge television rolled in on a wheelchair, a PS2, games and DVDs. The sad look he'd had earlier completely disappeared and he looked so happy and excited. He asked again the name of the organization I was with that provided the money to purchase these items and when I told him 'Soldiers Angels' he said, "Isn't that the truth!!"

Once again the overall theme holds true, support for our soldiers can be found everywhere, even in the toughest neighborhood in a pawn shop.

One Heck of a Day at the Airport!

One day in August I was to meet an injured soldier before he left for Walter Reed. The day didn't go anything like I had planned or even imagined, but it was definitely an excellent day even if it wasn't what I'd expected.

It was planned that this soldier's family would call me in the morning to arrange a place to meet, so I'd arranged babysitting for my children in advance. The airport is more than an hour's drive for me so my sitter picked up my children in the morning. Time went by and there was no call. Now I'm sitting there wondering what to do. I hate to be insecure and presume wrongly, and I hate to waste babysitting - I rarely get it. I finally called their house but no one answered. I figured they were possibly on their way to the airport and at such a busy time for him and his family perhaps I had accidentally been forgotten.

What to do...what to do? So I decide to go for broke and head to the airport, just in case. Yes it's a long drive and I wondered if perhaps I might be intruding. Alright, I admit it; I was insecure like a teenager on prom night. Who knows why I wasn't called. In any case I decided to go. I arrived at the airport to find it's changed a lot in the last seven years. Waiting at the gate or terminal was no longer allowed as it had been in the past. How would I ever find him? This is a large airport. I had tried to think of a plan on my long drive, but hadn't come up with any good ideas and now I was stuck.

I headed for the smoking section outside to ponder my idiocy. Leaning against a railing in the absurdly small smoking area I looked at all the people crowded to fit in it. I leaned toward the guy next to me and said, "I think they grossly underestimated the number of smokers when they erected

one little bench for this spot.” He smiled and agreed and then told me he was smoking till he had to catch his plane...he was headed for boot camp and then Iraq. He was alone and without family so I chatted with him for awhile before he left. “The irony” I thought.

Done with that I headed back inside, still feeling I was missing something I needed to do. What? Well, the soldier I was supposed to meet was surely at his gate by now, so I probably wasn't going to be seeing him, and then I saw a sign for the Armed Forces Service Center. I'd spoken to the director of the AFSC a few months previous about volunteering time to meet and greet troops off the planes (a few conversations really), and so I thought, “Well as long as I'm here I'll go see the place. It might be useful.” And up the stairs to the 3rd floor I headed.

I arrived at the AFSC and explained why I was there. That's when I met Anne face to face...a woman I'd spoken to on the phone the previous May about my favorite Marine at the VA Hospital, Kyle. What a small world! She visited Kyle often as well but we had never met in person. I had no idea she would be at the AFSC. She was excited to meet me and show me around, where I happily shook a few soldiers' hands and learned more about the center.

Then Anne mentioned they had just been informed a plane with 11I soldiers was arriving in 45 minutes. These soldiers were coming home for 15 days R&R from Iraq. I asked if I could join them in meeting and greeting the soldiers off the plane. Anne suggested I ask for permission from AFSC director down the hall as I wasn't an official volunteer and she didn't want to do anything wrong. So down the hall I headed.

I stepped into the office and asked for Debra, the director I had spoken to a few times by phone the previous June. A beautiful woman introduced herself as Debra so I said I was Holly. My first name is all I got out before she turned to look at me and said “Holly Aho from Glencoe?” Was there a sign on my head? How could she remember me from a phone conversation last June, last name and location to boot! I told no one in advance that I was

going to visit the AFSC. I didn't know I'd be coming till I impulsively drove up. In any case I was given the 'of course you can meet and greet' and so off we went to meet these soldiers off the plane.

Now I am not a hugger. The women I went with were older than me, and one of them leaned over and told me the soldiers would be relieved to see a pretty girl their own age to greet them as well. That had me feeling self-conscious and nervous. I don't usually comb my hair or wear make-up and 'pretty' is not how I prefer to be thought of. Today was no exception to the hair and make-up rule.

A few minutes later the first soldiers arrive off the plane and I'm thinking 'hand-shake'. I mean really, I'm not a hugger and I'm all of 5 feet tall so even if I try to hug I'm not going to succeed unless they bend down to hug me too. It's like hugging a 10 year old - I'm little. I have a good firm handshake. I meet the first soldier and Anne gives him a hug. Anne is wonderful. She used to be a cheerleader in school and she can get the whole terminal clapping for these soldiers. She's a hugger.

This soldier had no one to meet him at the airport. Anne had told me before that she was warned to greet and then let them go on their way - they have places they'd rather be than the airport! But this soldier wanted to chat. He had no place to be and no one to meet him but us. As we stood there talking I saw other soldiers see their wives and drop everything like a good movie to rush to their loved ones for gigantic hugs and tears. I missed greeting most of the others because this soldier needed me more than they - and I was glad to talk to him. It was wonderful to talk with him.

Finally there was just one soldier left, walking with his family who looked so proud of him. They were beaming really. Anne rushed to meet him and I decided to follow as he was the last. She hugged him and I told him I wasn't a very huggy person, kind of shy. Would a hand-shake work? He shook my hand and said at the same time that a hug was fine with him. So I hugged him. (Anne whispered later that since I'd gotten the first hug out of

the way I could become a natural hugger). I'm glad I did hug him - maybe I'll get over the non-huggy part of me.

In any case after all that fun I met with a few other soldiers at the AFCS to chat with them. They were very, very interesting. I ended the day with a visit to the VA hospital, visiting my new friends.

So that was my day that went nothing like I had planned and turned out to be an excellent day.

Letter from a Team Member of the Navy SEALs Lost June 28, 2005

A fellow Soldier's Angel received an email from Michael Weiner, whose son is a team member of the SEALs lost in Afghanistan on June 28, 2005. Included was a letter written by his son regarding his fellow SEALs:

“Most of you heard of the CH-47 helicopter that was shot down over the mountains of Eastern Afghanistan on June 28th. Onboard were eight Navy SEALs, in addition to the crew of the Special Forces helicopter, ”The Nightstalkers“. All were answering the call of a 4-man SEAL element engaged in a gunfight with the Taliban. All soldiers onboard the helicopter perished. Three out of the four on the ground lost their lives, while one narrowly escaped. Eleven SEALs dead. It was the worst loss of life in a single day over the last four decades for Naval Special Warfare.

These are the details that come across the news wire.

I'd like to share a few words with you on a more personal note. Five of those SEALs were teammates, friends, and brothers of mine at SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team ONE in Hawaii: Dan Healy, James Suh, Shane Patton, Matt Axelson, and Michael Murphy.

Senior Chief Dan Healy was a resident SDV guru among other things. Everyone loved his Irish personality. I went to him many times for help, and he always took time out of his day to show me the right way to do things. He was a true professional, never taking any shortcuts to save time. He was a family man more than anything else. As friend Dave Bauer put it, “if I

were to point to a guy I wanted my son to be like, I would point to Dan and say, be like that guy son”

Petty Officer 2nd Class James Suh was the ultimate perfectionist, spending hours playing with his gear. James and I were in the same stick of five guys going through free fall school last September. As it took me three attempts to pass our last graded jump, James was the first guy on the ground to help me re-pack my parachute and offer words of encouragement. In what little time James had away from training, he moved his father out to Hawaii to help take care of him. James had his priorities right.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Shane Patton? You can't help but start laughing when speaking of Shane as a result of his flamboyant personality. I first met Shane in BUD/s. There were many young guys to start first phase, but he was the only 18 year-old on the other side of Hell Week. Shane and I went through all phases of our training and checked into SDVT-1 together. We were neighbors in Panama City during SDV school. Shane had that special charisma about him, oozing of confidence. He was a friend to everyone, and he was always true to his word. As Shane would say, “Tee-Rue”. Never once did I see him get mad, a sense of humor about everything! The youngest of the group, Shane was 22.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Matt Axelson or “Cool-Hand Luke” as his platoon-mates referred to him. A very calm guy, Matt kept true to the SEAL motto, “a quiet professional”. All the guys looked up to Matt and sought his insight on most everything. A sage of many sorts, Matt had creative solutions to everything. Matt was the last guy recovered on July 10th. Up to that point, his platoon expressed that they were fully expecting a call from him, saying, “hey guys, bring me some more ammunition, I've found a cave and I'm having fun out here”.

Lieutenant Michael Murphy or “**Murph**”, the Fiery Irishman from New York. Murph moved fast. He was the most selfless guy I've ever met, and he kept himself on a busy agenda to help as many people as he could. I met Murph back in April 2003 when I checked in. Our work at the team kept us

around each other a lot. Though a peer in age and rank, I looked up to him a great deal. His strong sense of character, sound moral and ethical standards, toughness in the face of adversity, and good sense of humor throughout it all were the qualities Mike displayed on a daily basis. Murph was a family-man, caring fiancé, great friend, concerned citizen, warrior, admired by those who knew him, and inspiring to those who were close to him.

Those thoughts are just a snapshot, and obviously do not do justice to adequately describe who these men were to their family and friends. I had the honor and privilege to attend Shane's funeral in Boulder City Nevada on July 9th, as well as Murph's funeral in Long Island, New York on July 13th. Both were extremely well done and I am grateful and thankful for those responsible.

These men did not die in vain. The four guys on the ground, severely outnumbered, fought and killed numerous Taliban. The guys on the helicopter were aware of the situation and acted without hesitation in an attempt to save their buddies. The question that pains every American during a time of war all the sudden takes new meaning to me "Is war worth the cost of American life?" As a pallbearer walking Murph down the aisle in his hometown Church, painfully hearing each person we passed by break down into tears, the feeling of sadness and loss was never more real to me.

As I stood at attention and watched our SEAL Admiral present the Silver Star, Purple Heart and American Flag to Murph's mother, speaking the words, "On behalf of a grateful nation we are sorry" total helplessness overwhelmed me.

To their family and friends, an unbearable feeling of loss and to a nation an equally great loss. For these men, already Great Americans, were to go on and be contributing citizens for a better society, a better future. They were the men that would champion a cause to benefit the greater good. Individuals like that cannot be replaced. They are extremely rare, and America is worse off without them. So how can this be worth it? In my humble opinion, there is no rationale way to justify their sacrifice. To me,

the loss of Dan, James, Shane, Matt, and Murph is a painful exchange for the gains that come from this war, but at the end of the day, there is bigger problem that this war plays a critical role in, there is still a bill to pay.

That bill takes into account your great education, your childhood sports team, your peaceful neighborhood, your first car, your first road-trip through the Appalachian Mountains, Great State of Texas, Rocky Mountains, & Grand Canyon, every Bud-Light at every barbeque, and most importantly, your ability to choose whatever you want to do or say.

That bill is the price of our freedom, and while I am still trying to understand all of this, four words remain. *Freedom is not free.*“

Visiting the Mother of a Fallen Soldier

In March 2005 ¹CPL B. Travis was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade while standing watch on the roof of a Baghdad police station. Shortly afterwards I was contacted by a fellow Soldiers Angel who had heard of my miniature paintings for troops, asking if I would do a portrait of CPL Bruce for his parents. I agreed to do the painting and so she sent me of picture of Travis to use in creating the portrait. It was the hardest painting I have ever painted.

When I was finished I asked my fellow Soldiers Angel for the mailing address to send the painting. She told me to send it to her, and she would forward it to his parents with other mementos. She then happened to mention that Travis' mother lived in Minnesota. I knew then and there that I wanted to deliver this painting to his mother in person. I asked if that would be possible.

Several weeks later the military gave permission for me to have Travis' mother's name and address and I called her on the phone. It was a difficult conversation to have because it's hard to know what to say. The Soldiers Angel who asked me to create the painting had been at the memorial service in Washington DC and told me that his parents took the loss of their son very hard, so I didn't know what to expect when calling his mother.

Travis' mother was shocked to hear I'd been asked to do a painting of her son. She'd had no idea; however she was very, very excited. I asked if it would be alright to deliver the painting to her in person. She readily agreed. We discussed possible times to meet, and I told her I'd call her back the

next day to finalize plans. The next day when I called she asked if it would be alright to invite her daughter as well.

She had been so excited by my news and coming visit she had called her daughter the night before to share it with her. Her daughter wanted to be there for the visit as well. We made plans to meet the following week.

Since I now knew that her daughter was going to be coming for the visit I decided to paint a second portrait to give to Travis' sister. When we arrived I was very nervous, hoping that the paintings were good likenesses and that they would be happy with them. As I'd never met Travis in person I'd been forced to use photo references, which are harder to make portraits from. You have to guess at personality and facial expressions to add life to the painting. I passed out the 2 paintings and let them decide which each would like to have. They both did indeed like the paintings and we sat down to visit for awhile.

Travis' mom was a wonderful person to meet, as was her daughter. She was a mom very proud of her son, with good reason. We were shown to his old room, his high school football trophies, his medals, the flag from his funeral, newspaper articles about him hanging on the wall and a scrapbook his mother was putting together about her son. His room was as he'd left it. Each medal he'd received was in a small elegant wooden box. The newspaper article of his funeral was cut out and hung from the wall near the door. His sports trophies proudly lined the shelves. She told us how Travis had died, and told us stories about how he lived. Stories of trying to send him pumpkin pie all the way to Iraq for Thanksgiving (it didn't make it intact but the spray whip cream did), to his funeral, which was the largest funeral ever held in their town.

She told us about a fellow female soldier that had been with Travis when he died, also guarding the same building on the roof. For reasons unknown this female soldier had asked Travis to change positions with her on the roof. Travis agreed. A few minutes later he was killed, the only person injured or killed in the attack. The grenade landed at his feet and hit him full in the

face, missing everyone else. This female soldier was now undergoing psychiatric treatment and was not doing well. She told us of calling this soldier to try and help her, and of the pride she felt that her son saved this soldier's life when he switched places.

There was no talk of 'what if' or 'if only', just pride in her son, in his life and in his accomplishments. I walked away from our meeting that night knowing this - a tragedy does not equal despair. From meeting the mother and sister of a fallen soldier, to meeting the mothers and fathers of wounded soldiers, I have learned that their families are just as strong and morally grounded as their children. These are tough, proud, amazing people that do us all proud when they stand next to us as fellow Americans.

A Cold Call to an Injured Soldier

Mid-summer I received an email from Patti Bader, the founder of Soldiers Angels, regarding a soldier who had been registered for the Soldiers Angels program by his sister. This soldier was currently stateside from the address given by his sister, so 'STATESIDE' was put into his file and he was a tad overlooked because of it. Not ignored, but he wasn't given the full weight of Soldiers Angels strength and support.

Patti, the incredibly dedicated individual that she is, goes through Soldiers Angel's records often just to make sure everything is running smoothly. There are more than 80,000 angels doing various jobs to keep the operation running smoothly, but Patti still goes through everything when she can, to make sure there are no errors. She came across this soldier's registration and had a shock. True, he was stateside, so there was no error in signing him up, but he was injured and now stateside, needing plenty of support.

She sent out emails to those in charge of making sure this soldier was adopted and getting letters from various teams, pointing out that he was not merely stateside but just back from Iraq injured. Then she sent an email to me. You see, his address indicated he lived about 2 hours from my home and I have a strong interest in helping the wounded. I read his registration form indicating his wounds and injuries that his sister had filled out, and knew that I wanted to help.

This soldier had been injured by an IED in Iraq last June. He had damage to his hands, including amputated fingers, injuries to his left leg, where shrapnel had to be removed, and with a few other wounds. I will not go into

the details of exactly how he was hurt, but I will say that his best buddy was with him and died in the explosion, according to his sister.

I decided to do a little bit of Yahoo to find out his sister's phone number and call her. I also sent her an email explaining who I was and that I would like to contact her brother. She replied to my email informing me that her brother was staying with her parents at this time, and gave me the phone number. He would be returning to Walter Reed for surgeries later in the week.

So I closeted myself in a quiet room (4 kids can be noisy) and called his parents' house. His dad answered the phone. I told him who I was and why I was calling. His son was not home at the moment but I had a nice conversation with his father for about 15 minutes when he said to my surprise, "You really are an angel." I was speechless for a moment. I didn't know why he had said it. I hadn't at this point offered to do anything, not letters, care packages or anything, as I didn't yet know what might be needed.

So I asked him why he felt that way. He said this, "Not many people can call a complete stranger and have a nice conversation with them for 15 minutes. I feel as if we are old friends, not new acquaintances, and that is a special talent." I was floored because I don't feel I have that talent. I get scared every time I have to make a visit or a call to someone I've never met. I try to think up things I can say so that I don't sound like a dork. Then I give up on all my little 'rehearsed' things to say and figure that I'll just admit I'm not a polished, important person and then they'll understand why I sound like an idiot. Better to be an admitted nerd than a person trying to pretend they are calm and cool.

I left my phone number with him so that his son could call me when he got home. I wondered if his son would call me back, after all, I at least had a reason for calling a total stranger. Why would he want to call a total stranger who left a message? He did call me back a short time later and it

was so great to talk to him. He was a VERY nice guy. He was interesting to talk to and I enjoyed getting to know him a little bit.

I wanted to share this story so that any of you who feel shy or nervous like me when meeting new people or calling someone to help them can know that you don't need to be 'cool' or polished to help. And you can also see how rewarding it is when you go ahead and set your feelings of inadequacy aside to get things done.

Letter From An Air National Guard Soldier Working Hurricane Katrina Rescue & Relief

Another soldier's angel received this letter from an Air National Guardsman helping in the hurricane rescues and assistance. It is an excellent letter!

“Hi everyone,

I just returned from New Orleans on a hurricane relief mission in a C-130.

Let me just start by saying I was awed. Not in what I saw in destruction and devastation because I had/have already seen enough of that on TV. What really hit me hard was the absolute determination and willingness of all those involved in the relief effort. I just want to quickly tell you what I was a part of and what I witnessed as it just really filled me with pride and reminded me again why we are such an amazing and successful country.

It started when I showed up for the flight in Nashville. Instead of the flight planning I would normally do (the other pilot did it), I was tasked to call all 60 or so of the pilots from my squadron and find out their availability to fly hurricane relief missions. Now, don't forget these are all Air National Guard men and women and most all have full time jobs outside of

flying for the Guard. Almost without exception, every pilot offered whatever assistance was needed.

No surprise.

I then jumped in the airplane and flew directly to New Orleans Int'l, which was and is only open to relief efforts. We had on board with us an aero medical evacuation team. They are a group of highly trained nurses and med techs that are qualified in evacuating wounded and sick soldiers from the battlefield and keeping them alive enroute to a medical facility.

One of the many missions of the C-130 is basically a flying hospital. We can literally set up an intensive care unit in the back if needed. So with our team of aero meds and flight crew on board we set course for New Orleans with the rough idea that we would transport injured and sick people to Elington Field, TX (Houston, TX). From there we would fly to Alexandria, LA, Charlotte, and then back to Nashville. Our mission ended up evacuating one of the VA hospitals' patients as well as several civilians.

The weather was not great once we neared New Orleans. We made it in and were met by an airport SUV that led us to what is normally an airline passenger gate. The difference was the gates housed medical teams (mainly military that had just arrived) and scores of sick refugees (for lack of better term). We squeezed ourselves into a parking spot perpendicular to a C-141 and next to two C-17's. There were other Air Force planes on the ground as well. By the time we finally left, five other C-130's and another C-17 had joined us.

What happened next just really made my heart swell with pride. From every direction and in about 15 to 45 second intervals, helicopter after helicopter continued to land right next to us. It

was a mix of Army Blackhawks, Coast Guard helicopters as well as Marine and Army. They were joined by what must have been 15 “Flight for Life” helicopters from hospitals all around the Southeast. I saw Miami, Arkansas, and many other names painted on the sides.

These were not normal operations. These pilots were practically landing and taxing on top of each other. They came in fully loaded with sick personnel. Many right from the rooftops. One New Orleans Airport fireman took on the duty of aircraft marshaller and marshaled in choppers left and right. The helos would unload and then take right back off. It was not uncommon for a helicopter to be on the ground less than two to three minutes and then blast back off. We were basically parked in the triage area. These helicopters were immediately met by ground personnel who helped the people off the helos and if they couldn't walk, they put them on a stretcher or just flat carried them. What makes it so extraordinary is when I realize that these ground personnel were just the airport workers, airline employees, cart drivers, fireman, and then the staff of all the emergency teams. It was amazing. They were not necessarily trained for the jobs they were/are undertaking. They just stepped up to the plate and did it. The tower and ground controllers were coordinating airplanes and helicopters like they had never imagined in their most terrible nightmares and were doing a very good job of it.

There were literally so many helicopters coming in and out of the triage area that I do not understand how the tower guy could see through them all to control the planes once they landed. The little baggage trailers and tugs that you normally see zipping around the airport were being used to move survivors out to the airplanes. They can best be described as mini ambulances. The terminals at the airport were triage and staging areas. The airport vehicles that are usually operated by airport managers and security were leading airplanes and helicopters to newly created

parking spaces. Then the huge thunderstorm hit to make matters even worse. Thunder, lightening, and driving rain pounded the airport and surrounding area for over 1.5 hours.

The helicopter pilots and crews never stopped. Everyone was so determined and working with such purpose. I literally watched this one helicopter bring people in a then leave again for another load four times in the 1.5 hour long torrential rain storm. This pace was not uncommon. Another thing that exemplified the unselfishness of the rescuers was this one old and worn out red and white helicopter. It looked like something that does heavy lifting for construction up on mountains.

Basically, it did not look like one that was designed to carry people and conduct search and rescue. From all I can tell, it was just a privately owned helicopter that the two pilots decided they were going to make work for this. I still remember the pilot in the left seat. He just had on jeans, tennis shoes and some kind of old shirt. He was a little overweight, but you could just see the determination and purpose on his face as he brought that big helo in run after run after run. Don't misinterpret what I am describing. The military guys were doing this too, but I did not expect this from some private company or individual.

It just was incredible. Absolutely incredible. There is no way the helos should have been flying in this weather. If this was just some regular mission or training flight, you can bet your kids Super Play Station that they would not have been flying. It would have been easier and probably safer to floss a shark's teeth than to have gotten these guys to stop flying. The same thing went for everyone working to organize and evacuate the sick, hurt, and elderly inside the airport. The process was a little slower than ideal, but it is a massive undertaking not ever encountered by the agencies initially put in charge. Long story short, the Air Force medical teams got in there and got the ball rolling. As we left, a medical evacuation command post was

coming on line, which will significantly speed up the process of bringing people into the airport and then putting them on planes to fly out.

Another one of our Nashville C-130's was on the ground with us. They received their patients first. Once they could not physically fit anymore on their plane, they left and we took the next group. Our aero med team and flight crew just started helping the people who could barely walk onto the plane and assisted in the loading of stretchers.

Back to selflessness, we were also joined by two doctors who had been assisting in all the relief efforts at Tulane Hospital. They decided to go on the flight with us. One was an MD in his 7th year of surgery residency and the other was an MD who worked full time at Tulane hospital. They had been working nonstop since the hurricane. Another resident MD told me how after the hurricane hit he had to go home and get some sleep. He awoke to rising water at his place, so he got in his kayak and paddled down the street, past looting, which he said was very unnerving, and into Tulane hospital where he has been working ever since. The great American spirit is indeed alive and well.

We ended up taking 20 patients on litters (military for stretcher) and 31 people (not healthy at all) that could sit up for a total of 51 to Elington Field, TX. We arrived there and were met by what can only be described as an eye watering reception. We called the field 20 minutes out and let them know we would be landing shortly and passed on our patient information.

Well, let me tell you something. As we taxied in I looked towards our parking spot and I must have counted 30 ambulances and a line of hospital workers/volunteers with wheelchairs at the ready lined up 50 deep. There was another equally long line of paramedics with gurneys. These people had

it together. We shut down engines and then watched as Elington's smooth operation kicked into gear. The sickest of the sick were rushed to hospitals. Everyone else was given food, cold drinks, seen by a social worker, doctor, and other specialists. Then, one of the head NASA people there gave me his car to go to Jack in the Box to get food for the crew. Incredible!

By this time we were running out of our 16 hour crew day and we still had two more stops. Unfortunately, we couldn't get to it all as we had to head right back to Nashville, but another crew picked up the mission. I will be doing missions similar to this one tomorrow (Fri) and Saturday. Our Guard Base (TN Air National Guard) is flying six of our eight or nine airplanes out tomorrow in direct support of rescue operations. We plan on doing this for the foreseeable future.

Overall, I cannot do justice to all the good I saw today just by writing. I wanted to try though. Basically, the operation set up down there at the New Orleans Airport is one eerily similar to that of Baghdad Int'l airport when I was there for over eight months. Just a hive of activity with people pushing their bodies and aircraft to the max. No one complains, they just get the job done and worry about the rest later.

Every citizen of this country should be so proud of what their fellow citizens are doing for each other. The pressure they are working under knowing these sick and stranded people do not have time on their side is unexplainable. Our country is one of great strength and determination. It is evident in all the rescue and relief efforts that are taking place down there. If the hard work and pure grit of all the rescue and medical personnel I witnessed today are of any indication of the eventual outcome of this indescribable tragedy, then we are on the absolute fast track to victory.

I just want to add one more thing. I did not write this all out to highlight myself. In fact it is quite the contrary. I want all of you to know the efforts that are being made from the individual level to the highest level of government. Nothing is being held back. I just happen to fly an airplane from one field to another and am very happy to do it.

Please say some extra prayers for all of those suffering due to hurricane Katrina and for all of those working to save lives and rebuild a city. Talk to ya'll soon and have a great day."

Letters that make it all worthwhile

Last spring I wrote a letter to a soldier that was very lonely and sad. Here is the message she sent to Soldiers Angels when she signed up:

“My Unit arrived in Iraq in January of this year and I must say it has been a most trying time for me (and everyone involved).I have been quite lonely here. My friends back home I now realize are not as supportive as they pretended to be and I miss having people send letters. I have not heard from them. My mother was extremely unhappy with me for joining the military at such a tense moment and is quite bitter about my being here...she makes me feel guilty about my duties as a soldier. My father died the last day of January (a week after we got here) and I miss him terribly. I have wonderful friends here in the unit and without them I don't know what kind of emotional state I would be in right now. I really want to feel like I am needed here and that people back home actually care. I feel so incredibly isolated from the rest of the world. Can you please help me? I would love to receive letters from people telling me about what is going on in their lives and in the world (other than Iraq stuff).I really miss home.”

I decided she needed some extra TLC so I sent her a miniature painting (of course), and my four year old son made her a necklace. He did a very nice job using my jewelry making supplies, so it was actually a very nice wearable necklace. He told me he wanted to make her something because he'd heard that it's hot and dusty in the desert, and he thought it must be difficult to feel clean and pretty as a girl in those conditions. He wanted to make her a necklace to help her feel pretty. It was really very cute watching him select beads and pinch his tongue between his teeth trying to thread them oh so carefully.

I sent her a letter along with the gifts, letting her know they were made for her and by whom, along with my usual friendly chatter. I didn't hear back from her, which isn't too uncommon as she wasn't one of my adopted soldiers, just an additional soldier I chose to write. Five months later I received a nice surprise, a letter from her dated last May.

It was wonderful to read through her letter. For all of you who wonder when you will hear back from a soldier you've written to, and feel bad if you don't hear back...take note of this story. Here are a few excerpts from her return letter:

"I want to thank you so much for your support. It is refreshing to know that there are selfless people out there that still care...Especially with 4 boys! How do you find the time?! It seems so very difficult. Sometimes I find it difficult just to drag myself out of bed - especially lately. I must say that the package I received from you and Tommy positively made my whole week! I have displayed your picture above my cot along with Tommy's beautiful necklace! He is very talented and I will keep that necklace as long as I am alive as a reminder of him! ...

I certainly hope to hear from you and Tommy again! Thank-you so much for the gifts - you don't know how much it meant to receive them - let alone you two took the time to make them yourselves! Please give Tommy a huge hug and a big smooch for me."

Letters like these serve not only as a reminder of how simple it is to provide real and needed moral support to our troops, but also how wonderful it is to make a new friend. And her letter made MY whole week!

Letter from another Angel's soldier

“I have always been proud to serve my country. For everything my country has done for my family and me, I will continue to serve. As a reservist, I think I have the best of both worlds: I live and work in a community I can call home. I also take pride in my profession as a “citizen soldier”.

I recently completed my 20th year in uniform – which is a milestone in any occupation. In my 20th year I have found myself in Iraq as commander of a Movement Control Team. During this deployment, my unit has performed exceptionally and I take great pride in serving with them.

In about 5 more months (hopefully less!) my team and I are expecting to be back to wherever it is we call home. As was the transition to active duty, the transition back to our communities will be a strange and surreal trip.

As an Army Reservist I quietly carried out my duty. Prior to 9/11, my co-workers showed very little interest in what I did during my one weekend a month drill. Occasionally I would bring my uniform to work on Fridays because I would go directly from work to weekend drill, but other than those few instances, my two chosen professions never interacted.

Coming back to my civilian occupation, I can say I have been changed. Yes, Iraq has changed me as uniquely as war changes all who take part in it. However, I have been humbled by the overwhelming support from strangers. From the many gifts and letters I have received from people I have never met; to all of those patriotic Americans I met coming off the plane on R&R.

The R&R program allows troops to go home for a 15 day break. It is a wonderful program: bringing soldiers and families together for a brief break away from the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan.

As we landed at Dallas-Fort Worth Air Port, our plane taxied through two fire trucks spraying water on our plane as a salute to the troops on the plane. I thought that was a really an honor, but it didn't end there. When we got off the plane into the terminal, we walked through a gauntlet of men, women and children shaking our hands, patting us on the backs, offering their cell phones to make calls home. Strangers were throwing hugs and kisses and thanking me for serving. Little boys and girls gave me paper lei's, cookies and bottled water. For the smokers, there were two older men outside handing out cigarettes. As I went to my connecting flight home I was ushered to the first class line to check in for my plane. I was then told I could go to the Admirals Club for a shower and food. I jumped at the chance to clean-up after a long 30 hours trip. After I was clean I wanted to walk around and soak in civilization the Airport had to offer.

It was good to be on American soil.

As I walked around the airport, even more strangers approached me and thanked me for serving. While I waited for my flight, I hung out with 7 junior soldiers. They too were pretty overwhelmed with the number of patrons who greeted us with warmth. There had to be at least 200 people who paused and thanked us. I must have shaken 50 hands! When I finally got to Seattle, I was presented with another wonderful surprise: my wife. She was able to meet me at the gate. I spent two great weeks at home with my wife and kids hoping it could last forever.

Of course, it couldn't last forever and soon I was getting ready for the flight back to Dallas. I put on my uniform and after a sad trip to the airport I was saying goodbye to my family once again. After leaving Seattle and arriving in Dallas, there was yet again an avalanche of people thanking myself and other service members around me. It was a little disconcerting having all

this attention and I was sad for leaving my family again, so I went to the USO where I could wait for my flight and reflect on my time spent home.

I got on the plane expecting an uneventful ride back to Kuwait; however, on our trip back, we made a fuel stop in Europe. We were able to offload the plane to stretch our legs. As the 350 soldiers walked down the hallway, we found ourselves walking past a US Airway flight heading to the United States. We were welcomed by a thunderous applause given by the 200 hundred people waiting for their plane and were thanked and offered their hands to shake as we walked by. We were all amazed that even in another country we felt the warmth from our country.

In hindsight, I regret going to the USO and feel that I should have taken the time to socialize more. Since my leave, I've realized after talking with many other soldiers, that they enjoyed similar stories of the many patriotic Americans. This has astounded all of us and we wonder why? I know every individual had their own motivations, but I had a theory about all the warmth and thanks. I have always had a connection to the military as a citizen soldier, but it seemed amazing that many of the people expressing gratitude do not have a direct connection to the military and even though they may not have a friend or loved one who is serving, there is still a connection. This connection is the American flag I wear on my right arm and the US on my chest. This made us friends: it connects all of us who love our country. I am sure that I speak for many of my fellow soldiers when I say I am proud to serve the people of the United States and will continue to serve as long as I possibly can. Thank you, America!"

Volunteering at the Armed Forces Service Center

The last week of December 2005 I had the opportunity to volunteer for a double shift at the Armed Forces Service Center in the Minneapolis/St Paul airport. Finding myself minus 3 of my 4 kids I sent off an email to Debra, the AFSC director, to see if there was anything that needed doing or any way I could help. Debra responded immediately saying that she very much needed a volunteer for the graveyard shift, 8pm - 4am. I was happy to say I'd do it.

The AFSC had a computer onsite, so I took the opportunity to write about the experience as it happened. My goal was to encourage others to seek out similar opportunities in their area by giving them an inside look into what they could expect.

9:20pm: Well, I arrived on time, despite parking in the wrong place and walking the entire parking garage. When I arrived Debra was certainly prepared for me. She works days, so she's gone now, but she had my badge printed, me in the schedule book (typed in, not handwritten), and a time card already prepared. Debra is a woman who is on the ball. Debra Cain runs the AFSC and she certainly deserves a standing ovation for her hard work.

I was briefed on how everything works around here, the kitchens, food we can make and serve, bedrooms, paperwork, and so on. Very organized and I'm sure I'll forget it all in 10 minutes. We had one soldier here with his family when I arrived. His wife and 4 kids were with him. I have to hand it to him, both parents planned to go back to the bunks and take a nap, and as

soon as his wife went to bed the husband jumped right up to watch the kids. What a great guy. He looked so tired, but he wanted his wife to nap.

They're gone now, and we had one other guy in, from the Air Force. He'll be here until the morning, so he grabbed a Mall of America brochure and ran out the door after I gave him directions to the restaurants, bars and comedy clubs. I hope he has fun. I'll still be here when he gets back.

11:19pm: The Air Force guy came back from the MOA, happy and carrying decent food. Poor guy didn't have any smokes so I was happy to bum him a cigarette and we headed outside. He's on his way to Korea, getting ready for a long flight.

As we returned to the AFSC there were a few new arrivals, and one of them was kind enough to say she'd leave a few words here. Her name is Crystal, and she's stuck here overnight due to a flight cancellation, on her way home for the holidays.

“Good evening to all who are reading this late December night. I was asked to put in a few of my thoughts and well here goes. I have been in the Marine Corps for the past year and a half. So far I love it. Yes there are times when it definitely takes you away from your comfort zone but as a whole I'm very proud to call myself a Marine. I was checking in my luggage through the security today and the man working the security at the airport asked if I was in the service. I said yes and he said 'I just want you to know young lady that we are proud of you. You didn't have to do what you are doing and you volunteered and I just want you to know that there are still Americans that support you in these hard times.' I said thank you of course and thought about what he had said. I myself begin to wonder if what I am doing makes a difference. If my own country appreciates all we go through to keep our beloved home safe. Later in the afternoon after discovering my flight had been canceled due to bad weather I decided to take a nap on the terminal ground by my departing gate. I curled up next to the wall with my jacket over me and my luggage wrapped around my arm. I heard someone walk by and say 'Oh my gosh what is she doing on the ground. Eeww!' But

in my mind I can only think to myself 'Are you kidding this is luxury compared to some of the places I've slept before!'

As a Marine I can say that we really do need our fellow Americans' support. It's wasn't our call for the war in Iraq. We simply follow our orders. Protesting the war won't help the morale of our troops either, but then again [there is] freedom of speech. Going into Iraq myself for the first time in Feb. I don't know why we are there, I don't really care so much. I am going because it's my duty. Period, that's it. I am not speaking for every Marine that's just my opinion. Going against the troops isn't going to bring us home any safer or sooner. Thank you for your time and God bless America and all of you!!"

12:35pm: Well, now it is getting quiet. The service members that are already here have gone to bed. It has begun to snow; the beginning of what weathermen have promised will be 6" of snow or more, so not too many flights are coming in. It will probably remain pretty quiet.

It was very nice of Crystal to be willing to write her thoughts here. I had a nice chat with her and was proud to meet her. She told me about boot camp, and what it is like to be a Marine, a woman Marine. I found it especially interesting as she said she doesn't follow the news or politics much, as she doesn't have much interest, but that this she does feel strongly - she wants her job in Iraq to mean something. That's something she feels can't be done if they are brought home without finishing the job. So many think this is a conservative viewpoint - a Republican talking point. How wrong they are. This is the viewpoint of a 19 year old Marine who isn't interested in politics or news, just doing her job. She said to me, if she were to die in Iraq, it would be hurtful to pull out without finishing our job there...giving her death no meaning.

2:40am: Flights are being delayed, and we've had 2 more women arrive. The second was a woman in the Air Force, 31 years old, and very interesting to chat with. Some of the visitors that come in just want to drop in bed, have a bite to eat and leave or whatever, but some of them are sick

of long flights and little company, and are excited to meet someone new and have a nice talk. Cristy is one of those who are glad for a moment to relax and visit.

This is one of the best parts of being here - meeting these people and having the opportunity to hear their thoughts. The other is being able to serve them for a change. Most of them are shocked to hear that everything here is free...food, drinks, everything, as much as they want. They are ecstatic to find a computer with an internet hook-up, and phones to use. They are especially happy to see the nice comfortable beds.

A few of them weren't even aware the AFSC was up here on the third floor of the airport. They were downstairs sleeping on the floors and in chairs, hungry and lonely. An occasional quick sweep of the airport by airport personnel and us to let them know there's a nice warm bed, kitchen and living room upstairs free of charge at their disposal gets very happy reactions. I'm so glad we are here to help them.

It's so funny. They are so thankful, so polite, and so grateful. You just want to tell them, "No, it is we who are thankful." Similar to meeting a celebrity and having them fall all over you instead of the reverse. Well, the most we can do is put our actions where our mouths are and serve them to the best of our ability, make sure they are comfortable and happy before they need to catch the next flight.

3:50am: Well, it's time to get ready to head home. Our replacements are here. The night remained quiet the last hour, very relaxing. Time to go home.

Bringing Treats to Local Military Centers

In the beginning of January 2006 I and my two younger sons went to our local National Guard Armory. I was thinking that nice surprises always make a day better for everyone, so I'd make a nice surprise for our local soldiers. We went to the store and bought several dozen cookies in all different kinds. We then picked out a cake and I had the bakery lady write on it, "Thank-You! Happy New Year". Then we headed down to the local armory.

When we arrived the front doors were locked and I wondered what to do. There weren't any other doors that I could see, but there were cars in the lot. I headed to the local gas station to use the phone. A nice guy answered the phone and told me there were indeed soldiers at the armory and it was open. So we headed back to the Armory to find the doors still locked and no other doors in immediate sight.

At this point I was determined to get into this building and bring these guys the treats. I drove around back (feeling like a trespasser) and found a big garage door. There was one regular door next to it so again I parked the car and went to find it locked. Huh. With no other sidewalks leading around this building I was stymied. Then I noticed an ashtray and a few bricks in what could be a path near the corner. I turned the corner and found another door. This one opened! I looked inside to see I was in a garage area, with a gym beyond and a few guys playing basketball. Now I definitely felt like a trespasser! I'm sneaking in from the garage's side door!

I grabbed the kids out of the car, led them to the door and in we went. We walked into the gym and I explained why I was there. Delighted smiles

broke out all over. Food! Cookies! Cake! These nice gentlemen helped me carry the food in from my car, and of course my children, who had been excited to “go see some soldiers”, had turned into mutes. These soldiers had kids however, and they knew just the right words to make any little boy’s heart sing with joy. They said, “Boys? Would you like to see our army trucks? Get inside them? See what it’s like?” My kids are no dummies, they jumped right in.

I spent some time chatting with a few of the soldiers. One of them had recently returned after a year in Iraq. He is older, and had been in Desert Storm as well. He told me, “The appreciation and support for our troops during this war has been incredible. When we returned from Desert Storm we thought the support then was amazing. That was nothing compared to this war.” It made me so glad to know that they do know they are appreciated and supported.

All the guys were very nice, and very interesting to talk to. I would recommend everyone reading this do the same thing (hopefully you’ll have an easier time finding the door!). Get some cookies and treats, and head to your local Armory, military base or recruiters office to give them a nice surprise of support. On a final note - one of the soldiers gave my son a football with the flag on it and Army National Guard printed on the sides. My son thought he’d died and gone to heaven. He’s thrilled to have that ball. And the soldiers told us, if we come again, and I bring all my boys - they’d open the gates and let the boys see all the military trucks and gear. My sons have already started asking if it’s time to leave again to go back.

The “Boot Camp Boys”

The following story was shared by another Angel from Soldiers Angels:

I know there are times when an Angel wonders about the person receiving his/her letters and if those letters are making a difference; yesterday I found a reason to fight on. After 2 months with nothing more than the occasional quickly written note I got to hear Aaron’s voice again. When ²Aaron left for boot camp in January 2005 we knew that there were going to be big changes all around.

I never doubted for a minute that Aaron was made for this. He is one of those natural born leader types, the ones that don’t rule by intimidation but get people on their side by friendship and kindness. The first letter I received after he arrived there was horrible. He sounded slightly broken and it hurt him to know that his family still had not accepted his decision to join the military. You see, Aaron had done all the right things in his parents’ eyes after high school. He graduated high school with honors and was accepted into a good college not only for his intelligence but also because of his passion for his sport. I imagine it was this that caused his parents to really wonder why he would now join the Army instead of going and making “the big money”.

It really amazes me how sometimes we can be parents, and great ones at that, yet still not really know our children. Money has little importance to Aaron even though he grew up with it around him. It’s really one of the most wonderful qualities I first saw in Aaron. With the arrival of that first letter it became apparent that my pillar of strength doubted himself for the first time. The emotion this caused me to feel was heartbreak. Knowing he sat there during mail calls never receiving any support except my letters broke my heart.

He once wrote saying he saw other guys receive 8-10 letters a time yet he had written to his mom and hadn't heard anything back yet. He wrote about his plans for when he was done with boot camp. Most of all he wrote about the other guys. Stories about some of them doing great, stories about the ones that were having a hard time keeping up and most of all stories about the guys who had bad attitudes whom he felt joined for every wrong reason possible and didn't like being told what to do.

I didn't know what to do to raise his spirits so I did what any proud supporter would do, I turned to the Angels. When I put out a request to anyone who would be willing to write him and cheer him up the response was overwhelming and I thank you. The letters to Aaron came flooding in.

Now we have to remember this is boot camp we're dealing with so nothing is free for them in there. The DI's make them do push ups and sit ups when they receive mail a certain number for each piece of mail. I didn't know this at the time but I learned this with my last Sunday. I know some of you are probably gasping "Oh No!" but trust me. This actually has an amazing twist to it. When Aaron first got a few letters and cards from Soldiers Angels cards it was just a handful so it was not a big deal to do the physical exercise. When he read them and saw that they were general and inspirational he put them in a box and shared them with all the guys, especially the ones that didn't get any mail. These were the same guys who weren't taking so well to the Army way of life.

Not long after the mail call when he received the first few Angels' letters, a couple of guys got into a big fight. Both ended up needing medical attention. Because of this all of them were punished and didn't get mail for a week. On the day they were finally permitted mail call Aaron was shocked to find there was (as he described it) "half a bunk full" from you Angels. Now when you do the math for all this mail it equals more than a few push ups..

All he did was smile at the DI's and hit the deck! Nothing was going to

keep him from his mail. He explained this next bit to me with a pride in his voice I had never heard before. Even remembering it causes me to tear up. Aaron went on to tell me as he was down there doing his push ups first one guy came over and asked the DI if he could do some of Aaron's push ups. The DI said sure so on the floor next to Aaron went this soldier. A minute later came another and another. He went on to tell me he found himself doing push ups next to almost all the guys, each helping to earn the right to read Angel Mail. What amazed him most was the first soldiers to get down there with him were all the "dirt bags" as they were deemed by other, more motivated guys. Together he said they all worked off the letters and sat down to read and passed them around. Not only were these guys permitted to have mail (for some it was the first time they ever received mail) but because of this show of brotherhood they earned phone time last Sunday.

I wanted to tell this story because I read the Angel message boards online and see even Angels can sometimes question what happens on the other side of the letter sent. I felt it important for those of you that may need a pick me up or may feel discouraged know that no matter how few or how many the words are you put on the paper these heroes will pull from it everything they need to carry on, to strive to be the best and to do their jobs proudly. This time not only did you make a lonely soldier smile but you brought a whole group together as brothers. I know that this will stick with some of you for awhile and others it will stick with forever but know that this experience will stay with these men for a lifetime. I'm sure that when each of them called their loved ones this story was told so not only did you help them but you unknowingly helped others. As they finish up there and each go on to their personal journey in the Army they will all pass on this encounter with the Angels and it will bring them and many others comfort in during the hard times, the knowledge that there is a group of Angels behind them worth fighting for.

So please don't be discouraged when you don't hear anything from someone you write to. Don't ever think your words are falling on deaf ears because as your soldiers come and go, as you make friends and find heroes, one day you may cross paths with one of the boot camp boys and can

proudly tell him you wrote one of those letters and you've always been there beside him.

Never stop adopting and supporting our troops.

Coming Home

I received this email from a soldier I wrote to shortly before he left Iraq for home:

“Well it’s coming down to the end of our tour, although I can’t give you dates, lets just say we are in the double digits and should be home before the holidays. A lot has happened since my last email. First I was on leave during the month of August. It was surreal to be home and see grass, trees, and anything green. It’s the little things that you miss, like the sound of civilian airplanes flying overhead, being able to go to the store whenever you want. The humidity was amazing.

Coming home at DFW Airport, two fire trucks shot water on our plane as we taxied to the gate as a sign of welcome home and “let’s wash off the desert from you.” There weren’t many of us on the flight and we were rushed through customs. Just before leaving the terminal there were about eighty or so volunteers that applauded us and greeted us, gave us a handshake, bags of goodies etc. It was all overwhelming and I wanted to cry. Some guys actually did cry.

Upon getting back, I was given the unfortunate news that my platoon was hit by a roadside bomb. This happened the day after I went on leave. One soldier Spc. S.C.’s Kevlar helmet was hit by a piece of shrapnel and he took a blow to the head, I saw him yesterday and he is doing fine, the back of his head has cuts and scraps as does his arm, and he has times when he gets dizzy, but he will be okay. The humvee that was hit was totaled, the medic aboard said he saw a bright flash. “I thought it was the suns reflection in my face.” He said. Then there was a loud boom, then smoke. All the doors buckled in, causing the front passenger to get a shattered bone in his right elbow. All but one tire went flat, and there was smell of fuel and radiator

fluid. Spc. S.C. was taken out by helicopter, and everyone else was able to walk away from the incident.

While at home some people asked me is it worth it? I have to say yes, we did make a difference, we destroyed tons of old munitions left over from the Iran/Iraq war, handed out truckloads of toys, candy, clothes, supplies etc. to the children, and if I can make at least one child grow up not hating Americans, then it was definitely worth it. We also helped fortify Iraqi towns and helped train their army. I guess 10 or 20 years down the road we will really see the outcome of our efforts. I want to finish as I started and say “Americans are generous and kind....and we are the greatest people on the face of this planet and where ever we go we bring help and kindness with us. Thanks to all of you for helping us over here. God Bless America and all of you and our fighting men and women.”

Little Girl and a Landmine

A GySgt's Eye-View of Iraq

December 23

As you know, toys for the Iraqi children over here have come over by the box. On each patrol we take through the city, we take as many of these toys as we can fit in our pockets and hand them out as we can. The kids take the toys and run to show them off as if they are worth a million bucks. We are as friendly as we can be to everyone we see, but especially so with the kids. Most of them don't have any idea what is going on and are completely innocent in all of this.

On one such patrol, our lead security vehicle stopped in the middle of the street. This is not normal and is very unsafe, so the following vehicles began to inquire over the radio. The lead vehicle reported that a little girl was sitting in the road and she just wouldn't budge. The command vehicle told the lead to simply go around her and to be kind as they did. The street was wide enough to allow this maneuver and everyone waved to her as they drove around.

I soon saw her sitting there, and in her arms was a little toy bear that we had given her a few patrols back. Feeling an immediate connection to the girl, I radioed that we were going to stop. The rest of the convoy paused, and I got out to make sure she was okay. The little girl looked scared and concerned, but there was warmth in her eyes toward me. As I knelt down to talk to her, she moved over and pointed.

There was a land mine in the road.

Immediately, a cordon was set as the Marine convoy assumed a defensive posture around the site. The mine was destroyed in place.

It was the heart of an American that sent that toy. It was the heart of an American that gave that toy to the little girl. It was the heart of an American that protected our convoy from that mine. Sure, she was a little Iraqi girl, and she had no knowledge of purple mountain's majesty or fruited plains. It was the heart of acceptance, of tolerance, of peace and grace - even through the inconveniences of conflict - that saved our convoy from hitting that mine. Those attributes are what keep Americans' hearts beating. She may have no affiliation at all with the United States, but she knows what it is to be brave and, if we can continue to support her and her new government, she will know what it is to be free. Isn't that what Americans are, the free and the brave?

If you sent over a toy, you took part in this. You are a reason that Iraq has to believe in a better future. Thank you so much for supporting us, and for supporting our cause over here.

Semper Fi,

Mark X. XXXXX

GySgt, USMC

Richard the Medic

While stationed in Iraq Richard was a soldier in the Soldiers Angels program, adopted by an Angel named Sara. Richard's letters to Sara were so funny, interesting and entertaining that with his permission she began sharing them with the other Soldiers Angels. Richard was affectionately dubbed Richard the "Candy Guy" and "Richard the Medic" to all who read his letters. Richard, along with many other soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan, would often request bulk packages of candy in his care packages. Like many other soldiers had already learned, the local children were poor and lacking in treats or toys as well as many essentials. Requesting toys, clothing, shoes, school supplies and candy from family and friends back home became a common request from soldiers wanting to help these children.

With Richard's colorful and entertaining letters word soon spread that Richard always had a running request for candy, and as the candy began shipping in by the boxful to Iraq Richard became known as the "Candy Guy". The following letters are Richard's, sent to his angel Sara, and shared here with his permission. While the letters are edited slightly for content and names other than Richard's have been changed to protect privacy, I've left them as is for the most part.

"We went out this morning to the IP station in our city. I had a bunch of candy, from the Soldiers' Angels, that needed giving out. So I gave our gunner ³Jake the box to throw out of the gunner hatch as we rode by the houses down the road, on the corner by the school. Every morning they are waiting for us there.

They all have very colorful clothes on - especially the little girls. I have just learned that the further you are out in the country the more colorful is the

clothes, and the colors often signify what tribe they belong to. This was from my Iranian friend back in the US. I have noticed this, and the further we get in the country, the brighter their clothes become, and even some of the grown women wear them.

But these kids are really cute, and they stand on the side of the road, every morning, just waiting for us: their entire lives revolve around this. And this is because we always throw them stuff. Our driver, Luke told Jake, “only give it to the little girls, they don’t never get anything!” And this is what I always do when I am out: the girls are oppressed in this society, and only give it to them.

I am being run off the computer and will have to finish this in a minute. Richard... ”

“Last night we went down this narrow alley and stopped when some kids threw rocks and nearly hit the gunner on my vehicle, who stands up through the roof of the hum-v, next to a 50 cal. machine gun. So we stopped to find out why they were throwing rocks. I got out and was standing guard by the truck.

These kids came up to me and all started carrying on. They all shook hands with me and were all laughing. One kept saying, over and over, “I love you, and my father and mother love you: we all love you.” Another gave us the thumbs up and said, “Yeeaaaahh Bush! Down with Saddam!” And they just kept on and kept on with saying things like this.

And, believe it or not, but this is very typical of the people here. They are totally prospering and are very happy with what we have done for them. As we road down the dark alley, that was lined with hundreds of Iraqis, they all started cheering us. It was pretty incredible.....

We went out today and went down another very narrow road and stopped and I pulled guard again. Not much happened, except me and Sgt. Charlie - that they call "Old Fart," and who is a Vietnam vet - got to talking about French quarters and Bourbon Street in New Orleans. We got on this subject because the closest thing that the U.S. has that looks anything like it is here is French Quarters in New Orleans. So I am telling ya'll this to give you an idea of what this city is like. It is many open markets and is barely room to drive down many of the roads and back alleys. People are everywhere, and donkeys and donkey carts with their riders too.

Last night, right next to us, and down a very dark alley, I heard the most awful racket. It wound up being this donkey that was standing there, all by himself, and he was braying with the most awful racket I have ever heard before. You could hear him everywhere, he was so loud.

The sides of the narrow roads are loaded with open markets and people. I was standing by a bread bakery today, when we got out. They make flat bread and throw it against a stone wall to flatten it before they put it in the oven to bake. It taste really good, you ask me. So this is what it is like here: like French Quarters in New Orleans. The people are well fed, too, and seem very content with their lives, if not happy. It is a very, very close-knit society, and is something that we have seemed to have lost in the U.S., in many respects.

Well, ya'll, I better cut it short here, and I need to go. Was just letting ya'll know what all goes on here.

Oh yeah: all that candy many of you send me: I have given loads of it out at med-caps, in our aid station when they come in, and sometimes just individually, when I go on missions."

"Hey Sara, just got your latest package, and I thank you for it.

All is well here, and everyone that wanted an Angel is getting one. Thanks a million! Your organization is really, really appreciated by everyone here. It is helping us soldiers personally, and it is helping our entire mission.

Us medics have routine medcaps, where we see hundreds of Iraqis in one day. We give them meds and blankets and things. And we give out ya'lls candy. This gives them a favorable impression of us, and makes them less likely to support terrorism against us.

You are a part of this and are saving American lives - thanks.

Write you later, Richard.... ”

Hey Sara, there is one more soldier here that you could add to the Soldiers' Angels list, if you would.

He is not a medic but is in one of the line companies that regularly goes out on missions. A real good fellow, through and through. He is another one of the gunners that loves to give candy out to the kids. This would make his day to have a constant supply of candy and stuff sent to him to give out to the kids.

We were out on patrol today and he was there above me, in the gunner hatch, giving out his own candy, and some of the candy I gave him to give out. After he was finished he looked down at me and said: “that sure was fun!”

When we got back in, today, he repeated this same statement, about how much fun he had giving out the candy. This would make it for him, the rest of the time he is here, if he has a supply of candy to throw out to the kids.

The people here, by the way, are very friendly toward us, and ya'll are

helping us strive to keep it this way. It is August now, and only a year ago there was a major war with the people here.

Well, thanks a lot again.”

Hey all, had a good time of it today.

We were out riding all over the province. We stayed lost most of the day - it was great! We got lost first, and stayed lost a great long while at that, out by the Euphrates River.

You cannot believe the difference between the desert away from the river and the tropical zone next to the river. The entire area is irrigated, with big ditches and canals running all over the place. There are little dams all over the fields and it looks almost like a bunch of Vietnam rice patties.

The Euphrates River branches out, everywhere, and it is little rivers and lakes and canals and what even looks like Louisiana bayous as far as the eye can see. We went through this one village that was straddled right on one of these canals and it looked just like the river walk in San Antonio, Texas. What with all these little home-made wood bridges crossing the water.

I love it the most there away from town and down by the river or way out in the country by all the villages. The people are the most colorful down there.

As we were riding I noticed these patty-shaped things stacked in piles, every here and there: on closer inspection I found that they were dried manure, and used for fuel to make fires. When by the canal in that village I saw this fellow leading - no dragging - this goat by the ear, walking him down the road. That goat has - well, had - no idea!

I saw this poor goat tied to a tree one time with all his brothers and sisters hung in a tree right next to him with all their clothes off, and a butcher knife sticking in the tree!

I picked some dates today that grow all in the palm trees. They are yellow-gold in color, and grow in huge batches, and nearly fill the top of the trees. Saw an Iraqi who was skinned up the tree and tied on by a rope picking the fruit/nuts. They are very sweet and I saw them in town a while back and thought they were weird looking olives, as they let them sit, like bananas, and ripen til they are brown in color.

Down in that village by the river we stopped and I found a neat looking bottle on the ground and took this with me, and there were two young sisters standing side by side in dresses that were gold to yellow in color, and they blended in with all the date trees just perfect. You could have set them in the top of the palm trees and never seen them.

The canals and irrigation ditches are everywhere. I had to walk down to one and wash my hands, just to get some of the water on me. Well, we loaded up and were leaving and I noticed this dead rotten cow right there in the water I just washed my hands in - I knew I had been smelling something. I then washed them in cooler water.

We went to another town, which is also by the river. As we were pulling in I noticed this black veiled Iraqi woman who had her lower face covered but left her eyes and upper face uncovered. She was quite pretty.

We drove down only a little from her and there was this group of Iraqi police in the road and this short little fellow just grabbed hold of his crotch and shook it around for a little bit, and leaned back like he was real cool, or something. I had to laugh as the cat wasn't no taller than four foot five, and if he were American he would probably be right upset about the fact he had gone his entire life and yet had never been able to ride all the rides at the fair.

There were some boys there throwing rocks at each other and fighting. One of the elders came in and broke them up. I have seen one of these kids

before, in our aid station, with his eye put out for good because of all this rock throwing.

Then we went down by the river again, and stopped. There was a group of young men out by the river where I got out. They came up to me and got to talking to me and one of them spoke broken English. No lie ya'll: he asked to marry my sister so she could take him to the U.S. to live. I had to explain, the best I could, that my sister is married. Then he said, alright, you marry my sister. Well, I spent the next five minutes trying to figure out from his broken English how old his sister was, as I think it only fair to know how old the woman is that I am going to marry.

They were cheering us with thumbs up again too, wherever we went. And the grass and green by the river, where all the irrigation is being done is incredible: it is waist high and just as green as green can be. The entire region is lush, and this is my best description.

This country has great potential, great land for agriculture, oil out the ears, and archeological sites equal to Egypt's and Israel's. Westerners would pour in here to see the land of Sumer, where civilization began, and Babylon, further north, and Nineveh, the land of Assyria, way up north, which is where Jonah went to preach after being puked up by that fish.

And the donkeys were all over the place. It reminded me when I went with the scouts and we stopped at Hilla, which is modern Babylon. I got out and heard this braying, "heeeehaaaaaaa, heeeehaaaaaaa!" But couldn't see a thing. Then I noticed, across the road, the top tip of the two donkey ears, as the donkey was standing down in a ditch, by the road, just a-braying. Was really a funny sight, and the tip of the ears was all I ever saw of that donkey.

It was there that I had to point my weapon at an oncoming car, two times, as they were getting too close, and the people there are not our friends. This is the only time, thus far, that I have pointed my gun at anybody - thankfully.

Well ya'll, was laying it out to you while it was still fresh.

Until next time,

Richard..."

"Hey ya'll, not much going on here - thankfully. For the most part, where I am located has proven to be peaceful, and our missions consist chiefly in training Iraqi forces and humanitarian operations.

But I have done missions elsewhere. There we rode through places so full of IED holes you could literally hold your breath between holes, and never go blue in the face, for miles and miles. These holes ranged anywhere from small holes, big enough only to blow a human being into little tiny pieces, to holes large enough to fit a full sized hum-v in.

We went out with the EOD crew, to blow up IEDs. The explosions set off by the IED we found would have been enough to have taken out a fully armored track.

Needless to say, me and the scouts, that entire trip, stayed so puckered up you could not have driven a sharp sewing needle up our ass with a steel hammer.

But that is there.... here, like I was saying, it has been relatively nice and quiet. Last August, now, they had a serious battle here; but the Marines whipped the insurgent forces so bad they have not given us much trouble.

That all changed last week, to some extent. All of us medics were awoken at around one in the morning. It seemed that they had started a fight, and our sergeant major, that woke us up, was carrying on like they had personally invaded the FOB.

Several of us went out to the city, on patrols, and some of the medics ended up treating injured Iraqi National Guardsmen, that had been wounded by IED's, coming down from Baghdad. There were shots fired in downtown, by the mosque, and several mortar rounds went off. But outside of that, nothing materialized, and the insurgents' leader backed down and plead for peace - despite calling his mighty militia up, from all over Iraq, to wage his holy jihad.

And now, all is at peace, once more, here.

Check ya'll later,

Richard... ”

“Hey all, was just out with Bravo company again.

Once more we went on a presence patrol. We just ride through the city and see if anything suspicious is taking place. We often stop and question people about what all is going on in the city.

It is crazy in that they have all different types of militias in and around the city, and they dress in different type clothes, and some even wear mask like they are terrorist, or something. All of them, without exception, carry AK-47's. We saw a number of these blackclad militia men this morning.

For the last two times I have been out with Bravo we have given out candy as we rode. Last time big Jake was in the gunners hatch. This is a good ole boy if there ever was one: he is 41 years old, and is a big fellow that chews red man chewing tobacco, and is very good humored. Back in north Mississippi he is a mechanic and drives a pulp wood truck. He can really get to talking if you get him rolling.

He was on the gunner hatch throwing out candy left and right to the kids,

thoroughly enjoying himself. After we got finished he looked down at me and said: "Damn! That sure was fun." After we got back in he repeated this about how much fun he had throwing out candy to the kids. He is a big fellow with a good heart and enjoyed himself to death that day throwing out candy.

Well ya'll, my time is up, and I have to go.

Later,

Richard... "

"Hey ya'll, Sorry about not writing for a while, but been on leave, and having computer trouble, here.

I am titling this story, "The Deadly Mortars", as this is the bunch of guys I am running missions with now, and they really scare me sometimes - the mortar platoon, that is. Before I went home on leave I went out with them a good bit.

I normally ride in the back of the tub truck with John and Tim, and Drake. The tub truck is the truck with an open back, and we either stand or sit in the back of it; and it has armored plates around the sides. John is always standing there, at the gun.

It was a bright and early morning here on the FOB. I had this great big box of candy and things that was sent me by Soldiers' Angels, and I decided, as we were going out on a humanitarian mission anyway, that I could get it all together and give it out on that particular mission.

So I loaded this great big box up in the back of the tub truck with John and Tim. It was us three in the back, riding there down the road: the big five ton was right behind us.

We got to the corner, up a ways from our FOB, and all the little kids come running out to the road expecting goodies, like they usually get from us. But this day I decided I would wait till we got to the humanitarian site as we were always giving out loads of candy and things to the kids on the corner, anyway.

So I was kicked back on the top of the cooler, leaning back on the cab, and watching the road go by me backwards, with the five ton right behind us. All well and good.

But then, all of a sudden, we got to this sharp turn and our driver practically slammed on brakes to make the sharp turn. There was no way the five ton was going to stop as fast as we did: and they didn't; the problem here was they was right onto our tails before we ever did start to slow down to begin with. And when we hit the brakes I watched, as in slow motion, first the eyes of the two up front in the five ton get as big around as two set hen eggs that was ready to hatch.

Then I could hear them lock up the brakes, and even noticed the black smoke coming all off the bottom of the totally locked up tires dragging the hot road. And steady as a ticking watch the driver was turning the wheel to the side: by-n-by, my eyes got a lot bigger round than either of the two soldiers in the front seat of that five ton.

The truck got closer and closer to us, and disaster was imminent!

That is when the entire truck went up on two side wheels and kind of grazed the entire side of our vehicle that was stopped by now. After they rode down the side of our lucky tub truck a ways, they stopped too. It finally dawned on John and Tim what had happened, and they nearly laid one.

This was our near death times one!

Alright, so I thought: what else could possibly happen on this beautiful day in Iraq? We unloaded the stuff for our chaplain, as it was his mission: like wheelchairs, and blankets and things. After doing all this I got back up on the truck and intended to throw out the box of candy.

But all the kids had got a little bit unruly. So I thought to myself: alright now, ya'll want to play this; well now, you just wont get any of this candy, but it will all go to the kids on the corner after all. So we headed back to the FOB without incident.

We got to the corner, and sure enough: it had to be about twenty little Iraqi kids come running out to the side of the road, the little girls in their very colorful dresses: they looked every bit like the trees in the Fall, back at home.

We went past the corner and down the road a ways before I chucked the box of candy out. I took the thing and threw it as hard as I could to the right, so as to not get any of the kids killed: it was way off the road, now.

But no sooner had I throwed it when this little boy - not more than seven years old - come shooting out across the street from the other side, just like a dog, without even looking once. I stood up from the cooler and nearly freaked as I saw the tiny silhouette of this kid only right in front of the Five Ton, that was steady plowing up the road, full speed ahead. How that kid survived, I can't never tell: both timing and God, I suppose.

The five ton missed running over that kid, literally, by a fraction of a nose hair. This really shook me up.

Near death times TWO!!!!

Come next day we were out again. I was about nervous by this point, and

only wanted to survive the week so I could go home on leave! We went on up town without incident.

But then, we went to make this real sharp turn, and that is when it happened: the fifty cal ammo box just fell plumb out of the side of the truck, and the hum-v didn't stop but just ran right slam over the box. Somehow, the back tire caught that box just right: big fifty cal rounds started going off all in that box, shooting all out the side of the box, and going everywhere, BOOM! BOOM! BANG! You name it... It left great big burnt holes all in the road where it shot the road all up.

Near death times three!

But I made it home and had my leave, so need I ask for more?

And this, ya'll, is what it's like with "The Deadly Mortars".

Later, Richard..."

"Hey ya'll, I am in Kuwait and on my way home from Iraq-hopefully for good. I have a few days to spare, doing much of nothing, so I figure I might as well catch up on a few good "Dixie Thunder" stories. Now this is one that happened about two months ago.

Kennedy was out with his "Road Warrior" bunch, as they so dubbed themselves. And the entire gang was there: Kennedy, Patterson, Ward (Fat Bazzard), Hamilton (Hambone), and good ole cross-eyed Butler. Well, they were down by the IP station and got up a load of live mortar rounds from them, and they were steady loading them into their vehicles to take out to the desert and blow up. (See, this is one of our jobs here: to work with the Iraqi Police and Iraqi Army, to get live ammo they find, take it out to the desert, strap some good ole C4 to it, and blow it up-otherwise, it may fall into the hands of the insurgents. Mind you, all of these are bonafide live rounds, and one little slip and KABOOOOOOM!!!!!!)

So they were all out there, in a long line, most careful in every minute detail, as they gently handed each other one round, then another round, and then another and so forth, til they was finished. But Kennedy, being the trickster he ever is, come up with a really good one to pull. They was out there sweating away, concentrating on the dangerous mission at hand, knowing that any minute, any one single slip, and one of the mortar rounds would hit the ground, trigger the live pen, and KABOOOOOMMM!!!! (They would have all gone off too, had this happened, and not just the one in question.)

Anyhow, Kennedy said he was right there between Fat Bazzard and cross-eyed Butler, taking the round from Butler and handing it to Ward. But what Kennedy did, unbeknownst to any of them, was put down the mortar round, what was every bit the size and color of an Iraqi brick-bat, and actually picked one of them brick-bats up, in its place. Well, by-n-by, Ward wanted his next round, to pass on down the line, and that was when Kennedy done it: he took that brick-bat, walked toward Ward, and tripped over his own two feet, at the same time throwing the brick-bat, what looked every bit like one of them mortar rounds, way up in the air. Kennedy cleared the area and laid low, to watch what happened next.

It was like one of them pentacostal preachers slapped Butler upside his head and he was instantly healed of being cross-eyed: he went to hollering, as loud as he could, “oh Looooorrd, heaaaaadddddddsssssss upppppppp!!!!” That was when Fat Bazzard sprung into action and moved faster than a three hundred pound super man: he run right over several of them, his head looking up for the incoming round at the same time. He was screaming like a little girl, kicking around and all, thinking this his last day. Him and Butler just outright panicked, and Hambone plumb got out of the way of the two; and the rest of the Road Warrior bunch, once they got wind of what was up-and coming down fast-lit out of there quick!

Some jumped behind that one tree that grew in the place-what was no bigger around than a man’s thigh,-while others were just jumping down and laying flat on the ground, with eight fingers and the palms of their hands

over their heads, and the other two stuck way up in their ears. This one fellow was running around in circles like a chicken with it's head chopped off. It was general mayhem. Fat Bazzard saw the round coming down over that way, and he sprinted across the desert sands like one of them line backers that used to play for Bear Bryant, at Alabama. And he dove for it, when he got there close.

But it was all to no avail, and the brick-bat hurled to the ground with a loud, "thud"..... Kennedy was steadily killing hisself laughing the entire time, watching the most ridiculous thing he had ever seen in his life, what with cross-eyed Butler being miraculously cured, and a three hundred pound super man trying to save the day. And I am sure when all the dust cleared they were about ready to literally kill Kennedy; but it was all for fun.

Well, maybe I will get some more out before I leave, so see ya'll later, Richard..... ”

More Information

(Author's Notes)

It is my hope as author of this book that the reader will not only enjoy the true stories in this book, sharing in the laughter and tears, joys and sorrows that come with supporting our troops from the heart, but will be inspired to become personally involved in providing support to our brave military men and women. Following is a list of organizations with information on how you can get started on making your own unforgettable friendships and memories as you support our troops.

Soldiers Angels – A large non-profit organization dedicated to all aspects of supporting our troops and their families.

Website: <http://soldiersangels.org>

Address: Soldiers Angels 1792 East Washington Blvd Pasadena CA
91104

Phone Number: (615) 676-0239

Any Soldier – Online website providing contact information for soldiers needing support.

Website: <http://anysoldier.com>

Address: Any Soldier Inc. P.O. Box 1929 LaPlata MD 20646

About the Author

Holly Aho is an award winning milblogger (military blogger), artist and author residing in Minnesota with her husband and four children. To learn more about her as well as supporting our troops through Soldiers Angels you can visit her website/blog at <http://sablogs.com>.

Wish I could reach
from here to there
So many of you,
so few.

I hear your voices
from there to here
so many of you,
so few.

You have reached me
in the here and now
so many of you,
so few.

Your courage, honor
from place to place
so many of you,
so few.

We support you
from now til then
so many of us,
so few.

By: Holly Aho

Afterward - 2023 & Counting



Imagine - Erma Bombeck the columnist commits a crime, is sent to prison for a decade and then released - still compelled to write. You might find her name is Holly Aho (now Bot).

Holly Aho, now remarried as Holly Bot, began her blogging career earning the "Best MILBlog of the Year - US Civilian" award in 2005, as well as being a finalist for "World's Best New Blog 2005" in the Bloggies.

Initially inspired by a passion to help wounded US military soldiers and support their families, her writing career was interrupted in 2010 with an 8 year prison sentence. Released in 2018 she is motivated today by a desire to instill hope and provide help for those affected by incarceration.

Holly writes like a columnist/diarist, and her writing can range from transparent and wrenching (suicide watch in prison) to laugh out loud funny. Seeking to develop meaningful time spent with readers, her work does more than tell, it asks, it provokes, it engages.

Visit her new blog at www.hollybot.me

Turn the page for preview

HB

From Surviving to Living

by Holly Bot

“What were you thinking? Why did you do that?”

My family asked me many questions like these in the days after my arrest. They were mystified. I was too! At that time I had no answers. I was very bewildered by my behavior.

I'm a convicted felon. I'm a registered sex-offender. I never expected to be either one.

I grew up in a nice, Christian middle-class home in the Midwest. My parents sent me and my brother to a Christian day school. We attended church regularly. By my early 30's I was married with 5 children and doing my best to raise them in a similar fashion.

We had a good life. I had a nice life. One that I ended by earning a 12 year prison sentence.

My life didn't end when I went to prison, although I thought it had. It felt like it had. The truth is that my life really began *while I was there.*

I've learned that prison itself doesn't change lives, but people's lives can be changed while incarcerated. My life didn't end when I went to prison, although I thought it had. It felt like it had. The truth is that my life really began while I was there.

If you are impacted by incarceration personally or through a loved one, my desire is that you find encouragement in your situation and hope for your future.

Hi. My name is Holly. This isn't a story about prison or crime or even really a story about me - although all of these things are in it.

Do you feel like you are struggling to survive today? Are you sick of just moving from one day to the next?

How does one go from surviving to really, truly living?

That's what this story is about, but I didn't author my own transformation. The truth is, when I entered prison I was unaware I needed to change. But change I did. Thank God!

I never saw it coming. Let me tell you how it happened...

JAIL

I was arrested in March 2010. Again I heard the familiar questions, “What were you thinking? Why did you do that?” I had long believed myself to be the source of conflict in our family. Our family's shared religious beliefs, strong convictions, and high expectations defined a good person. I was an unlikable failure who nevertheless cried out for attention and love. I was an embarrassment.

Have you ever let someone down? Failed to meet expectations? How did you feel?

Intake process at the county jail passed in a blur. Finished with my mug shot photos and fingerprinting, a female guard ushered me over to receive my clothing and hygiene. I slumped after her. Inside I felt cold and withdrawn, hopeless. With little interest I hefted the blue tub full of necessities now mine and brooded as she escorted me deeper into the building. Several times we paused before heavy metal doors with keypads, awaiting a buzzer entry before going further.

"I felt lonely beyond all belief, too sad to cry. I felt I'd been crying for days."

The jail was windowless and quiet, able to house 264 male and female inmates (in separate areas). My eyes roamed the large room, absorbing the hard red cell doors and furniture, cold gray cement floor and the room's 2 other occupants. Despite the jail's large size and attempts at equal gender portioning, the men's pods overflowed with repeat customers while the women's single pod often lodged just one or two women. I located my cell and dumped my belongings on the bed.

I felt lonely beyond all belief, too sad to cry. I felt I'd been crying for days. I flopped on the bed and captured the wall with my stare. I memorized every crack in the cement blocks.

Life before this day had been busy, busy, busy, always on the go with five children. I lacked the capacity to achieve quiet calm. My body and mind raged against this enforced seclusion and isolation. I felt contained and constricted, empty and frozen. I wanted to act, do something! I lacked the power, the permission.

"I lacked the capacity to achieve quiet calm. My body and mind raged against this enforced seclusion and isolation. I felt contained and constricted, empty and frozen. I wanted to act, do something! I lacked the power, the permission."

The next few weeks found me writing letters to my children, family, and friends. My family did visit, for which I was grateful, but I learned that mail, good old fashioned mail, is something special. Young women, old women, everyone loved mail, me included. Women born with a cell phone in their hand and never mailed anything in their life felt the allure of the written word on paper from behind bars. I, like everyone else, rarely received it but eagerly looked forward to every mail call.

Three months passed before my husband secured my release on bail. During that time many women revolved through the door of justice. Eliza was the first to demolish my immature views on life.

"During that time many women revolved through the door of justice. Eliza was the first to demolish my immature views on life."

Eliza blew into jail two weeks after my own arrest. Initially high as a kite, the tall leggy blonde made quite an impression. Over the next few weeks I learned Eliza had been to prison many, many times. She had more children than I, most given up for adoption. Eliza stayed 2 weeks before her own release on bail.

“Would you like to play cards?” Eliza asked the room at large. With little else to do I agreed. “My fiance will be so mad at me,” she bemoaned, twisting the large diamond ring on her left hand. Jail rules demanded such an item be removed during intake, but Eliza's hands had been too swollen to allow it. Threats to cut the ring in order to secure its release from her hand had been made. Anxiously she pulled on it, with no success.

Standing, Eliza began to pace. After only a few strides she relaxed. Returning to the table she retrieved her cards and threw out a king. With a distant look her eyes wandered the room. Ten years younger than Eliza, I did not feel a deep connection to her. I was unfamiliar with her lifestyle, although I sympathized with her struggles.

“Christina arrived shortly after that...even her eyebrows had wrinkles. 'Tired' was a step she'd blown past in her desire to earn the merit badge 'Awake for 17 days.'”

Christina arrived shortly after. First impressions put her age at a worn-out 60ish. Deep bags under her eyes dragged the rest of her face towards her drooping lips. Even her eyebrows had wrinkles. “Tired” was a step she'd blown past in her desire to earn the merit badge “Awake for 17 days.” Someone told me Chris was only 40 years old; right then I made a solemn vow to never, ever do drugs.

Christina flung herself into bed immediately and proceeded to hibernate, occasionally accepting food, which she devoured like a ravenous animal. Ten days later she emerged from her cell, looking 20 years younger and feeling refreshed. I didn't recognize her.

Another woman arrived, her face a mass of sores and scabs. I overheard her explaining her appearance. “I burned myself while frying food.” The woman next to me, aware of my naivety, leaned over to whisper, “Don't believe her. That's meth for you. She's a picker.”

“What??!” I recoiled in horror. “What do you mean?”

“She's been picking at her face. She did that to herself. Drugs will do that to you.” I dared to examine the new woman more fully, now sitting across the room playing a game. Her wounds looked nothing like burns. I wondered to myself. She left a few days later.

"I'd already heard the phrase, 'I'll write you,' repeated many times. I'd been quick to catch on that this was a lie."

And so it went, women coming and going, my new education rounding out. The day came for Eliza's release. I'd already heard the phrase, “I'll write you,” repeated many times by departing inmates to those left behind. I'd been quick to catch on that this was a lie, if a well intentioned one.

As Eliza readied to go she turned to me and said, “I'm going to write to you.” Surprised, I looked up, searching her face for the reason. At the time, the jail housed about 10 women, and I felt no special connection to Eliza. Perhaps sensing my confusion she clarified, “I know what it's like to be locked up, how hard it is, how lonely it is. I'm going to write to you.”

"Eliza seemed a stereotypical addict. I would have thought her anything but a role model, able to do what others failed to accomplish."

Finished packing, Eliza gathered her things and left. Watching her leave, I wondered at her words. Eliza seemed a stereotypical addict – unstable, unreliable, spacey. Her self-described life was messy and destructive. I would have thought her anything but a role model, able to do what others failed to accomplish.

Eliza hitchhiked the two hour drive home from jail. Four days later my name was announced at mail call. Amazed, I slid open the large purple envelope to reveal a pretty card inside. Eliza's loopy handwriting greeted me.

"Over the next three months no one was more reliable, more dependable, than Eliza. I was humbled. I am still humbled all these years later."

Over the next three months no one was more reliable, more dependable, than Eliza. Her letters and cards continued to greet me at least three times a week, every week, until I walked out the door. I was humbled. I am still humbled all these years later. She consistently spent time, money, and energy on me. She expected nothing in return. She was the first unexpected person to treat me thus. She would not be the last.

She altered my worldview, but not me, not yet.

Visit www.hollybot.me to keep reading!

- 1 Names have been changed to protect privacy
- 2 Name has been changed to protect privacy
- 3 Name have been changed for privacy