

Remembering sister soldiers overseas

■ Southern California women send care packages to soldiers in Iraq and Kuwait

By **Shirley Hawkins**
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Myraline Whitaker still recalls the conversation as if it were yesterday.

“I was talking to a former Marine who had been in the military and she said that her roommate had been an African American woman. She recalled that every time her roommate pressed her hair, she had to leave the apartment because the smell of the hair was so pungent,” Whitaker recalled.

Whitaker said the woman’s comment was hard to forget. “It made me realize that African American women on active duty may not have ready access to ethnic haircare products,” she said.

Curious as to whether African American women serving overseas were in need of toiletry items, Whitaker Googled a military website, www.ansoldier.com. “Any Soldier.com is a blog that lists over 3,000 soldiers. I was surprised to find there were numerous requests from African American soldiers for items that were in short supply overseas.”

Whitaker soon found that hundreds of African American soldiers stationed in Iraq and Kuwait were in dire need of not only black haircare products, but other items that reminded them of home, as well. She found that popular requests included lotion, fem-

inine hygiene products, baby and foot powder, comedy CDs, and black magazines such as *Ebony*, *Essence* and *Jet*.

In response to the need, Whitaker, who is the owner of a hospitality consulting service, flew into action. She started asking local beauty salons to donate their discarded magazines. She even urged her local gym to donate their unclaimed water bottles and workout clothes. Within weeks of reading the soldier’s blogs, Whitaker started shipping the items overseas.

Whitaker also realized that the dry and windy conditions in the arid desert posed a special problem for the “sister” soldiers. “The heat in Iraq and Kuwait can reach 100 degrees,” she pointed out. “Black women soldiers overseas wear different hairstyles—their hair could be braided, twisted, relaxed, or thermal heated. Sisters over here have the option of wearing extensions or wigs or getting our hair styled if we’re close to a beauty salon. But the soldiers overseas don’t have that option, so they email requests for haircare products such as Motions, Lustre products, Soft Sheen, and Garnier. They also request vaseline, moisturizers, and hand sanitizers.

And Whitaker is well aware of the toll a war can take on one’s spirit. “Having to fight a war on a daily basis, the women soldiers go through a lot of tough days,” Whitaker observed. “Having these products arrive gets their mind off the day and reminds them of home.”



■ **Myraline Whitaker** at her packing party which she started after discovering that many African American female soldiers stationed in Iraq and Beirut were in short supply of toiletry and hair products. Whitaker and several book clubs pack the items several times a year and ship them to grateful soldiers. /OW Photo courtesy of Myraline Whitaker

It wasn’t long before friends heard about Whitaker’s project and volunteered to help. “I told members of my book club, the Sisterfriends, about my project and they thought it was wonderful,” said Whitaker. “We were later joined by the Ladies of Color Turning Pages and the Reading Circle from First AME Church who purchased a hundred dollars’ worth of products for the packing party.”

Whitaker said that members of the book club kick off each packing party with a pot luck buffet. “We had our most recent packing party in April. When we get to the packing party, we assemble the boxes and then we sort the products. We recently sent care packages to 50 women and every box gets a letter,” said Whitaker.

Whitaker said that their project is gaining national coverage. “We’ve gotten calls for donations and requests for stories about the packing parties from New York, Michigan, North Carolina, *The Washington Post*, and even HBO.”

With soldiers facing the threat of bombs and missiles on a daily basis, Whitaker and other book club members are amazed when they receive heartwarming emails from grateful soldiers. Sgt. Y. Riley, who is stationed in Camp Ramad, Iraq, wrote; “We do thank you for all that you are doing for us while we secure the force on this side of the earth. Keep us in your prayers and we do look forward to hearing from you again. May God bless each of you for looking out for us.”

Tamara Williams, a packing party recipient who served in Iraq and recently returned to her home state of Michigan, wrote; “I’m so happy light is being shed on the African American sisters over there. “I would like to make a small donation. It’s the least I can do for what you all did for me and my spirit.” **OW**