Operation Dear Abby: A Personal Testimony

Description

While reading something on Mattâ€™s blog recently, he commented about taking the time to send a letter to the troops. While Iâ€™m sure it was being done before my experience in 1986, I found myself at the other end of a big letter writing campaign. Hereâ€™s my after action report:

IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m not sure if this story is about the real beginnings of Operation Dear Abby, but I believe it is. The purpose of this post is to use some history to give you some first hand accounts of the impact of letters from all over America have on our troops, and, quite honestly, to help you make a decision (for you fence sitters) to take the time to get out pen and paper and to communicate with those at the Ã¢â‚¬Å“pointy end of the spear.Ã¢â‚¬Â•

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Sometime in mid to early 1985, an enterprising and forward looking sailor stationed aboard USS BIDDLE (CG-34), wrote a letter to Abigail Van Buren (Dear Abby) and asked if she would ask her readers to write to â€œany sailorâ€• while our Battle Group was on deployment to the North Arabian Sea from Oct, 1985 through Apri1, 1986. This certainly was before the days of extensive access to the internet in the US, so â€œthe wordâ€• would have to he passed by more conventional means. From my understanding, Abby checked with the Pentagon to make sure this would be acceptable to publish and (the obivious) answer was â€œyes.â€•

Fast forward about 9 months. We had left our east coast ports, sailed to Singapore, and then made an early return to the â€œMed,â€• in January, 1984, due to the belligerent stance taken by Col. Khaddafi. By April, we had conducted several â€œfreedom of navigationâ€• operations and had engaged Libyan surface slips in combat. Then the letters started to come.

Sometime about early April, mountains, as compared to the normal flow of mail, IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m not exaggerating, began to be delivered to the USS CORAL SEA Battle Group, addressed to Ã¢â‚¬Å“Any Sailor.Ã¢â‚¬Â• My staff was embarked aboard BIDDLE at the time, and when the logistic runs by helicopter from the Carrier came each day, we would get 3-4 large orange mailbags of just this mail. The bags would be taken to an area near the front of the mess deck, and left for all to dig through as time permitted. Believe me, we made time for this.

Iâ€™ll say this: It was better than Christmas, and all we were getting was letters from Ã¢â‚¬Â• home.Ã¢â‚¬Â• It was special and mail, the hard copy kind, hand written stuff is/was always wonderful to receive from your real relatives, but this stuff was outstanding because all types of people from all over took a few moments of their lives to write to us; faceless, nameless service members floating about on haze grey vessels half a world away. I canâ€™t put into words the elation these pieces of paper provided to so many of us.

We read them, passed around the ones we liked, and many sailors wrote back, I know at least a few sailors even met some of the writers. I recall letters from veterans, housewives, an airline pilot, school kids and even a few from some women inmates in the Florida Correctional system. The â€œthank yoursâ€• were numerous, but many included just plain old â€œslices of lifeâ€• from the hearts and

souls of American citizens, giving as a glimpse of their days.

These letters were a special gift and lifted the spirits of many. If your ever wonder if just taking a moment to share a little of your life with someone in the service is worth the effort, the answer from someone on the other end, is a resounding â€œit sure is!â€•

I know after we were released from the theatre, after a 3 week extension to bomb Libya in May, 1986, the continuous, massive amounts of mail were delivered to the Battle Groups left in the Med, and I suspect it got distributed widely about the Fleets in all oceans.

For my part, thank you to those who may have written back then, but today, especially to anyone who has been doing the same sort of thing for our service members. You are making a difference, and, as then, I know your seemingly small efforts are tremendously appreciated by the men and women far from home.

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