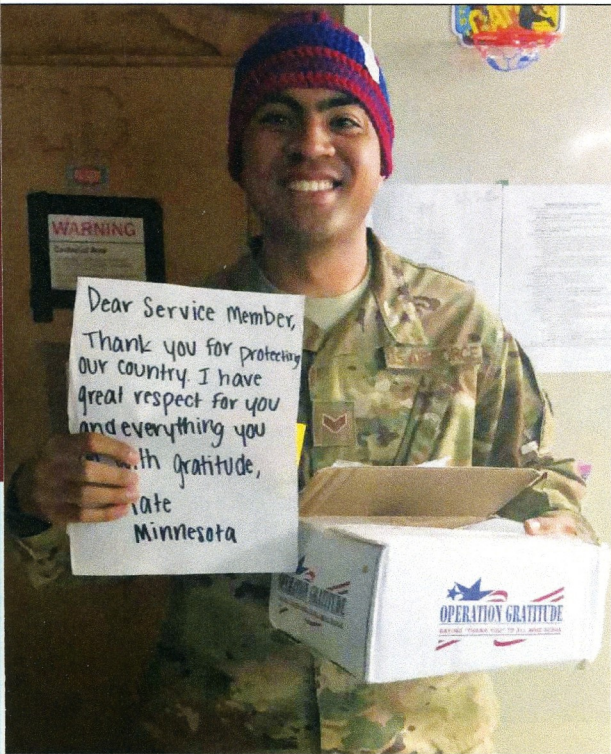


# *Family*

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By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ



# GIVING THANKS

National volunteer organization Operation Gratitude provides care packages and personal notes to active-duty troops, veterans and military families

A little appreciation can go a long way, and the non-profit organization Operation Gratitude is mobilizing a nationwide network of volunteers to ensure that deployed service members, veterans, and military families know that they are respected, admired, and valued. To this end, the organization sends special care packages containing carefully chosen items and handwritten notes meant to boost the morale and resilience of service members and give them warm reminders of home.

Founded in 2003, Operation Gratitude provides opportunities for the American people to express their gratitude and show military personnel that what they do matters—indeed, to date Operation Gratitude has sent more than 4 million care packages to deployed troops, veterans, first responders, and children of deployed troops. Currently, Operation Gratitude is one of the largest hands-on volunteer non-profit groups in the country, sending out 200,000 care packages each year with the goal of sending more than 1 million packages per year by 2027.

“Our care packages often arrive at pivotal moments,” asserts Emily M.R. Schwartz, executive director of the organization. “Many recipients tell us that receiving a package filled with personal notes and everyday comforts helped them feel less alone and more supported.”

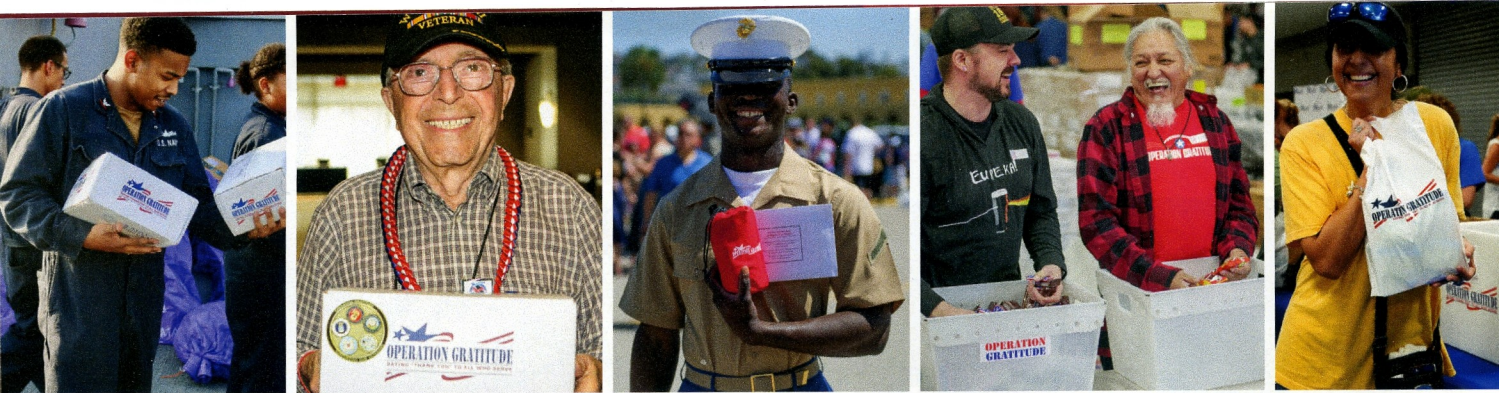
Schwartz herself started with the group as a volunteer in 2009: “I believe deeply in service and showing up for people when it matters,” she relates. “That belief first brought me to Operation Gratitude not as a professional, but as a sister. My connection to the military began when my brother served in the Marine Corps. When he enlisted, my family—who had no prior military background—was embraced by Operation

Gratitude and a community of Americans who simply wanted to say ‘thank you’ to my brother and those serving alongside him.

“I began volunteering with the organization, and it quickly became a place of belonging for our family,” she continues. “Through care packages, handwritten letters, and shared acts of service, we experienced firsthand how powerful gratitude can be for both servicemembers and the families waiting at home. In 2015, I joined Operation Gratitude’s staff, later returned as a member of the Board, and about a year into my term was asked to step into the role of Executive Director. Today, I am honored to lead an organization that once supported my own family, as we enter a new chapter—bringing gratitude, connection, and service directly into communities across the country.”

Operation Gratitude was founded in 2003 by Carolyn Blashek who was volunteering for a military organization and met a soldier who was about to deploy. “He told her that he didn’t see the point in coming home because it felt like no one back home cared,” explains A. “Annie” McDougale-Stamey, director, marketing and communications. “That conversation stayed with her, and she resolved that no servicemember should ever feel forgotten or unappreciated.

“Drawing on her own experience as a mom, Carolyn thought about what made her kids feel connected when they were away at sleepaway camp – something tangible that reminded them someone back home was thinking of them,” McDougale-Stamey continues. “The answer was a care package. With that simple but powerful idea, Operation Gratitude was born, sending care packages to troops serving on the front lines to remind them they are seen, valued and deeply appreciated.”



Schwartz points out that Operation Gratitude has a two-fold mission: to thank all those who serve, and to provide every American with a way to do that. “Our purpose is simple but powerful: to lift morale, foster connection, and remind service members and their families that their sacrifices are seen and appreciated,” she states. “We aim to strengthen the emotional well-being of the servicemember community by delivering tangible expressions of gratitude—care packages, handwritten letters, hand-knit items, and moments of human connection. We reach this goal together with thousands of volunteers nationwide, partnering with community and corporate supporters, and working closely with the military community and leadership to ensure our programs align with real needs.”

Operation Gratitude is supported through a mix of individual donors, corporate partners, foundation grants, and in-kind donations; volunteers include individuals, families, schools, community groups, and corporate teams.

“Volunteers contribute their time and talents, helping us stretch every dollar and deepen our impact,” Schwartz notes. “Donor support also helps fund the infrastructure behind our Community Resource Hub—the tools, resources and systems that allow volunteers across the country to participate from their own hometowns. Our donors and partners play an active role by sponsoring care packages, hosting volunteer events and contributing goods and resources. Together, this collaborative approach allows us to scale our impact while keeping our work personal, meaningful, and rooted in community.

“We try to make it as easy and welcoming as possible for anyone who wants to say ‘thank you,’” she adds. “Volunteers start by signing up through our website, where they gain access to our Community Resource Hub. From there, we provide simple guides, tutorials, and ideas for getting involved—whether that’s writing handwritten letters, making paracord lanyards, hosting a collection drive, or taking on other gratitude projects. Once a project is complete, we walk volunteers through the next steps, whether that means shipping items or personally delivering them to local veterans, first responders, or active-duty servicemembers in their own communities. For those who want to support deployed

troops, we also host Operation Gratitude Assembly Days throughout the year in communities across the country, bringing people together to pack care packages side by side. Volunteers can even let us know if they’d like to help bring an Assembly Day to their hometown.”

The Operation Gratitude website [www.operationgratitude.com](http://www.operationgratitude.com) is pivotal to the organization’s mission. “We make it easy to request support; anyone can visit our website to request a care package for a loved one who is deployed, a military unit, or a group of veterans,” Schwartz comments. “Behind the scenes, we work closely with military units, family readiness groups, and trusted partner organizations to coordinate deliveries and ensure packages reach those who need them most. We work to fulfill requests thoughtfully and respectfully, prioritizing moments of need while ensuring our programs remain accessible and mission-driven.”

The organization also sends care packages to the children of deployed service members. “Military families live with challenges that many people never fully see – long separations, constant uncertainty, frequent transitions and the emotional weight that comes with loving someone who serves,” Schwartz observes. “These realities can take a toll not just on servicemembers, but on spouses, children and extended families as well. While Operation Gratitude is not a clinical service provider, we play an important role in helping service members and their families feel seen, supported and connected. Through care packages, handwritten letters and community-based acts of gratitude, we remind service members and their families that they are not alone. Our programs help ease feelings of isolation, reinforce resilience, and offer moments of encouragement during difficult seasons—simple gestures that can make a meaningful difference and remind all those who serve that a grateful nation truly stands with them.

“At its core, Operation Gratitude is about unity,” she adds. “Our programs bring together people of all ages, backgrounds and political beliefs around a shared purpose: gratitude for those who serve. In a time when many families feel stretched and disconnected, we believe that simple, sincere acts of appreciation can have a powerful ripple effect, strengthening not only military families, but the communities that support them.” 🇺🇸

## Progress Through Partnership

Operation Gratitude works closely with military partners to ensure that care packages get to deployed troops especially on special occasions.

According to McDougle-Stamey, in December 2025, the organization partnered with CENTCOM (U.S. Central Command) to deliver care packages to deployed troops during the holiday season. She shares one particularly poignant moment, when the Operation Gratitude received the following “mail call” from CENTCOM:

*“The team cannot express enough thanks for this opportunity. Allowing us to hand out the packages later really helped bring the soldiers spirits back up. We got to witness many smiling faces and tears from soldiers receiving a gift from Santa on Christmas Day. Thank you again for this great opportunity and the care packages did not go to waste.”*