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WITH LOVING CARE

Volunteer-run 'Operation Courage Is Beautiful' takes a feminine approach to supporting active-duty troops

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COVER STORY



Deanne Burton ▶ Operation Courage is Beautiful - Women's Military Care Packages

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I just got back from spending some time in an austere environment during my deployment and received your care package. Tonight I'm going to use the mask, face wash, moisturizer and do some feminine things! Thank you so much for your support!! It means the world.



With Loving Care

Volunteer-run Operation Courage Is Beautiful takes a feminine approach to supporting active-duty troops

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

Everyone likes to receive a little “something-something” in the mail, and care packages from well-meaning individuals and charitable organizations frequently are sent overseas as a way to honor active-duty military personnel and thank them for their service. There is just one small problem: Most of these care packages are oriented towards men.

With an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 active-duty personnel currently deployed overseas, and with 20% of them being women, there seems to be a demonstrated need for the feminine perspective, and one volunteer nonprofit has been looking after the needs of women in

the military since 2009. The stated mission of Operation Courage Is Beautiful (OCIB) is “to bring a little joy and femininity to our active duty, deployed U.S. servicewomen through care packages geared for women.”

The effort began in August 2009 when OCIB founder and current board president Cindy Chan came across an article in a women’s magazine that shared the stories of several servicewomen on deployment. “I was struck by how different the experiences of women and men in the military can be, even when they’re performing the same roles and serving the same purpose,” Chan recalls. “I soon realized that most care packages sent to



troops were designed for men, with men's sized socks, bars of Irish Spring soap, men's deodorant.

"This gap in support inspired me to create care packages specifically for women—not just to provide essential items and boost morale, but to honor their femininity and service," she continues. "It became a way to recognize their unique needs and remind them that they are truly valued and appreciated.

"Our main goal is to bring smiles and a little joy to deployed servicewomen through our thoughtfully curated care packages," she adds. "These packages aren't just about practical items – they're a way to say, 'We see you; we appreciate you; and we're thinking of you.' We achieve this by working with donors, sponsors, and volunteers who help us obtain the contents, assemble, and distribute these packages. Each package is a reminder to the recipient—and those they share it with—that they are not alone and that their sacrifices are recognized."

Each year, the organization sends approximately 4.5 tons of personal care products to women. "Every year our goal is to send 1,000 care packages," Chan notes. "Over the years, we've touched the lives of nearly 15,000 women, and we hope to continue expanding our reach."

Based in San Diego and entirely volunteer-run, OCIB is deeply connected to the military community, surrounded by active-duty service members, veterans, military families, and numerous military bases. "While many of our volunteers, myself included, may not have direct familial ties to the military, we share a deep respect for the sacrifices made by service members," Chan explains. "We are motivated by a strong desire to support an often-overlooked group and to provide resources that honor and celebrate the invaluable contributions of women in uniform."

Anyone can request a care package for themselves or someone else, and any active-duty, deployed U.S. service member is welcome to



OCIB founder and current board president Cindy Chan

receive a care package. Requests can be made on the organization's website, **www.operationcourage.org**; the request should include the full name of the service member, current military address with APO/FPO/DPO designation, and the current deployment period with preferably at least four months of time remaining. OCIB volunteers pack the products and letters of appreciation into the care packages and ship to the provided address.

"Our packages go to APO/FPO addresses primarily in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and on Naval ships worldwide," Chan relates. "We often hear from servicewomen stating that our packages are the "best [they] ever received."


Chan points out that one of the biggest challenges for deployed servicewomen is the lack of access to personal care products specifically tailored to their needs. "Sometimes these items are not readily available during deployments," she explains. "For example, one servicewoman was the only female in her unit at a remote location. She specifically requested feminine hygiene products; so we added extra feminine hygiene products to our packages. Others have asked for plastic tampons specifically because some countries don't carry plastic tampons. In another situation, sailors were on an extended deploy-

ment, and the ship they were on no longer had enough feminine hygiene products; we sent them extra feminine hygiene products. These packages not only meet practical needs but also offer a morale boost during what can be an isolating and challenging time. Family members appreciate our program because it is a free and additional way to support their loved ones on deployment."

The organization's funding comes from a combination of individual and organizational donations, corporate sponsorships, and grants from various organizations, including officers' spouses' clubs. The group also holds corporate packing events and had a fund-raising 5K run.

OCIB has been the recipient of numerous grants, including from the National Veterans of Foreign Wars, Military Spouses Association of Camp Pendleton, Air Force Officers' Spouses Club of Washington, DC, the SDG&E Steps4Good program, and many others. Past donors and partners include small businesses, corporations, corporate groups, and organizations including units of the Daughters of the American Revolution, college sororities and fraternities, locally and nationwide. Chan received the "She Serves Award" from the National VFW for her efforts. The first week of November in San Diego has been declared by the City of San Diego as "Operation Courage is Beautiful" week.

"This year we are focused on collecting products to include in our care packages," Chan relates. "Individuals may contribute through the online purchase and shipment of products through Amazon, Walmart, or Target to our address. Larger organizations may hold product donation drives. Businesses in the cosmetics and personal care industry can reach out to us to explore partnership opportunities.

"We're incredibly grateful to the national corporations, community groups, and even school and scout groups who have supported our mission over the years," Chan enthuses. "It's truly a collective effort." 

In Their Own Words

OCIB-
THANK YOU THANK YOU,
THANK YOU! THIS IS THE FIRST
FEMALE CARE PACKAGE I HAVE
EVER RECEIVED IN 16 YEARS.
THANK YOU FOR THE THOUGHTFUL
PRODUCTS AND THE CARE THAT
GOES INTO THE BOXES. IN
ADDITION TO THE PRODUCTS, I
RECEIVED A CARD AND A
PHOTO OF A GIRL SCOUT TROOP,
13 LITTLE FEMALES.



"Dear Operation Courage Is Beautiful, amazing people: First let me start by saying I appreciate your patience in getting my response. As I'm sure you can imagine life here can get quite hectic. But I have had you on my mind.

Let me continue by giving you the biggest possible THANK YOU! We cannot possibly thank you enough or tell you how much your thoughtful packages meant to us. The amazing thought, care and love we felt in each and every package was overwhelming. As females we encounter an additional layer of complications and hardships when it comes to deployments and your packages were overwhelming. You guys are truly incredible and we all just wanted to let you know that your efforts, time and concern for strangers halfway across the world are appreciated more than any of us could ever adequately express. We couldn't get all the females in the picture, but we got as many as we could. Please know that your love touched all of us. May you all be blessed, and thank you from the bottom of our hearts!

Love, from Kuwait, the lady warriors of the 369th SUS BDE!"

- W/R P., Linette

"OCIB, thank you, thank you, thank you! This is the first female care package I have ever received in 16 years. Thank you for the thoughtful products, and the care that goes in the boxes. In addition to the products, I received a card

and a photo of a Girl Scout troop, 13 little females. Please let the troop know I got their box, there isn't any info on the photo of the car. Thank you for not forgetting us as we are still being deployed, keep up the good work."

- McKinzie

"Thank you so much for the AMAZING boxes! I was able to share items with so many women in my section, and it brought so many smiles. This is one of the best orgs I have seen in a long time. We appreciate your support and love what you send. Sending lots of hugs to all of you!"

- Yvette

