

MISSION ONGOING



PHOTOS BY TROY HARVEY/THE STAR

Evelyn and Saul Goldman place items in the 100,000th care package for For the Troops during an event Monday afternoon in Simi Valley. The organization funds all its needs through community donations.

■ Care packages reach 100,000 and counting

By Wendy Leung
Wendy.Leung@vcstar.com
805-437-0339

It was Christmastime in Iraq when Sgt. Philip Schmidt received his first care package from a stranger.

Soldiers at the base surrounded him, watching him pull See's candies, DVDs and a tin of shortbread from the box.

"It was really good shortbread," Schmidt said. "I never loved shortbread until that moment."

That was 2005, when the Simi Valley-based

nonprofit For The Troops sent out its first box. On Monday, volunteers placed eyedrops, instant noodles, hot sauce, stationery and other items from a wish list into the 100,000th package and shipped it to Afghanistan.

Schmidt, 33, of Palm Springs, came to Simi Valley to see the nonprofit reach the milestone. He talked about his first month in Iraq, which he said passed quickly.

"As more months pass, you really do sense the

See PACKAGE, 2A



Care packages wait to be picked up at For the Troops on Monday afternoon in Simi Valley.

PACKAGE from 1A

forgottiness, that you've been forgotten by America," said Schmidt, who enlisted in the Army in 2001.

Schmidt said that asking his mother to send a razor and his favorite toothpaste is one thing but that getting a care package from someone he has never met is another thing entirely.

"It's a remembrance from America that you guys love us, you guys support us," Schmidt told an audience that included volunteers, city leaders and crooner Pat Boone.

More than 30,000 U.S. troops are in Afghanistan, with most expected to return by the end of the year. But For The Troops has no plans to slow down.

"We'll always have troops somewhere," said organization co-founder Paula Cornell.

Nine months ago, For The Troops began sending care packages to troops serving in countries other than those in the Middle East.

"On to our 200,000th box," Cornell said.

Cornell and Janie Josephson founded the organization to show their appreciation of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cornell said she had never thought much about the daily lives of military personnel and was shocked when she learned from her husband one day that he did not brush his teeth for a year while he was serving in the Vietnam War.

The troops' wish list of items has grown through the years, but one thing has stayed constant — wet wipes.

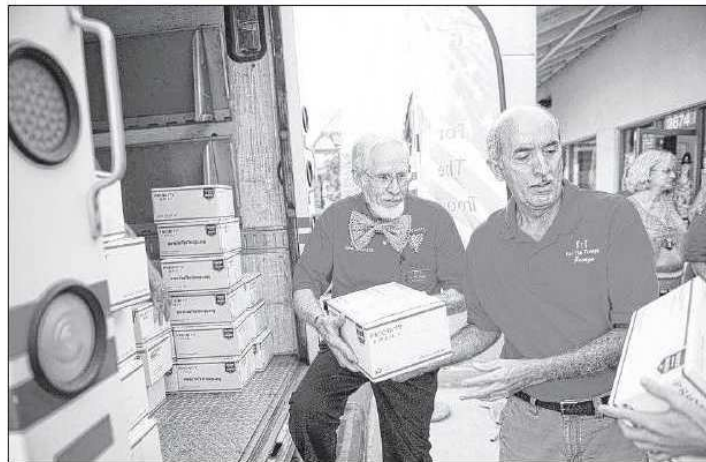
"If we run out of baby wipes, we don't ship," Cornell said.

More than a dozen years since the war in Afghanistan began, much of society has forgotten that troops still face danger



PHOTOS BY TROY HARVEY/THE STAR

Melba Swearingin hugs Sgt. Phillip Schmidt at a For the Troops event Monday afternoon. Schmidt received the first care package sent by For the Troops, which started sending out the boxes about nine years ago.



Jim Carpenter (left) and George Arvizu load a mail truck with care packages that will be shipped overseas to U.S. troops. "When you start doing this, it gets in your blood," Arvizu said.

there, Cornell said.

But volunteers say Simi Valley, a patriotic city that feels like a tiny town, has not forgotten. Everything for the organization, such

as packaging supplies and rent for the Cochran Street location, have come from donations from the community.

"We're a city of 120,000,

and we've sent out 100,000 packages," volunteer Tony DiRaimondo said.

The community's coming together helped DiRaimondo and his wife

get through the past decade. His son, Michael DiRaimondo, was 22 when he died, becoming the first fallen soldier in the Iraq War from Simi Valley. The flight medic was killed by a surface-to-air missile.

"We wouldn't have survived one hour, one minute without this community," DiRaimondo said. "It's been 10 years."

The community that has come out to support the troops and their families has been multi-generational — children writing letters, military personnel and retired police officers who assemble the care packages five days a week.

George Arvizu, who retired after a three-decade career in law enforcement, said helping with the boxes is second nature.

"When you start doing this, it gets in your blood," Arvizu said.