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Supporting the troops is a habit for Affton man

By Steve Birmingham

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So why does David F. Harster support the troops of the 70th Troop Command by sending them food and other items, anyway?

Because he can, he said.

Harster, owner of Harster Heating & Air Conditioning in Affton, was recently honored by the Missouri Army National Guard unit with a certificate of appreciation for outstanding support of the citizen-soldiers in the 70th Troop Command, which has its headquarters at Jefferson Barracks. The Guard honored him for sending on a regular basis dozens of care packages to deployed soldiers in Iraq. Food, magazines, compact discs, clothing, video games and other items are collected by Harster and some of his employees, packaged in 20 pound boxes and mailed every week to soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.



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"I was surprised and didn't even know they were coming," Harster said about the day in December when the Guard showed up at his office. "I feel like I'm sitting here kind of fat and happy, and I'm running my business and I'm at home, and they're over there risking their lives. That whole war thing, I don't debate that too much, but I just know they're there."

Erica Burrus photo --- David Harster was honored by the U.S. Army recently for sending care packages to military troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Sgt. 1st Class Darrin Anderson, who presented Harster with the honor, said it was a generous thing Harster was doing.

"The effort that he is doing is a personal sacrifice in support for our soldiers," Anderson said. "It's wonderful to do it on a singular basis, but to do it on a consistent basis as he does without getting any outside support and doing it on his own, is an extraordinary thing."

"When a soldier gets a package when deployed, it's like Thanksgiving or Christmas," Anderson said. "It's a nice feeling of appreciation and warmth. There's really no way to describe it."

Harster bought the company from his father, Emil F. Harster, in 1988. What started in 1950 as a one-truck, one-man operation working out of an historic Affton building built in 1910, has now grown to 20 employees and 18 trucks and servicing more than 17,000 local residents.

An avid pilot of Cessna-type aircraft, Harster started sending the packages after a friend was deployed to Iraq. Both he and the friend, Jeff Shultz, are also both builders of Sonex sport aircraft, and they had been communicating over great distances for years about their efforts.

"When his Sonex was completed he told me he couldn't fly it because he was being deployed to Iraq," Harster said. "Later, he sent me an e-mail and said 'boy if anybody has some snacks or anything, we're dying over here for some munchies.' He said they eat good over there but they just sometimes want something sweet or salty. So I sent him some peanuts."

Harster said anyone can find a soldier to support with similar donations through a website called anysoldier.com.

"Once Jeff came back and I found out there were so many of them over there that wanted stuff, I looked on the website anysoldier.com and found soldiers," Harster said. "Soon I began finding stuff being placed next to my desk by my employees, food and magazines and stuff. They jumped right in."

Another soldier, a 20-year-old woman hospitalized in Iraq, was listed on anysoldier.com and soon Harster and his crew were sending personal care items along with food and snacks.

Anyone can log on to anysoldier.com and see lists of items that soldiers are requesting, he said. Chocolate is not a good thing to send because it melts, and soap, if sent, should be packaged and sent separately because the soldiers said everything tastes like soap if it isn't mailed separately, Harster said.

"The soldiers are really appreciative, they're not demanding," Harster said. "With Jeff, I was sending one package every other week, but now I'm doing one every Monday. They like Pop Tarts and these Betty Crocker Warm Delights. Those are really hot items and they like them. They have a microwave oven at the combat hospital."

Harster is modest about the award from the National Guard and really doesn't understand all the fuss.

"They gave me the award but it is pretty much a company-wide thing," Harster said.

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Pokin Around

Steve is a Chicago native who lives in St. Charles. He has covered school strikes, murder trials, a 6-month-old who could whistle, a repo man and marauding feral pigs. Reader favorite Steve Pokin brings his weekly columns and more to a new web log.

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