

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Omahan spends time writing letters to soldiers

BY JANE PALMER

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

All soldiers should know they are appreciated, says Omahan Mary Ann Bernal.

Through the nonprofit organization Soldiers' Angels, Bernal "adopts" three soldiers. She writes them at least once a week and sends each a "care package" of goodies. She also sends hundreds of cards each year to other soldiers who are injured or in harm's way.

"I never expect a thank you," she says. "We're only here because our military protects us and gives us the freedoms that we have. Freedom is not free."

Bernal started to write to soldiers during Operation Desert Storm. In those days, the military would accept letters and packages addressed to "any soldier," so she would write about 100 generic letters a week. If she received a response, usually about 25 a month, she would follow up with another letter.

"In Desert Storm, I had a soldier who liked action movies," she said. "Every week I would tape movies on cable television, and on Friday I would send him a box of videos and microwave popcorn. I found out, years later, they used to stand around and ask if Mary Ann's package arrived yet. When I was told that they loved that, it made me feel good that it took them away from war."

Now that security measures control what soldiers may receive, Bernal works through Soldiers' Angels on her letter writing, and she mentors others who say they want to correspond with soldiers.

"The hardest thing is that this is probably going to be a one-way conversation," she says. "You're probably never going to hear from your soldier. It's a dangerous environment. People are get-

GET TO KNOW...

MARY ANN BERNAL

Age: 65**Family:** Son Alexander, daughter-in-law Kerry and three grandchildren, all of Omaha.**Volunteer:**

As a member of Soldiers' Angels (www.soldiersangels.org), she sends letters and care packages to U.S. military personnel.

Background: She has a business degree from Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., and worked for many years at PricewaterhouseCoopers. She moved to Omaha in 2004 to be near her son and his family.

What most people don't know

about her: She's a "Star Trek" fan who has been wearing an ensign's Starfleet Academy class ring for 20 years.



ting killed left and right.

"Occasionally you get a response. One girl told me she had my card on her desk. I just got a reply from a soldier; he sent me a piece of Afghanistani paper currency like a souvenir.

"I don't expect any of it. But it's there to let you know that you are making a difference."

You don't need to be a skilled writer to correspond with a soldier, Bernal says.

"If you treat it like a diary or a blog, you'll be all right," she said. "I write about my grandchildren's sports events, weather, water pipes breaking at work, shoveling your driveway.

"I wrote about having the snowplow coming through my neighborhood, making a snowball the size of Texas in front of my driveway. Silly stuff like that,

they appreciate it."

The biggest expense, she said, is postage. For care packages, she jams as much as she can into \$10 flat-rate shipping boxes from the U.S. Postal Service.

Bernal traces her interest in the military to Dec. 7, 1941, the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and precipitated a declaration of war by the United States.

Her father met her mother that day. He served his country in World War II, and Bernal was born on the Patuxent River Naval Base in Maryland.

Bernal has been interested in English history since she read Sir Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe" as a sophomore in high school. She has traveled several times to the United Kingdom and Ireland and, in January, published her first book, "The Briton and the Dane."

The book is set in ninth century Britain during the reign of Alfred the Great, a benevolent king who kept his land free from Viking rule.

"There is some romance in there, but most of it is treachery, guts and glory," Bernal said. "I'm not a romance writer."

"One of the soldiers I write to, in Special Forces, wrote that the way I portray the warrior mentality is right on target. I'm very proud of that because the warrior spirit is with us."

The dedication in Bernal's book pays tribute to a young soldier who died serving his country and who never met the author.

Bernal, who retired recently, plans to write another book and to continue to attend as many of her grandchildren's activities as she can. She also enjoys dancing with a medieval dance troupe, Barony of the Lonely Tower, which is affiliated with the Society for Creative Anachronism.

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