

live well operation holiday joy

Three military families had their best Christmas ever, all thanks to the kindness of strangers by Anne Cas

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Holiday wishes can come true—just ask these military wives. With spouses thousands of miles away in Iraq or laid up with injuries, money was dwindling and they weren't sure how they could make the season joyful for their kids. Then, as if Santa himself had personally dispatched a squad of elves, people they didn't even know stepped up to lend a hand.

gifts galore

Kristi Loving had pretty much given up on having Christmas presents for her daughters Alani, 5, and Meah, 2, last year. Her husband, Barton, a marine sergeant who'd served in Iraq, had been in and out of the hospital with knee surgeries and infections, and Kristi was unable to work due to a heart condition diagnosed during her last pregnancy. What little money they had was being spent on pricey medications not covered by their health insurance. There simply wasn't anything left for gifts. "We've struggled a lot," says Kristi, whose family is stationed at Camp Pendleton in Southern California.

Then a friend told her about the Camp Pendleton YMCA Secret Santa program,

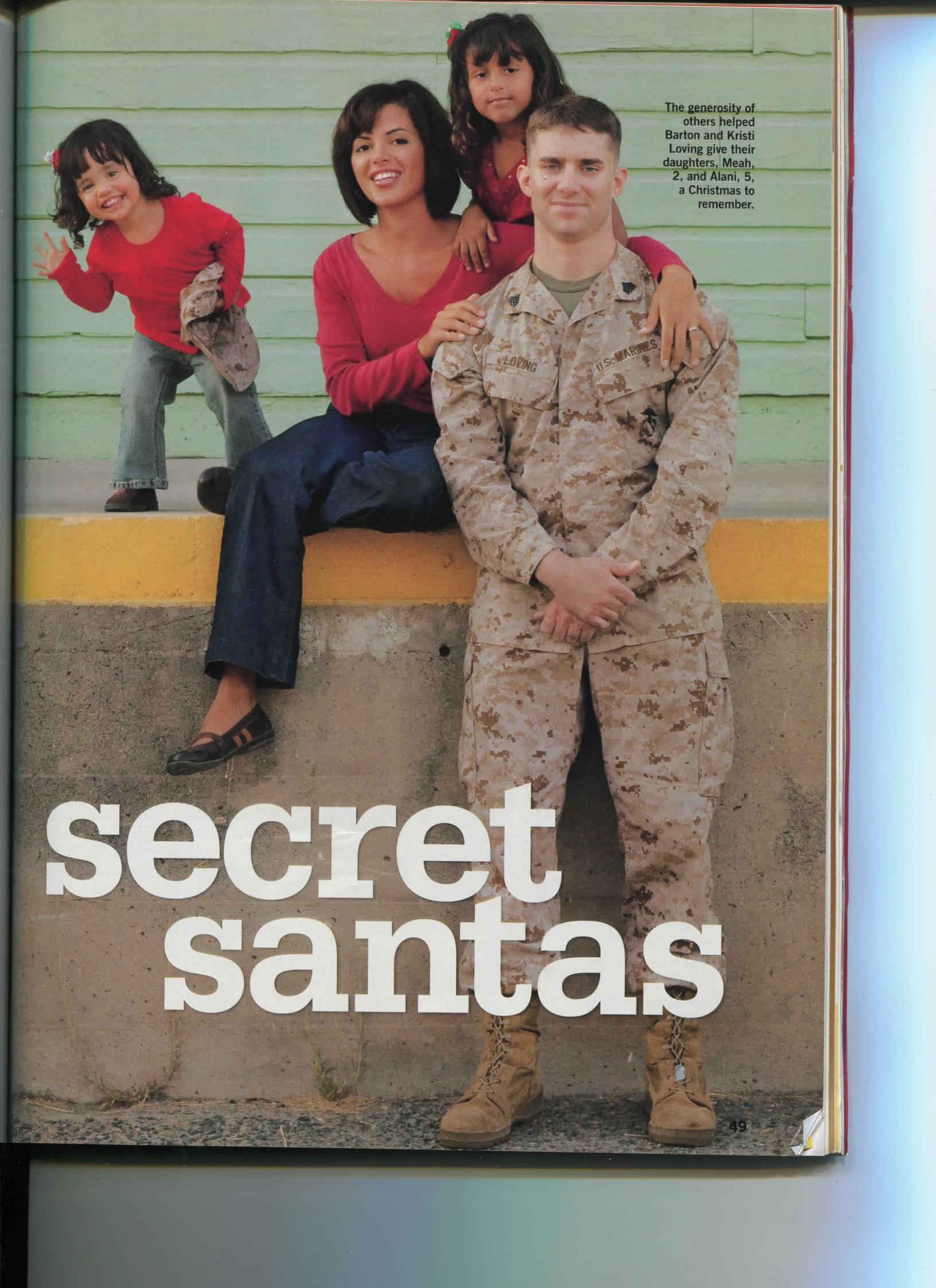
which assigns military families in need to a local business, civic group or individual who thanks them for their service by anonymously buying them holiday gifts. Kristi eagerly signed up, asking only for books, educational toys and art supplies for her daughters—nothing fancy. "I thought that way my girls would at least have a couple of presents to open," she says.

About a week before Christmas, Kristi drove to the distribution center in her little Toyota, expecting to pick up two or four presents, and watched in amazement as bag after bag of wrapped gifts was brought to her car. "The packages filled up the trunk, the back seat and the passenger seat! I could barely see out of the car," Kristi (Please turn

Help us thank the troops by giving their families a little joy this holiday season. Join our sixth annual Woman's Day/Armed Services YMCA drive, in partnership with the Military Channel, on behalf of military families in need. The ASYMCA helps junior enlisted service members and their

families. Every cent goes to providing Thanksgiving food baskets and Christmas gifts. To donate to the Woman's Day/Armed Services YMCA Holiday Drive, send a check payable to "Armed Services YMCA" (specify the WD/ASYMCA Holiday Drive) to 6359 Walker Lane, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22310. To donate by credit card, call 800-597-1260 (9 A.M.-5 P.M. ET) or go to womansday.com/asmca

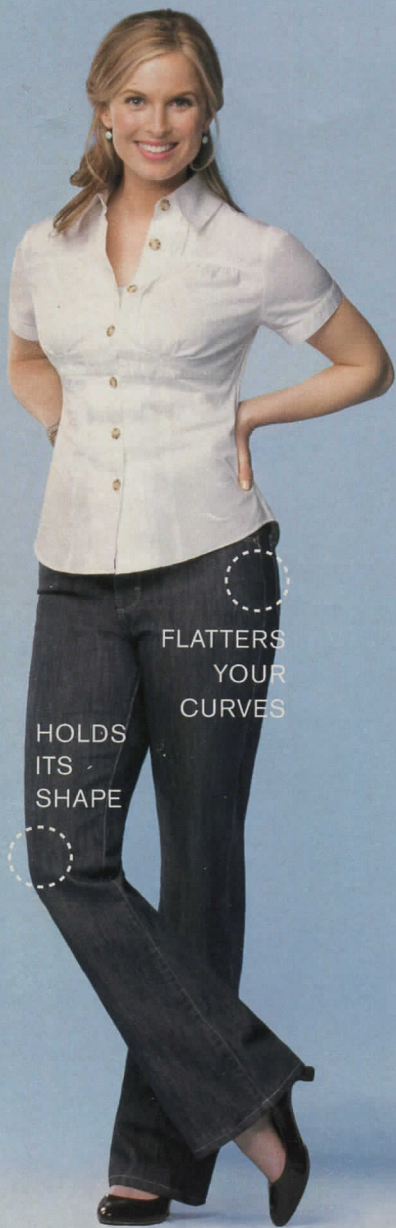
BE A SECRET SANTA



The generosity of others helped Barton and Kristi Loving give their daughters, Meah, 2, and Alani, 5, a Christmas to remember.

secret santas

— NEW —
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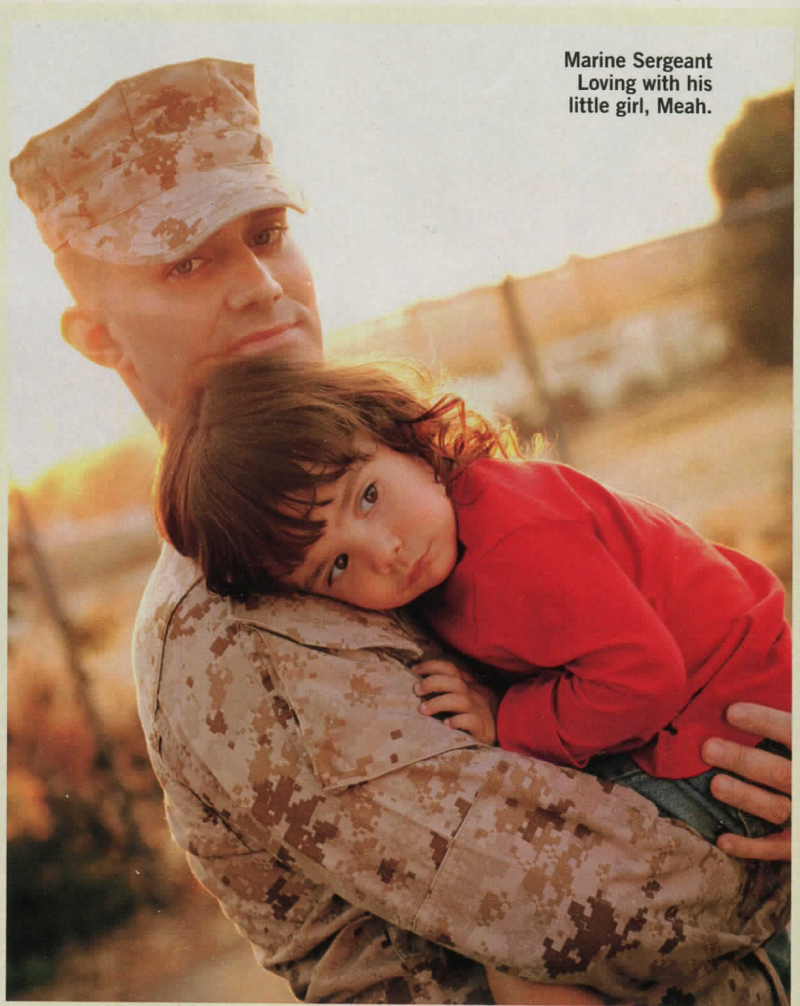


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Marine Sergeant
 Loving with his
 little girl, Meah.

says. As she was about to drive away, she was also handed a bunch of gift cards to Target and Walmart. The total: \$900. Kristi was speechless.

On Christmas Eve and morning, Alani and Meah excitedly tore open their presents and found a Barbie Dream House, a Power Wheels car, books, crafts and many more toys. Kristi and her husband even found gifts for themselves: a few video games for Barton and high-end athletic wear for Kristi.

"This was our way of giving back to the troops for all they do to protect our freedoms," says Frank Hoffman, general manager of Petrochem Manufacturing Inc. in Carlsbad, California, the company that bought the Lovings' anonymous gifts. It was Hoffman's idea to sign

up Petrochem, but he was amazed at his colleagues' generosity, especially in this economy. "We have 28 employees and we collected \$3,500." The company's owners matched that amount, so Hoffman had \$7,000 to spend on four military families. He made three separate trips to Toys"R"Us, which gave him a discount on all his purchases. When he was done, he still had \$2,000, so he bought gift cards—Kristi made theirs last for months.

Thanks to Frank and his colleagues, the Lovings were able to give their girls a wonderful Christmas. And they made sure to tell Meah and Alani that some of the gifts were from Santa, but others were from "nice people we don't know," so the (Please turn to 52)

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SECRET SANTAS

CONTINUED girls would always remember how giving folks can be.

lighting the way home

Lisa Howard of Grand Haven, Michigan, had her hands full last December. Her husband, Bob, a major in the National Guard, had been serving in Iraq for 11 months, so she was caring for her boys Brendan, 4, and Connor, 3, solo—and they kept her hopping. Add in her three-days-a-week job as a physical therapist and Lisa had a lot to juggle.

She'd seen her husband just once since he'd left for Iraq, and sadly it was when he returned briefly for his father's funeral. It had been a tough year, but the family stayed close through phone calls, e-mails and videotaped bedtime prayers. Being strong was simply what Lisa did. She didn't consider herself a hero. But someone at her job did.

A few weeks before Christmas, Lisa found some candy canes left on

her desk as part of a holiday gift exchange. Next to them was a letter informing her that she had been nominated for the Decorated Family program sponsored by Christmas Decor, an outdoor holiday decorating franchise that lights the homes of up to 200 deserving military families free of charge. The letter included a snippet from the nomination form, and as she read it she began to cry:

*How do you describe a 3-year-old who just wants his daddy home to tuck him in at night? How do you make sure a heavy heart does not weigh you down? Strength, faith and love—the core of the Howard family. As Lisa, Brendan and Connor anxiously await Bob's return, please help them light the way home for a dearly missed father, husband, son and soldier—a man and a family who gave up much so others wouldn't have to. The letter was signed "Secret Santa" and an added notation said, *If this guy calls you, don't hang up on him.**

The "guy" was Dave DeVries, owner of a Christmas Decor

franchise in western Michigan. A week later he did call to tell Lisa that her family was in the running. But she demurred. "I told Dave that if there was a more deserving family, to pick them," says Lisa.

"That's pretty much how the letter described you," DeVries told her, laughing. "It said you were very selfless." Days later he called back. "We're doing your house," he said.

The lights went up a few days before Bob Howard was due home from Iraq. When he returned on December 21, his house looked like a Christmas card. "It was really amazing," he says. "It was so nice for folks I didn't even know to do this."

A week before the holiday, Lisa learned the identity of her Secret Santa, the one whose nomination letter had moved her to tears and who'd left the letter and candy canes on her desk. It was Jean Nielsen, a coworker Lisa had known for years.

a father's surprise

Desiray Wilder wasn't looking forward to Christmas 2007. It would be the first holiday away from her husband, Matthew, then an Army sergeant, in more than a decade. Worse still, her daughters, Destiny, 10, and Mariah, 7, had celebrated their birthdays without their dad. Now they would have to celebrate Christmas without him too.

"Mariah said she wished he could be wrapped up in a box like a present and mailed home," says Desiray, who then lived in Elkton, Kentucky.

Matt, on his fourth tour of duty, had six months left, so Desiray knew it was unlikely they'd see him soon. Then one day in early December, Matt called from Iraq. He'd just been accepted to flight school and might be coming home sooner than planned. Desiray thought it would be January at the earliest, so she kept busy volunteering at North Todd Elementary, her girls' school. "I tried not to get my hopes up," she says.

On December 10, she got the call

Together at last: Lisa and Bob Howard with sons, Connor, 3, and Brendan, 4, and newborn Kelsey Claire.



she'd been hoping for: Matt was coming home in a few days. Desiray still kept the news from the girls because she knew that military plans could change in an instant. Plus, she'd begun to hatch a secret plan: "I thought, *Wouldn't it be wonderful to surprise Mariah and Destiny at school?*" She knew she couldn't pull it off alone, so she asked some of the teachers to join in. At first Matt was going to walk in during the morning assembly. But then instructional assistant Tracy Latham, who recalled what Desiray had told her about Mariah's wish, got the idea of gift-wrapping him.

"I bought a red ribbon and wrapping paper," Latham recalls. While at the store she couldn't resist sharing the news with the store greeter, who was helping her find a big, discarded box. "Have you called Channel 13?" he *(Please turn to 55)*

Matthew and Desiray Wilder with Mariah, 7, and Destiny, 10, at the girls' school.



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SECRET SANTAS

CONTINUED asked. She had not thought of that. Soon the TV station was notified, and by the time all the kids had gathered for the assembly there was a camera crew in the gym and excitement in the air.

Mariah and Destiny had been told that they'd be opening a present sent from their dad during the assembly. As the girls stood in the middle of the gym, an enormous gift-wrapped box was wheeled out. They ripped off the paper and out popped their father, still wearing his Army fatigues.

"Daddy!" they shrieked. Destiny grabbed him around the waist as he reached down, scooped up Mariah and held her close. One look at her girls' happy faces and Desiray knew that they'd just received the best gift ever. "It was wonderful to have Matt home," she says. "I don't know what we'd have done without him." wd

OPERATION KID COMFORT

How you can help military kids across the country

● Seven-year-old Mariah Wilder got her wish when her dad jumped out of that big gift-wrapped box. But thousands of other children are still waiting for their moms and dads to return from active duty. To help military kids cope while a parent is deployed, the ASYMCA started Operation Kid Comfort. Created at Fort Bragg/Pope Air Force Base in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 2003, the program has volunteers collect photos of the deployed parent from his or her family and transfer them onto quilts or pillows that they hand-make themselves. Having a cozy quilt or pillow featuring pictures of Mom or Dad to snuggle with brings a smile to the kids' faces, and makes the time apart a little bit easier. If you'd like to volunteer to make one, contact Susan Simms, Armed Services YMCA, 6359 Walker Lane, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22310. *Angela Ebron*

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