

HUGS FROM HOME

A young employee at Bentwater preparing to deploy to Iraq inspired Marlene Summers to answer her own call to duty

For most Americans, the war in Iraq is hard to get their heads around. Not so much whether they are for or against it, but the fact it is a war being fought by the sons and daughters of parents they do not know, against an enemy that does not wear a uniform, in a part of the world most have never been, and on behalf of people they will never meet.

But while on the putting green at Bentwater one day in October, Marlene Summers got up close and personal with the war. That's where she met Army reservist Adam Michael Johnson, a member of the Bentwater grounds crew who was about to be deployed to Iraq.

"We're not a military family, and we're a long way from the war," said Summers, who owns a chocolate chip cookie company. "But since I have a son the same age, I just put myself in his mother's

shoes and thought what it must be like to send your son to war. It just touched me."

Summers decided to answer her own call to duty. She met the young man's parents — John and Belinda Johnson of Magnolia—and also began exchanging e-mails of encouragement and sending chocolate chip cookies to Johnson in Iraq as a small token of appreciation of his service to the country.

When Johnson told her the cookies were a big morale-booster with his fellow soldiers, that's when Summers decided to expand her project to every soldier fighting thousands of miles from home.

Summers owns a company called Chocolate Chips By George. She decided one way she could support the troops would be to send every soldier a "hug from home" in the form of a chocolate chip cookie.

The company launched its Soldier Project in September and, for every \$1 cookie that someone buys, she will send a cookie a solid-

er in Iraq or Afghanistan. The names of the individuals and businesses who donate to the Soldier Project go onto her virtual "Grammy's Wall of Heroes" on her website. For people or groups who purchase 50 or more cookies, a star is placed beside their name on the wall.

"Instead of a wall consisting of the names of our fallen heroes," Summers said, "my wall would be a list of the people who want to send a 'hug' to our soldiers letting them know we appreciate their sacrifice and their valor. This wall would have the names of Americans living freely in this great country because of the soldiers who leave their homes, their families and are willing to give the ultimate sacrifice if called upon to do so."

The goal of the project is to send a million cookies/hugs to American soldiers. So far, nearly 900 groups and individuals, have been added to the Wall of Heroes, and Summers is hoping to add many more.

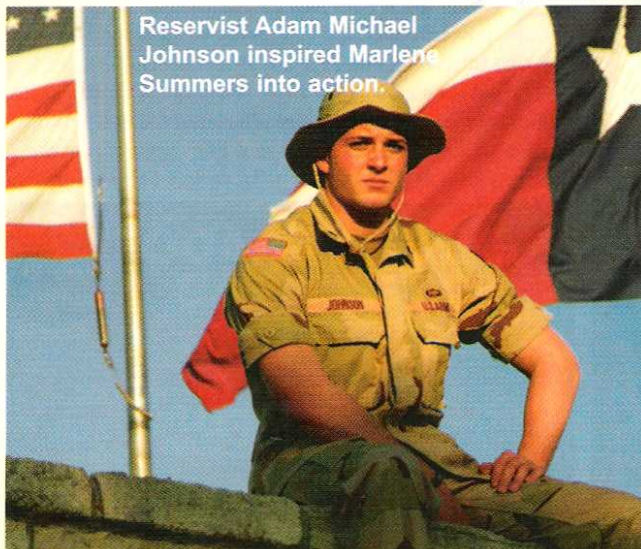
Women's Golf Charities, for instance, has pledged up to \$5,000.

While one chocolate chip cookie seems like a very small way to say "thank you" to someone who puts their life on the line every day, a number of veterans have reiterated how far even the smallest gesture will go in boosting a soldier's morale. Especially when troops see the negative slant placed on the war on television, when they know there are good stories that are not being told.

One vet told Summers about the importance of receiving a pineapple upside down cake from his mother in 1953. After being flown 6,000 miles to reach him, the cake had fallen apart. But that didn't really matter. Truly, he said, it was the thought that counted.

"It's amazing how you remember the little things like that," the veteran said, "and how something small like that can boost morale."

For more info, about the Soldier Project, visit www.chocolatechipsbygeorge.com.



Reservist Adam Michael Johnson inspired Marlene Summers into action.



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