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MAIL VALENTINE GIFTS, CARDS, TO TROOPS EARLY

WASHINGTON – It's not too early for family members of troops deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom to start mailing Valentine's Day packages, cards and letters. The senior official that oversees the Postal Service's domestic and international transportation and logistics network said that while January 20 is the last day to mail packages via Parcel Post; Priority Mail packages and First-Class letters and cards will reach loved ones on time if mailed by January 30 .

"Mail builds morale," explained Vice President, Network Operations Management, Paul Vogel. "A package or letter from a family member at home is the next best thing to being there. Our dedicated employees will continue their all out effort to get the mail delivered to the military's postal system overseas, so that they can deliver these important items to loved ones on the front lines."

The Postal Service is also supporting the Department of Defense (DoD) in reminding individuals and groups who wish to mail bulk quantities of care items to service members unknown to them that alternative means for supporting our men and women in uniform are available that won't slow the military mail system's ability to deliver packages, cards and letters from loved ones.

Do the Right Thing

The DoD recommends supporting the service member's family at home, or through other local programs, or by:

- visiting www.defendamerica.mil and clicking the "Support Our Troops" icon;
- visiting www.operationuplink.org; or,
- calling the Military Postal Service Agency's toll-free number 1(800) 810-6098 to identify other programs.

Addressing Tips

The DoD has requested that those who send mail use the service member's full name (with or without rank or rating), unit and APO/FPO (Air/Army Post Office or Fleet Post Office) address with the nine-digit ZIP Code (if one is assigned) and a return address. For packages, customers are reminded to place addresses on one side only; the return address in the upper left hand corner, and recipient's in the lower right portion.

Generally speaking, in keeping with international agreements, there are specific restrictions for each five-digit military Post Office ZIP Code (APO/FPO). Restrictions are updated every other Thursday and can be found at www.usps.com, Customers can also call 1-800-ASK-USPS or visit their local Post Office.

All military units are assigned an APO or FPO ZIP Code and in many cases that ZIP Code travels with the unit. The Postal Service places APO/FPO mail on special charter flights, commercial airlines, and military service aircraft at military and U.S. airports.

When planes arrive overseas, the mail is tendered to the military and transported via local military transportation to delivery points. Last year, more than 60 million pounds of mail were flown to the region.

The time to deliver varies depending on the category of mail and the country of destination. According to the Military Postal Service Agency (MPSA), depending on where the service member is located, letters and Priority Mail parcels to Afghanistan, Iraq and Kuwait normally take 10 to 15 days. There may be size restrictions and customs declaration form requirements to some locations, as mail going through the Military Postal Service Agency can be subject to the host country's customs requirements.

Packaging Tips

It's a good idea to keep the following in mind to ensure that packages are delivered promptly.

- **The Box:** Select a box strong enough to protect the contents and large enough to accommodate cushioning. If reusing a box, cover all previous labels and markings with a heavy black marker or adhesive labels.
- **Cushioning:** Cushioning the contents with newspaper is a novel way to send news from home. Styrofoam and bubble wrap are also good choices. Close and shake the box. If it rattles, add additional cushioning to keep items from shifting.
- **Batteries:** Occasionally a battery powered item, such as a radio or electric razor, will turn on during shipment. Be sure to remove and wrap the batteries separately.
- **Sealing:** Tape the opening of the box and reinforce all seams with 2" wide tape. Use clear or brown packaging tape, reinforced packing tape or paper tape. Do not use cord, string or twine, as it causes the package to get caught and possibly damaged in sorting equipment.
- **Include a card describing the contents:** Occasionally improperly wrapped packages fall apart during shipment. Including a card inside the package that lists the sender's and recipient's addresses along with a description of the contents helps in collecting items that have fallen open during processing.