

U.S. troops on leave deserve pampering

Friday, July 4, 2008 2:59 AM

BY [ANN FISHER](#)

Eighteen days isn't much time to rest and relax on break from a war.

That thought dawned on Melissa North during a recent plane trip as she chatted with two Army medics from Grove City on leave from Iraq. What the women missed the most, they told her, was the luxury of a shower on their own time and in their own bathroom.

North said she was overcome with the urge to treat them to a pedicure as soon as they touched down in Columbus, or drag them to the recent opening of *Sex in the City*.

These soldiers deserved some pampering, she said. But how?

The stranger seated on her left had the answer. He told her to look up a Web site on her Blackberry.

If you're feeling really patriotic today and want to help a service member on leave, check it out for yourself: www.operationopenarms.com, which is devoted to making the most of the time U.S. troops in Florida have while on leave from foreign duty.

John Bunch told North that he started the southwest Florida program after he met a soldier who wanted more than anything to go fishing in the ocean but couldn't afford the luxury while on leave.

Bunch owns a charter fishing business. Of course, he took the fellow fishing, but something nagged at him: Why can't we do something like this for everyone on leave?

The Florida Web site boasts more than 160 sponsors who provide all kinds of freebies. Participation is limited to troops carrying an official DA-31 leave form. For Marines and Navy personnel, who don't get combat leave, the program offers the same opportunity any time during the first 30 days after return from foreign and combat duty.

"Why don't we have one of those in Columbus?" North asked Bunch.

"I don't know," he responded.

"Then I'll do it," she said.

And she has. Her Web site operationopenarmsohio.com is scheduled to launch today.

"We don't have an ocean, but there are so many things here to do," North said.

Golf. Kayaking. Water parks. Bowling. Hocking Hills. Professional baseball, football, hockey and soccer. The Buckeyes. Salons galore. Restaurants. Car washes. Shoeshines. Tailors. Theaters. Concerts. And there's always Lake Erie. And shopping.

So far, 22 sponsors have signed on. North is shooting for 200 by the end of the year. Check it out to see if you fit.

North's only regret, now, is that she didn't get the names of the Army medics who inspired operationopenarmsohio.com in the first place.

"They're back in Iraq, and I never got a chance to take them shopping for a pair of heels or something," said North, who sells new homes for M/I Homes. "They're still people. They're soldiers who are giving so much. Why not let them have free everything while they're home?"

Feeling patriotic today? Then do something about it.