

## **Convoy of Toys – Our State Magazine – December 2006**

*During the holiday season, Marine Corps Reservists dedicate themselves to bringing joy to underprivileged children through the Toys for Tots program.*

By Bryan A. Oesterreich

The word “Marines” evokes many images, most relating to men and women training for or engaging in military actions around the world in defense of our country. That’s because that’s what they do, most of the time. When the Christmas season approaches, however, many of those same Marines show that even the strongest have compassion for the weakest — the children who, were it not for the Toys for Tots (TFT) program, would probably face a very bleak Christmas morning.

The TFT program began in Los Angeles, California, in 1947. That year, Bill Hendricks, a major in the Marine Corps Reserves, led a group of fellow Reservists in collecting and distributing 5,000 toys to area children. The Marine Corps took notice. The program went national the following year and was officially known as the United States Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program. The growth of the program since then is nothing short of remarkable.

In its first full year of operation, 1948, there were 74 communities in 25 states participating. Currently, there are programs in 516 communities in all 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. In 2005, more than 18.5 million toys were given to 7.5 million children. Since its inception, TFT has distributed 351 million toys to 166 million needy children. Needless to say, collecting and distributing that many toys takes a lot of manpower. Cue the Marines.

### **Local support**

All of the Marine Corps Reserve units in North Carolina participate in the TFT program — including the Marine Corps Reserve unit at the Cherry Point Air Station in Pamlico County. Coordinating the program there is Gunnery Sergeant Nichol Williamson. She has a support staff of seven enlisted personnel and two officers — all full-time. Williamson and her staff work with agencies in 20 eastern North Carolina counties to collect both toys and donations, sort them, and arrange for distribution. Many people, organizations, and businesses put time and effort into the program. “We’re always trying to increase local support for our program,” she says. “There are many ways for local citizens and businesses to get involved.”

One population that is showing support by not only collecting toys, but also raising public awareness of the TFT program, is local motorcyclists. Williamson says there are several clubs in her service area that hold annual “rides,” where participants donate money or toys before taking an afternoon cruise. “Every year, we’re seeing more and more riders,” she says. “Some of them are the big and burley type, but they all have soft spots for needy kids.”

Another source of cash donations and toys is the corporate sector. Time spent by Williamson and her staff recruiting new participants is paying dividends. “Last year was our strongest year ever,” she says. For example, several area car dealerships have gotten involved by offering to match bicycle donations. If area citizens donate 50 bikes, an additional 50 will find their way into the hands of children with smiling faces come Christmas. Other area businesses make bins available for toy collection or provide drop-off points for those who would like to donate.

In Beaufort County, Washington’s NBC-TV affiliate, WITN-7, has been participating in the TFT program for 20 years. Viewers can drop off new, unwrapped toys or make cash donations at the station during the months of November and December. The toys are arranged around the news desk, so viewers can see the ever-mounting bounty. During the days just before Christmas, news anchors are elbow deep in dolls. Dave Jordan, evening news anchor at WITN, is delighted to be involved. “Everyone at the station participates,” he says. “Over the past few years, we’ve had to use every available space we can find to store the toys.” Jordan feels the program benefits needy children and helps provide a stronger sense of community for others. “It pulls the whole region together.”

Another strong supporter of the TFT program is the Kinston Indians minor league baseball franchise. The team holds a “Toys for Tots” game every year. Marines in dress blues are on hand to show support and assist in collecting donations. Other communities, like Plymouth, ask the Marines to participate in parades — which lets the children interact with the Marines while they collect donations.

Even local colleges are getting involved by holding fund-raising events. An original Christmas play was performed at Beaufort County Community College in Washington to benefit TFT. More than 500 toys were donated at the performance, which more than doubled the number collected the year before. Rebecca Spain, Student Government Association president at the time, was very pleased with the results. “We had fun helping Down East children have a happy Christmas morning,” she says. “We’re planning on doing it again next year.”

### **“Like Santa’s workshop”**

Once all the toys have been donated, the fun really begins for Williamson and her staff at Cherry Point. “It looks like Santa’s workshop around here in November and December,” she says with a gleam in her eye.

Toys are brought to Cherry Point either by groups and organizations that have held benefits to help stimulate donations or by military trucks. When the toys arrive, they are unloaded into more than a dozen barracks-style warehouses that are used as sleeping quarters for Marines undergoing training during the first six months of the year. Then the toys go through a sorting process that includes gender and age group criteria. Warehouse Distribution Agency Coordinator Sgt. Deanna Dively supervises this part of the process. “We do our best to match the toys with the children,” she says. Dively provides some interesting data on the toys. “By far, the most commonly donated toys are for children in the three to six years of age group,” she says. “We usually end up with a surplus of those toys. But we’re always short of baby toys.”

Once the toys have been sorted, they need to be boxed up for distribution. Area churches, the Salvation Army, and other organizations submit request forms. Each organization uses its own criteria to determine the needs of its community's children. Then Dively and her staff do their best to fulfill the request orders. When the orders have been filled and boxed, the organizations are contacted so the toys can be picked up and distributed. "We'd like to have our Marines distribute them, but our service area is just too large," she says. Last year, they distributed 40,000 toys to 20,000 eastern North Carolina children.

If the supply of a certain age group's toys becomes depleted, funds are used from money raised to go out and purchase suitable toys. "Having the ability to purchase the toys we need is a definite advantage," Dively says. "If people aren't sure what sort of toy would be appropriate, a cash donation will be very welcome and helpful."

Capt. Kenneth Griffin of the Salvation Army location in Washington is one of the lucky ones who has the chance to meet the children who benefit from the program. "We take out ads in the newspaper telling folks how they can apply for the toys," he says. "They're asked to show documentation of their financial condition." Griffin and his staff then work up a request order. When the toys arrive at his location, families are asked to come and pick out the toys. "It's a great day when they come for the toys," he says. "It warms our hearts to see the children so happy."

Last year, the Toys for Tots Foundation raised \$236 million to help ensure that our youngest and most vulnerable Americans have a very merry Christmas for years to come. The next time you hear the word "Marines," remember that while they are dedicated to preserving the American way of life in a military context, they're also dedicated to caring for Americans who cannot yet care for themselves. Williamson says, "If we can make one child happy, our mission is accomplished."

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