

HOME / LIFESTYLE / FOOD

Cakes baked with care in a time of war

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Kevin Muir of the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq with a Bake Me a Wish! cake.

By Darry Madden
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Josh Kaye remembers the birthday cakes of his childhood so bittersweetly that he has shaped his life's work around them. He grew up in a family of humble means, and never had the kinds of birthday parties his friends did, the ones in which kids were covered in confetti and the culmination was a big cake and flickering candles. Now his mission is to help make birthdays special by shipping cakes from well-wishers to boys and girls across the city, the country, and now to a war zone.

Kaye's company, Bake Me a Wish!, has been sending cakes to and from US troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. About 10,000 cakes have gone over as part of Operation Birthday Cake. This year, Bake Me a Wish! teamed up with the Armed Forces Foundation to help soldiers send free cakes to their mothers and wives back home for Mother's Day, as well as for civilians back home to send cakes to wives and mothers serving in the Middle East. It's called Operation Mother's Day.

This all started two years ago, when Kaye got a call from a mother whose son was serving in Iraq. His birthday was coming up, and she wanted to see that her son had a cake. "I said, 'probably not,'" recalls Kaye. "How would we even get it there, and how would we get it there in one piece?"

Then he and a team of bakers in New York began testing recipes and researching packaging that would take an Oreo cookie cake safely into battle. A not-insignificant amount of styrofoam insulation and artificial ice go into sending a cake, which can sometimes take up to two weeks to get to its destination.

The cakes themselves are Buicks: On the higher end of the luxury models, pulsing with sweetness and ultra smooth on the tongue. They come in flavors like double fudge crunch and double chocolate cake.

Nelida Bagley of Sugar Hill, N.H., is a military mom who will be receiving a cake this Mother's Day from her son, Jose Pequeno, a staff sergeant in the Army National Guard. On behalf of Pequeno, the Armed Forces Foundation is sending his mother the cake as a thank you for her unflagging support after he was severely injured in an explosion at a checkpoint in Ramadi, Iraq. After 14 operations, Pequeno, 34, remains unable to speak or move.

"The cake serves as a unique message of love and support and an excellent reminder that family members are not forgotten," says Douglas Stone of the Armed Forces Foundation.

Bake Me a Wish! cakes are available from 888-987-9474 or bakemeawish.com. The Armed Forces Foundation donates 25 cakes per month to military families. Call 202-547-4713 or go to armedforcesfoundation.org. ■