

A VISIT TO THE USO SHOWS THE VERY BEST OF AMERICA

I have seen the very best of America, and it is not Martin Sheen or Michael Moore. Rather, it is the salesman from Akron, Ohio, with a three-year-old daughter he has held too seldom since her birth. It is the grocery clerk from Fredricksburg, Maryland. It is the student studying heating and air conditioning in Pittsburgh, the mechanic from a small town in North Carolina, the young woman from Wisconsin and another from Florida. All are members of the U.S. military en route to Iraq, ready and willing to put their lives on the line so that you and I won't have to.

I spent the morning recently with them and their colleagues at the USO facilities at Hartsfield-Jackson Airport in Atlanta. I am a more grateful and humble American for having done so. Every day of the year, including weekends and holidays, some 300 to 600 soldiers, Marines, Air Force and Navy personnel arrive and depart Atlanta to and from Iraq through the USO facility. You will be pleased to know that they are treated like the heroes they are by a cadre of USO volunteers, under the direction of Mary Lou Austin, the president and chief professional officer of the USO Council of Georgia.

The USO doesn't suffer for volunteers. Ms. Austin says they have a waiting list of people wanting to be a part of this extraordinary opportunity. Space doesn't allow me to list all the groups that give their time and talent to the USO, but they range from BellSouth and its retired employees to Primerica, Wachovia and Lockheed Marietta, from the Knights of Columbus, the Atlanta Kiwanis Club and the Jewish War Veterans to the good folks who run Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. That doesn't mean that the USO can't use your help. The volunteers prepare "care packages" for the military and always need grocery certificates, tickets to entertainment and sporting events, bath kits (some of the soldiers arrive in Atlanta directly from the battlefield!), popular music CDs, hand-held electronic games and, of course, money.

While the Atlanta staging area is one of the busiest USO facilities in the country, the Georgia Council and its able volunteers also serve the military and their families at Hunter Air Force Base in Savannah and Robins Air Force Base in Warner Robins. The treatment our troops receive is Southern hospitality at its very best. I watched enthusiastic volunteers from Wachovia Bank greet weary-eyed soldiers in the airport's main concourse with flags and cheers as they arrived for 15 days of R&R. Even onlookers joined in. Passengers stopped to thank the volunteers. Some gave money on the spot. One woman got so caught up in the excitement that she later exclaimed to a USO volunteer, "I was so busy cheering that I may have missed my mother's arrival." I suspect that she got as distracted as I did, watching emotional families tearfully hugging their sons and daughters, husbands and wives.

Nothing I have experienced prepared me for the scene when the young men and women lined up for their return trip to Iraq. They gathered in a hallway at the airport and marched double-file to the gate to receive their boarding passes. As the troops appeared in the atrium with their backpacks and assorted gear — one even toting his guitar — a cheer arose in the airport. Passengers awaiting their flights, diners in the restaurants, waiters, bartenders, security guards, police officers and gate agents gave them a sustained standing ovation. The troops looked a little surprised, slightly embarrassed and extremely pleased. It was the public's way of saying "thank you" and "please stay safe." It was a sight I will never forget.

You want to see the very best in America? Make it a point to get to Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport one day — any day — and watch America's finest as they receive the sincere appreciation from those they serve. Then thank God for the selfless men and women in our military, for the dedicated USO staff and volunteers who take such good care of them and for both groups for reminding us that we live in the greatest country on earth.