

DAILY NEWS

MEMORIAL DAY

DO WRITE THING FOR TROOPS

Effort to cheer G.I.s

BY MAKI BECKER
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

LINDA MENDENHALL-Kushner has a Memorial Day wish: to collect thousands of letters from New Yorkers and send them to her husband's Army National Guard unit in Iraq.

"You know that movie, 'Miracle on 34th St.'? There's that spectacular scene where they bring bags and bags of letters to Santa Claus," the 45-year-old Huntington, L.I., woman said. "That's what I want — to get bags of mail to our boys."

Mendenhall-Kushner's husband is Staff Sgt. Stanford Mendenhall of the Guard's 69th Infantry Regiment — New York's own Fighting 69th.

The men of the 69th were called to duty last May. After five months of training at Fort Hood, Tex., and then in the deserts of California, they were deployed to Iraq.

Their primary duty is to protect the dangerous highway that connects Baghdad to its airport.

Eight soldiers from the 69th have been killed in action.

To show the guardsmen they have not been forgotten and to keep their spirits high, Mendenhall-Kushner is organizing a letter-writing campaign.

She is asking New Yorkers to pen a letter or a card addressed to "Dear Soldier" this Memorial Day, as a way to support our troops and to honor the sacrifices of those who have given their lives.

The correspondence should be mailed to Mendenhall-Kushner, who will arrange to send everything she gets to the unit in care of her husband, who will distribute letters to the other men. (Because of security concerns, the military requires mail to be addressed to a specific serviceman or servicewoman.)

Mendenhall, who spoke to the Daily News by phone from Iraq, said letters from New York would be much appreciated.

"It will lift their spirits," he said. "The people are backing us — it's a good feeling to know that."

At Mendenhall-Kushner's home in Huntington, she and other family members of 69th soldiers will get to work, collecting the letters and inviting the public to sign giant posters, all of which will be shipped to the regiment. "Their words will carry them,"

she said of the public's words of encouragement.

Already, she has collected dozens of letters from sixth-graders at Long Island Lutheran Middle & High School.

"Dear Soldier," a child named Dillon wrote. "I am very thankful of what you are doing for me and I have pretty much no way to repay you, but all I can say now is good luck and be safe. I know you can do it. P.S. You're my hero."

Mendenhall-Kushner said she's hoping New Yorkers, who have proven so generous during holiday seasons, will step up one more time for the 69th Regiment.

"They have to have a gung-ho attitude and we need to be cheerleaders."

In her cheer squad is Lily Trujillo, 50, of Copiague, L.I., whose son, Fernando, is a member of the 69th.

"They still need a lot of encouragement," she said of her doting son, who sent her flowers on Mother's Day.

"They just want to be appreciated and remembered for what they're doing," Trujillo said. "If it wasn't for them fighting for everyone's freedom, where would we be?"

Another mother of a 69th guardsman, Colleen Wright, 55, of West Islip, L.I., worries that her son, Jonathan Rothwell, and his fellow soldiers are starting to get weary.

"I know they're getting tired being there," Wright said. "It's very hot there now. They'd love to come home."

With Internet access and phone cards available, many of the soldiers keep in contact with their families through E-mail and phone calls.

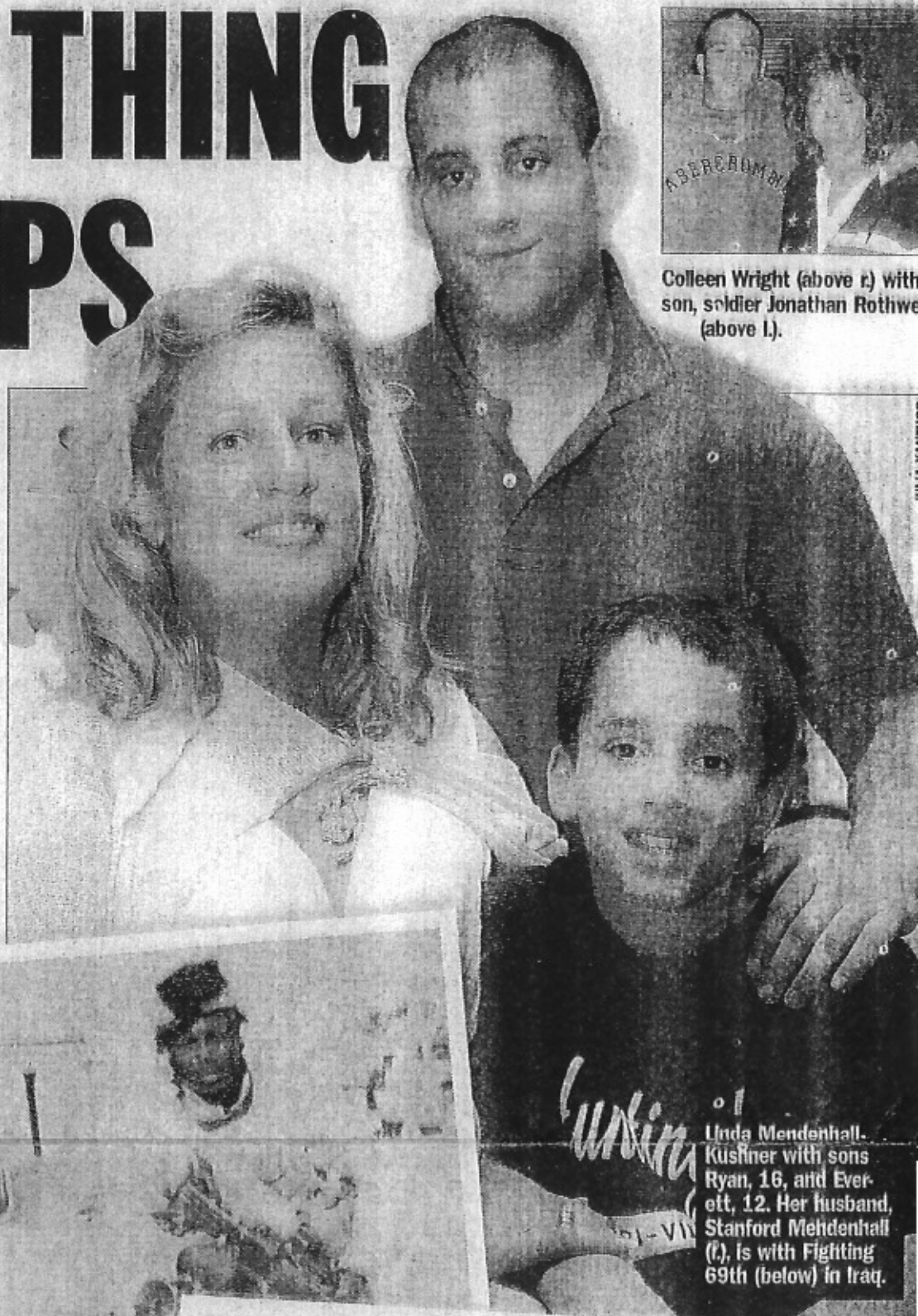
But Rothwell assures his mother that the soldiers still crave letters from home, Wright said.

"My son tells me whenever he receives a letter, it's like a million dollars," she said. "It's like five minutes of being home."

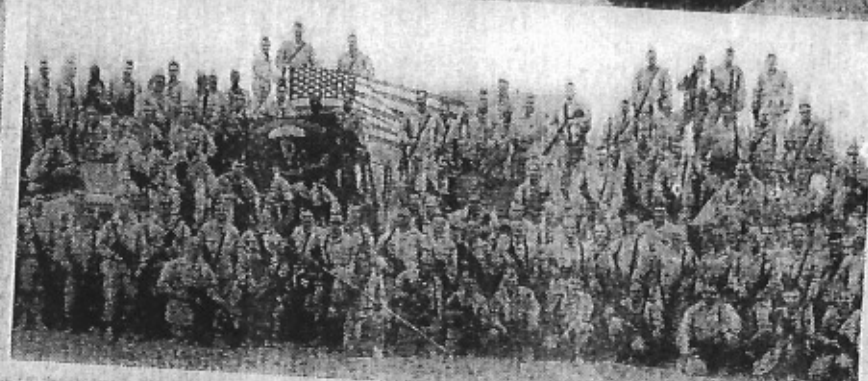
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Colleen Wright (above r) with son, soldier Jonathan Rothwell (above l).



Linda Mendenhall-Kushner with sons Ryan, 16, and Everett, 12. Her husband, Stanford Mendenhall (l.), is with Fighting 69th (below) in Iraq.



**SENDING
A HERO
YOUR
THANKS**

Send a letter or card addressed to
"Dear Soldier" to:
**Linda
Mendenhall-Kushner
44 Cameron Drive
Huntington, L.I.
11743**

Mendenhall-Kushner also is collecting gifts for the soldiers.

Among the most requested items are phone cards, DVDs, CDs, sports drink powders that can be mixed with water, beef jerky, any kind of food that comes in cans or tins, and goodies to give out to Iraqi children, such as crayons and color pencils.