



## Candy Airlift Sends Goodwill to Marines

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To most, a candy bar is a snack, maybe a guilty pleasure. But to the men and women in military service in Afghanistan, the confections come with an infusion of goodwill from the folks back home. “I can only speak from personal experience,” attested Laguna Beach resident and Marine helicopter pilot Brie Walker, a current reservist with Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 772 in Willow Grove, Penn., “But when I was over there, the overwhelming generosity I saw from people back here is something I will never forget.”



*Laguna Beach resident Brie Walker at the controls of a Marine Super Stallion helicopter.*

Walker now has the chance to see it from the other side. Back home, the 35-year-old full-time mother of two young girls, aged 2 and 4, joined the Laguna Beach Parents Club. When she found out about the club’s annual post-Halloween drive to collect excess or unwanted candy to donate to Marines on the ground in Afghanistan, not only did the effort resonate with her personally, but she knew exactly where to send it: Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 361, also known as TheFlying Tigers, currently stationed in Afghanistan. Walker and her husband Jason are both squadron alumni. Walker was a commissioned officer on active duty with the Flying Tigers from 1997 to 2006 before joining the reserves.

Parents’ club volunteers will collect candy Nov. 1 to 5 at the location’s listed below. Kids and parents are encouraged to create cards to include with their donations.

“When they receive this candy they will immediately realize that people back home really do care and remember them,” said Walker. “Every Marine knows what time the mail arrives each day, and when this shipment arrives, the smiles will be abundant, for sure.”

When she served in Afghanistan eight months last year, Walker took delight in sharing care packages from home with fellow Marines who “really” needed it. Since she was part of a helicopter squadron, her aircrew was in a position to deliver the goods. “The ground Marines who were the most isolated got all the best loot from our mail that we could find,” she said. So, while the Flying Tigers may keep some of the donations for themselves, they will bundle the bulk into care packages for delivery by helicopter to front line troops in austere locations most in need of TLC from home.

Now, out of harm’s way, Walker keenly feels the need to support soldiers still at risk in Afghanistan and is enthusiastic about the Parents’ Club initiative led by co-president Jill Espinola-Fletcher.



This is the fourth year of Halloween-candy collecting by the club. Previously, they gave it to a dentist in Mission Viejo, an ex-Marine who sent it to Camp Pendleton to be shipped overseas. “This year, we know exactly where the candy will be going and who will be in charge of dispersing it when it arrives in Afghanistan,” said Espinola-Fletcher, who also explained that between play group parties and other activities and trick-or-treating on Halloween, most kids collect much more candy than they can reasonably consume. “It’s extra special to us to know that we will be bringing some troops a little bit of Halloween from back home,” she added.

Walker started down the path as a Marine pilot by chance. While attending Maine’s Bowdoin College, she worked off campus as a waitress at a bar frequented by pilots from a nearby base. When one of them offered to show her the flight simulator where he trained, Walker accepted. “When I saw it, I was hooked,” she said.

The CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter that Walker flies is the largest helicopter in the U.S. military and is used to carry troops, heavy equipment, food, water, and ammunition to the Marines serving in outlying bases. Almost 100 feet long and weighing 53,000 pounds, the craft has two pilots and two to three aircrew-gunners in back. The chopper can carry cargo long range since it can be refueled in midair from a C-130 transport plane.

Though Walker has only lived in Laguna since May, she already appreciates the club’s embrace. Describing the difficulty of relocating to a new town with young children, Walker said she might have moved again if it weren’t for club members. “This club and its offerings made this town really feel like a community for me.”

Her former squadron’s commanding officer knows to expect in-coming candy and has promised to ensure it reach its destination. When it gets to the Flying Tigers, they’ll redistribute it to the neediest forward operating bases. “Something as seemingly silly as candy means a lot when you are far away from home doing that mission,” she said.

For more information about the Laguna Beach Parents Club, visit [www.lagunabeachparents.com](http://www.lagunabeachparents.com).

Candy Collection Locations:

- Laguna Library Children’s Section
- Laguna Presbyterian Church Preschool
- St. Catherine’s of Siena Parish School
- Laguna Beach Montessori