

Uncle Sam Wants You...To Bake

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To every thing, there is a season. At time for laughter; a time to cry. A time for protest and—I recently learned—a time to support the troops.

Please understand. I'm a child of the '60s. Call me a dove, a peacenik even. I never imagined I would cook up a way to become part of the so-called "war effort"—that is, I didn't until I heard from my friend, Alan Burks.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Alan's oldest son, Peter, decided to enlist in the Army. Tragically, 2LT Peter Burks was killed on November 24, 2007, when a bomb planted just outside the Green Zone in Baghdad blew up his Stryker armored vehicle. He was 24 years old.



Like son, like father. In the aftermath of Peter's death, Alan decided to reach out to other Gold Star families (a name given to bereaved relatives of those killed in combat). This spring, Alan arranged with American Airlines to fill a cargo jet with supplies for soldiers still

fighting in Iraq, and sent out an email blast, soliciting donations. Scanning his list of suggested items—pencils, soccer balls, athletic socks—I had a sweeter thought. Could I bake cookies? Alan thought this was an excellent idea.

Unsure which kind of confection might best travel overseas, I asked Gina Miraglia Eriquez, *Gourmet* magazine's resident cookie expert, for help. "Oatmeal cookies are sturdy," she answered without hesitation. Peanut butter cookies and ginger snaps were good choices, too. "Whatever you send," Miraglia advised, "don't stack them high, or they'll crumble."

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Packing technique was also much on the mind of Lyndsay Leybold, who oversees Operation Baking Gals, an organization that monthly unites nearly 3,000 home chefs nationwide who bake homemade treats for American soldiers. During World War II, Leybold told me, cookies sent to Europe were kept fresh by slipping an apple peel between layers of paper toweling. "Today, I protect each pair of cookies, by placing them back to back, in Saran Wrap," she advised.



As I pondered the specificity of her instructions, it occurred to me that baking is the boot camp of culinary enterprises—success comes only to those who listen carefully, and unquestioningly follow orders. Butter? Eggs? Brown Sugar? All affirmative! Precisely following each step of

the recipes, down to an eighth of a teaspoon, I soon had balls of dough neatly lined up and ready to, well, fire.

Such thoughts were peculiar. Acutely aware of who I was cooking for, I felt a nearly grotesque sense of imbalance. These men and women are daily risking their lives, and I show my appreciation with ginger snaps? But wouldn't it be worse to do nothing?

War, after all, is a little word that's big enough to camouflage the sad fact that no matter where, no matter when, armed conflict is always created by arrogant old men, who outsource the fighting to terrified young people. Most soldiers don't want to fight any more than I do. With this in mind, I mailed off what I hope tastes like a reminder that peace will someday return. Make cookies, not war.