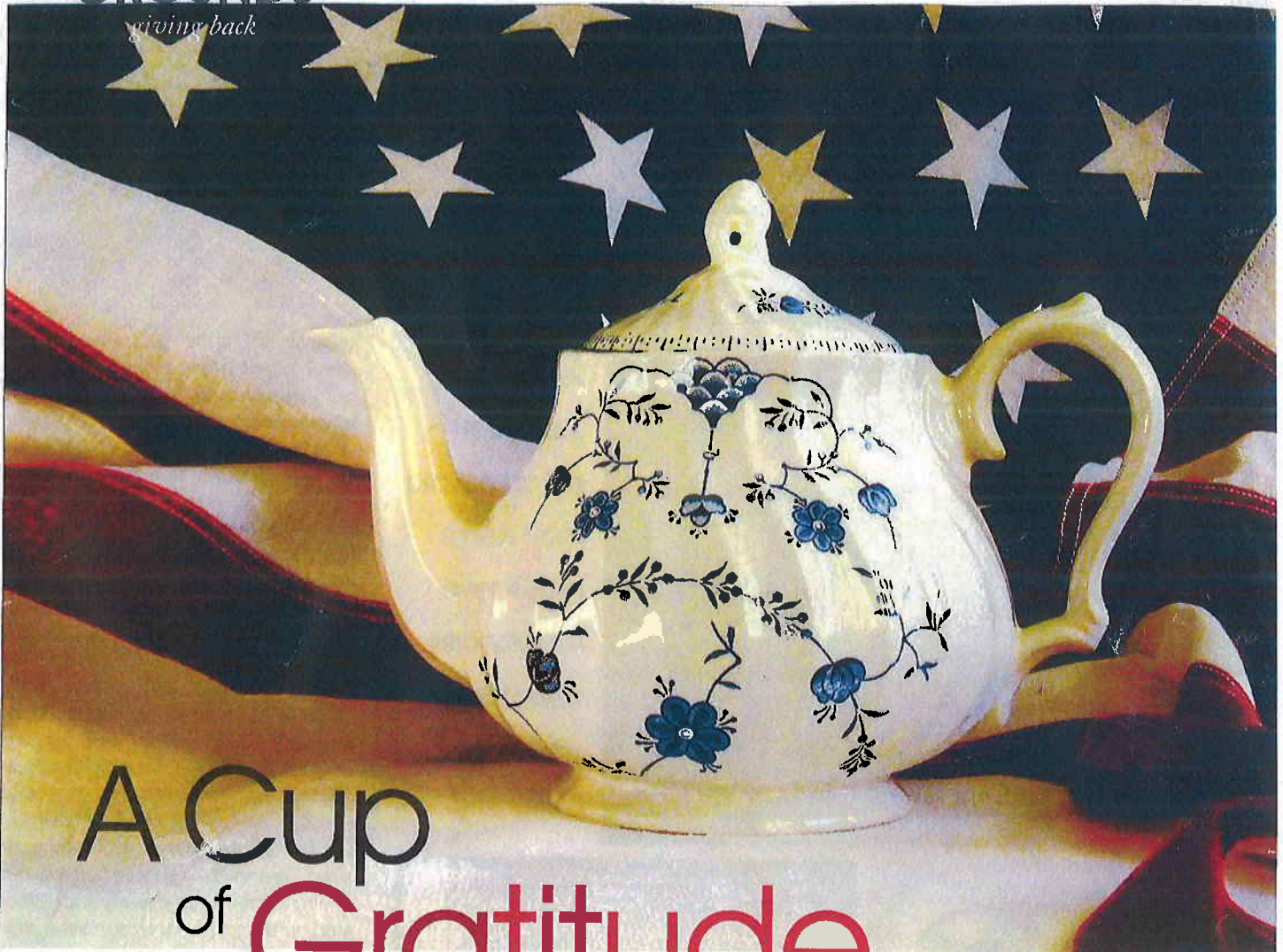


giving back



A Cup of Gratitude

BY MARY CHAVOUSTIE

A good cup of tea shared with friends often warms the heart more than the palate. The soldiers at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio would, no doubt, agree.

Originating at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) in Washington D.C., the Annual American Tea pairs many of the same hands that once held artillery with delicate china teacups. An event that may appear “un-macho” in theory is instead well received, proven by the smiles from over 400 in attendance last year at BAMC.

Deborah Bonelli sets the annual program in motion from her home in New York. For years, Bonelli volunteered at weekly teas for parents at an area children’s hospital, the setting a welcoming calm for those with

children in crisis. A news story about a soldier at Walter Reed gave Bonelli the idea to recreate the same atmosphere at the army hospital — beautiful table settings, tea, sandwiches, and desserts. Four years later, Bonelli is still finding time to serve those who have served our country.

“For me,” says Bonelli, “being granted to do the tea has turned into an unexpected and extraordinary gift.”

The afternoon of appreciation is one small way for volunteers from across the U.S. to come together to say “thank you” to soldiers recuperating at

BAMC from injuries during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) (Afghanistan) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (Iraq).



Many are dealing with life-changing limitations, including burns, loss of limbs, blindness, and a host of other injuries.

Family members and caregivers, integral parts of the soldiers' healing, are invited to share in the event, this year occurring two days before Mother's Day.

Room-bound patients, as well as those in the Burn Unit unable to come to the main staging area, are also able to participate, with volunteers making their way, complete with drink and food-filled tea carts, to each "warrior in transition."

"It's a very humbling experience to meet them. It makes me so proud of being an American, and having such wonderful young men and women who are willing to volunteer to serve our country," says Bonelli.

Donations from across the U.S. — vintage cups and saucers, teapots and tea, sandwiches, pastries, flowers, table decorations from school children, and of course, numerous hours of preparation from volunteers — make it all possible.

"Every year," recalls Bonelli, "there is always a moment or an encounter that is 'the tea' for me. At WRAMC, it was a warrior who, upon learning that we do it all ourselves, returned to the tea, stuck his hand into his pocket, pulled out a \$5 bill, and handed it to my sister to help pay for the expenses. Of course, she did not take it. Here we are doing this tea to thank them, and they cannot thank us enough. They are so appreciative. We're not there looking for a pat on the back; we are there for them."

Those wishing to make a contribution to help defray the cost of this year's Annual American Tea can mail checks (payable to CLABSM) to P. O. Box 312312, New Braunfels, TX 78131. Please put BAMC Tea on the memo line. Any surplus will be donated, as in past years, to the Wounded Warrior Project or the Warrior Family Support Center at BAMC. •

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BOTTOM, OPPOSITE PAGE: Deborah Bonelli with volunteers.

TOP, THIS PAGE: Boxes of carefully-packaged teacups and supplies are flown to BAMC days before the event.

MIDDLE LEFT, THIS PAGE: Thank-you letters from children are shared with the warriors in transition.

BOTTOM, THIS PAGE: Volunteers from across the U.S. come together to prepare the Annual American Tea.