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# Which online retailers ship APO

By Jon R. Anderson - Staff writer

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Holiday shippers are likely to face some battles getting gifts to deployed loved ones this year. The reasons:

- A number of large online retailers won't ship to APO/FPO addresses.
- High-end items, especially electronics, have a reputation for disappearing en route. Reports of theft and rifling are up nearly 16 times since 2006.
- The system itself is getting slower: The military's version of Express Mail is lengthening guaranteed delivery times to three to five days, rather than two to three days.

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Never mind that military mail often takes weeks, sometimes months, even without the holiday rush. In April, the Pentagon's Defense Business Board recommended outsourcing military mail delivery because of rampant inefficiencies that prevent more than one-third of all overseas military mail from ever getting to intended recipients.

## Retailers won't ship

Military shoppers should keep in mind that many retailers — even the military exchanges — restrict what they ship to overseas military addresses.

In some cases, it's the equivalent of retailers not delivering to post office boxes because of exclusive contracts for lower rates with private carriers. Staples, for example, has an exclusive arrangement with UPS for most of its shipping.

But for other companies, the primary concern is loss.

## Do they ship to APO/FPO?

**DO:** Dell, Sam's Club, Overstock.com, Office Depot, OfficeMax, Bank of America Military Bank rewards program

**DON'T:** Apple, Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, Sony, Costco, Home Depot, Buy.com, Staples, USAA, Navy Federal rewards program

**Also DO:** Macy's, Sears, J.C. Penney, Dillard's, Hot Topic, Old Navy, Gap, Banana Republic, Aéropostale, Barnes & Noble, Foot Locker, Disney Store, Toys R Us, Victoria's Secret

**DEPENDS:**

- AAFES/NEX/MCEX Won't ship some: electronics, supplements, toys, kitchen and most furniture and appliances.

Will ship: laptops and computers (website being updated to accommodate these sales).

- Amazon Won't ship: cellphones, computers, furniture, outdoor living items and Target@Amazon.com items. Won't ship some: apparel, baby, camera and photo, electronics, health and personal care, housewares, jewelry, software, sports, and tools and hardware.
- Walmart Won't ship: Photo processing orders. Other items that can't be shipped are identified on the item page or when you click "See estimated arrival date" on the item page, and during checkout.
- Best Buy Won't ship: Mobile phones, TVs 25 inches and larger, GPS hardware and software, Family Radio Service (FRS) radios, cordless phones, FM transmitters, oversized products including major appliances, entertainment furniture, and other items that exceed certain size and weight restrictions, special-order products and Marketplace items shipped from Marketplace sellers.
- Target Won't ship: Food, candy and chocolate, heavy or oversized items and various other products.

Online giant Amazon, for example, will not ship computers, cellphones, most apparel, and many more items to APO/FPO addresses. Best Buy and Walmart have similar restrictions.

And some companies won't ship to APO/FPO addresses at all. If you want to buy anything directly from Apple, you'll have to get it shipped to your home and reship it yourself, or use a third-party remailer.

Insurance is "highly recommended" when doing so according to Apple's shipping policy.

Sellers are reluctant because they can't track a package once it enters the military's system.

Auction site eBay doesn't consider the APO/FPO system to follow "best practices" because of the inability to track — a basic expectation among most online shoppers.

"This lets buyers know when to expect their items, and allows sellers to confirm that their items arrived," eBay spokesperson Johnna Hoff says.

Even the military's own online retailer — [www.shopmyexchange.com](http://www.shopmyexchange.com) — will not ship many items to overseas military addresses.

Issues that affect shipments to APO/FPO addresses include warranty concerns related to shipping (i.e. shipping damage) as well as voltage differences and the military mail system's size and weight limitations, Army and Air Force Exchange Service spokesman Judd Anstey said.

While many large retailers offer free or reduced-rate shipping for in-store pickup, Anstey said nothing similar is available for overseas AAFES shoppers looking for a workaround.

Other military-friendly companies also have surprising rules. If you plan to pay for presents by cashing in rewards points, you better read the fine print. Four of Navy Federal's credit card rewards programs say "Merchandise will not be delivered to PO, APO, or FPO boxes." And while USAA has similar restrictions, Bank of America does not.

And if you're thinking that Magpul rail-mount vertical fore-grip would make a great stocking stuffer for your M4 this year, you better hope Santa delivers it, because U.S. Cavalry won't. It's one of many items the popular tactical gear merchant won't ship APO/FPO.

## Guarding against theft

Theft was the problem Steve Liberati faced as he expanded his snack-on-the-go fitness food business, largely at the urging of troops eager for more of his high-protein creations. Owner of Steve's Originals — a paleo diet food supplier — Liberati grew increasingly frustrated with stolen shipments.

## MAILING DEADLINES

If your package will travel by parcel post — the slowest way — mail it by Nov. 12 to get it there by Dec. 25, according to recommended holiday shipping dates provided by the U.S. Postal Service.

### **APO/FPO AE ZIP 093**

- Express Mail Military Service: N/A
- First class cards and letters: Dec. 3
- Priority Mail: Dec. 3
- Parcel Airlift Mail (PAL): Dec. 1
- Space Available Mail (SAM): Nov. 26
- Parcel Post: Nov. 12

### **All other APO/FPO**

- Express Mail Military Service: Dec. 17
- First class cards and letters: Dec. 10
- Priority Mail: Dec. 10
- Parcel Airlift Mail (PAL): Dec. 3
- Space Available Mail (SAM): Nov. 26
- Parcel Post: Nov.12

**Source:** U.S. Postal Service

A soldier opened one of his packages downrange only to find an old wrench instead of his order, Liberati says. One \$500 order disappeared entirely.

He's not the only one who has had problems: Reported incidences of theft or rifling rose from 103 in 2006 to 1,637 in 2011. The MPSA, Joint Military Postal Agency and U.S. Postal Inspection Service have formed a working group to look at security and mitigate theft.

Last year, investigators busted two mail handlers at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport who had been caught on video rifling through military mail from troops based in Europe and the Middle East. One suspect admitted he had been stealing mail since November 2009.

John Couch, a retired State Department security officer and now owner of ShipItAPO, a remailing service for overseas military addresses, says the best way to guard against theft is to repackage items so that you mask the contents.

## Not-so-express mail

On top of everything, mail officials recently announced that express mail service to and from overseas military addresses now will take longer.

Dubbed Express Mail Military Service, its guaranteed delivery now will take between three and five business days, up from two to three days. The changes went into effect Oct. 3.

It remains to be seen whether mail carriers will be able to meet even those extended goals. A USPS internal report found that three out of every four pieces of express mail sent to military ZIP codes arrived late. Of those, the vast majority took six days or more to reach a military post office, according to the December 2010 USPS Inspector General's investigation.

Express Mail Military Service is available to and from 190 overseas military post offices, mostly in Europe and the Pacific, but not for those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last-minute holiday shoppers should be aware that Express Mail Military Service's delivery guarantee "is not available for holiday packages," says Faye Slater, deputy director of the Military Postal Service Agency.

If you want to use this service to ship your gift, your packages must be in the mail by Dec. 17.

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