

CHRISTMAS IN IRAQ

Celebrating Christmas in the midst of a war is an odd thing. Celebrating Christmas in a Muslim country in the middle of a desert is even more odd.

There are few traditional trappings of the holiday season. I haven't seen a red costumed Santa Claus or any plastic reindeer. No garland, sleighs or elves either.

In many ways, however, I'm looking forward to Christmas this year more than usual. By this time back in the States, I usually get frustrated over the commercialism of the season. You can't possibly have a good Christmas unless you receive a particular gift and go into debt with your credit cards. Each year at this time I lament that we've lost the focus about the real meaning of the precious day we celebrate.

In the desert it is so much easier to appreciate the spiritual significance of December 25th. There are few distractions here. But most of all the message of Christmas is one every soldier needs to hear. The Prince of Peace, the Light of the World is born into the darkness of our lives. And the darkness is so very real. The message of eternal life told to soldiers who face danger and death every day is powerful. So in many ways, this will be a beautiful Christmas.

We celebrate this holiday as best we can. A few days ago there was a camel in front of a chapel. Soldiers climbed aboard, had their pictures taken and some even went for a ride.

Today, in front of the chapel is a Christmas present give-away. All enlisted soldiers of the rank E-4 and below can choose a free gift. There are no hard feelings that only those folks can receive a gift. We all know they are paid the least and do the lion's share of the fighting. They deserve everything we can do for them. Of course the gifts are distributed in typical Army style. A perfect, single file line stretches for almost two blocks. Everything is neat and orderly.

But the most touching decoration I have seen is a simple Christmas tree. Instead of the usual ornaments, it is decorated with photographs of soldier's families. Each person was invited to add to the tree. Most did with extreme pride. The tree is radiant with the bright smiles of loved ones.

The hardest part of celebrating the holidays is the fact that we do so without family and friends. While we all put on a brave face, in the quiet moments I suspect every one of us would admit that not being with our loved ones is the hardest part.

And so I predict that Christmas, like Thanksgiving, will pass uneventfully. Soldiers will go to church. That will be the main event. The dining facility will go out of its way to prepare a nice meal, at least as nice as they can when you cook for several thousand people. We won't spend a lot of time thinking about what we would be doing if we were

back home. Although for the soldiers here that have young children, that won't be easy.

And then we'll be glad it is over, another milestone with family missed. But as I've told our soldiers, the only way any of us are going to appreciate this day is if we focus on the real meaning of Christmas. God loves each of us so much that He sent His only Son so that we might have eternal life.

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