

## CHRISTMAS 2025

Every family enjoys Christmas together. While serving on active duty, many of us missed their special religious and family traditions. As retired veterans we appreciate them more now because we have been absent over the years. However, the ones spent apart still have a special place in our heart. During Desert Storm, during sand and sea, on full alert, several airmen were able to create the most unusual Christmas tree, plus find a guitar and rally the troops to sing Christmas songs.

The CC asked my team for an ecumenical service. A few volunteers sang carols, read the Nativity Scriptures, which was followed by a message and communion. We had no juice or bread, so we creatively used the raisins and crackers in our MREs in the blistering afternoon heat. It represented a very special Lord's Supper. We were close to Bethlehem and Savior's world.

You probably had similar experiences. Spending it with your deployed brothers and sisters made it feel like a family event. Thousands of miles from home, the inner meaning of the holidays surfaced and gave us a deeper, more genuine experience. Our fellowship, camaraderie and common purpose were the unique 'gifts' we shared, far from shopping malls and elegant dining.

We were able to cook up some mystery chow from our MRE's, as soldiers, sailors and airmen gave their faith testimony and told stories about what Christmas meant to them, and what they will do when they return home. I learned later how many families like my own kept their tree up till the summer so they could celebrate as a family with their deployed parents. Later that evening I went to the food drop off box next to our chapel tent and found there were many leftover donated MRE contents, such as tabasco sauce, gum, cheese and crackers, candy, toilet paper, cookies etc. I asked the commander if it would be appropriate in the spirit of Christmas to take the contents to the perimeter fence to our host nation troops working across the flight line.

He made a call and gave the OK. My translator and I jumped into the Humvee and headed to the ECP.

As we drove across the white sands, we passed the lights and generators by the hammerhead. We pulled up to the ECP. The translator spoke to the security guards telling them we had some snacks for their troops. He made a call to his superior who came over and appreciatively took and emptied the three boxes into a barrel, thanking us for the 'holiday gifts. It was a simple and rewarding gesture of sharing, so we thought. We felt good, but for a short time. We started driving back to our tents. As we followed the perimeter fence there appeared several children yelling. I asked the translator what they were saying. "They want us to stop," he said.

Two of the boys asked in their native tongue, "Can they have the boxes?" Through the translator I told them "Sorry, we gave everything to the troops."

They paused and nervously responded, "No...no... we do not want what stuff was in the boxes, we only want the cardboard". Dumbfounded I asked, "why?" They responded, "We want the empty boxes so we can make a floor for our home!"

We felt at a loss and ashamed. We have in our possessions more than we will ever need; they have nothing. They sleep on dirt floors. As I prayed that night I caught heaven's unforgettable gift. For chaplains are always sharing the message with others, but God had a special message for me! Jesus was born on a dirt floor, on a cold night and in a distant land. I needed this "sermon experience," delivered by children and with a few words.

I celebrate with you our Creator God's breaking into human history and gifting us forgiveness and love through the grace of His only begotten Son who was born of a virgin. Jesus the Christ taught, healed, guided and brought us into a reconciled relationship with Almighty God, so we could be with our neighbor.

The inner meaning of Christmas is being grateful to God for this amazing love gift, and "giving to the least of our brethren." Let us continue to thank God for the many blessings we have as Americans by giving to those less fortunate.

As God broke into human history, is there a way you can break into the history of another person by showing them the fruitful gifts of our Christian life—Peace, Joy, Kindness, Goodness, Love, Patience, Gentleness and Love?

In this joyous season of our earthly life I pray we can empty our swollen boxes and touch others with the essential gifts that produce eternal results. Mary and I pray you have a meaningful and blessed Christmas.