



For soldiers serving in distant war zones, holiday memories often focus on hardship and sacrifice.

# Christmas Past

Story by Capt. Gena Ellis

**T**HIS Christmas most soldiers will be home to help put up holiday decorations and enjoy time off with their families.

For other soldiers with families, the holidays will be enjoyed somewhere overseas. Still others, especially single soldiers and those serving in places like Bosnia, Africa or Korea, will be away from home and alone for the first

time during this holiday season.

For many residents of the U.S. Soldiers' Sailors' and Airmen's Home, the holidays will be a time to remember Christmases past, when the Army was at war.

Imagine a cold so cold that the war wounded froze in ambulances and on the battlefield, and those fighting the battle did so in blinding snow or lying in the middle of an open field, cold and freezing, unable to see the enemy.

John O'Donnell doesn't have to imagine it. He lived it as first sergeant

of an ordnance company that fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

On Dec. 16, 1944, O'Donnell's unit was breaking down artillery pieces. The Germans started a counteroffensive that day, during some of the worst weather to hit Europe during the entire war.

O'Donnell was told to put the weapons back together and move out. His unit took up a position on the Eisenborn Ridge.

"Nobody was thinking about Christmas, just about staying alive," he said. "We had everybody on the ridge."

O'Donnell said he was miserable from the cold and the ongoing battle, which lasted for six weeks. He had been on the move with his unit since D-Day, six months earlier.

"Christmas was just another day out in the fields," he said. "No shelter, no food, blinding snow. Hitler picked that time to attack because the Air Force would be grounded by the bad weather."

He didn't have any reminder of Christmas that year.

"No Christmas mail. The Germans had captured our post office and all our supplies," he said. "It was just miserable."

He remembered a much better Christmas, in England, the year before.

"I ate Christmas dinner with an English family. We'd saved up some rations and the lady made a meal out of them. We even had Spam," he said.

Bill Ritchie will never forget where he was on Christmas Day in 1944.

While the Battle of the Bulge raged in the Ardennes, Ritchie was a prisoner of the Germans. He and 23 other Americans were housed in a barn just north of Berlin.

He had been captured in Holland on Oct. 27, the day before his birthday.

"By the time Christmas came around, the shock of being taken prisoner had worn off," Ritchie said.

"The big thing that day was that we got the day off from work because the Germans wanted the day off. They're big into Christmas," he recalled. "The guards gave us cigarettes."

The prisoners had been digging ditches, cutting ice off ponds and chopping wood. The only other bright spot during that dismal Christmas Day was a change in the prisoners' daily meal.

"We received oatmeal and thin soup," Ritchie said.

In one way, this small group of POWs was also a part of the Battle of the Bulge.

"The Germans took some of our clothing," said Ritchie, referring to the use of American

uniforms worn by Germans to infiltrate U.S. positions in the Ardennes area.

Mary Tropeano, a telephone supervisor with the Ninth Air Force during World War II, doesn't remember any Christmas celebrations, but she does remember arriving in England in February 1943 and helping to sort "tons" of Christmas mail that was just coming into the country.

Christmas 1944 found Tropeano monitoring messages concerning the Battle of the Bulge as she worked as a switchboard supervisor in Chantilly,

France. What she heard gave her little cause to celebrate.

Bill Woods has vivid memories of the harsh Christmas of 1951 when he was a forward observer during the Korean War. But he remembers one happy experience that happened because he attended a midnight Mass on Christmas Eve and was selected to see a special performance on Christmas Day.

"I'll never forget it. We went down to the airfield, and here comes Bob Hope," Woods said. "It was quite a sight." The day away from the front lines was a welcomed respite from combat in frozen rice paddies.

"I remember it was so cold that I left skin on my canteen cup trying to drink a cup of coffee," he said.

The next time Woods saw Hope perform at Christmas, it was in 1964 and the airfield was in Vietnam.

John Kautzman's memories of Christmas in Vietnam come from 1969, when he was an operations sergeant with a ranger battalion in Cu Chi.

"We got back to the hooch and someone had brought in a little banana tree in a big bucket," he said. "It had some linked ammunition wrapped around it."

He said the tree was so scrawny that someone had to anchor it to keep it from falling over and that they had to add coat hangers to create more branches, but it was a Christmas tree, just the same.

"This little buck sergeant brought in a Bronze Star and pinned it on top. Pretty soon there were Army Commendation Medals

hanging on it, Silver Stars, parachute wings, Combat Infantry Badges, it was a pretty macho thing," Kautzman said. "But then someone said 'let's not forget whose birthday this is, and someone brought out a rosary and added the finishing touch to the tree.'"

Kautzman also remembered his unit receiving "care packages earlier that week — cigarettes, little note pads, pens and pencils.

"But I'll never forget that tree and how the medals really gave it color," Kautzman said. □

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