

A Christmas Message from VFW National Commander

Dec 15, 2008

Anyone who has worn a uniform overseas knows this is the most difficult time of year to be separated from family and friends.

“It is easy to say ‘let us remember our troops’ during the Christmas season, but how many of us really understand the painful nobility of this sacrifice” Bruce Kluger asked in *USA Today* last Christmas. “For those on active duty in the Middle East, the business of battle knows no holiday.”

I could not have possibly said it better. But this writer did not stop there. “Equally heartbreaking—and incomprehensible—is the wrenching vacuum that war inflicts on families on the home front,” he wrote.

Christmas celebrations in Afghanistan and Iraq are, by necessity, subdued. More quality food, special church services and private thoughts of loved ones usually constitute this most beloved of holidays in the war zone. Yet these gestures never seem to be enough.

On Dec. 25, 2007, McClatchy News Service was one of the few media outlets to report on the troops directly from the field. At Patrol Base Warrior Keep in southwest Baghdad, two of its reporters interviewed soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, to sample their sentiments.

“If I didn’t feel like this is where I needed to be, I think it’d be horrible,” Chaplain Eric Light told them. “Our holidays are so tied to our families, it’s nearly impossible to re-create them here.”

What we can do as veterans is to remind those around us of the emotional importance of this time of year to the troops thousands of miles from home. After all, they are “honoring our nation with their service while fighting wars whose consequences have nothing and everything to do with the humanity at the heart of the holiday,” Kluger aptly pointed out.

While we are keeping them in our thoughts, let’s not forget the other GIs on far-flung fronts that never make newspaper headlines. From Kosovo in the Balkans to South Korea in

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Northeast Asia, tens of thousands of Americans maintain lonely vigils. Still others prowl the seas, protecting our shores from afar. Their missions should never be taken for granted or forgotten.

The debt of gratitude we owe the tiny percentage—less than 1%—of Americans who bear the burden of our freedom can probably never be adequately paid. But the least we can do is to give them more than a passing thought. As we enjoy Christmas revelry, keep in mind that someone in uniform is making that possible. Chances are that it might even be a family member. If so, you need not be reminded of the sacrifices being made.

As the mother of one Afghanistan soldier said, “Each American should remember during this season that our soldiers are fighting the battle over there so we can be safe here at home.”

In that spirit, let my wife, Jean, and me wish all veterans a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah and a great New Year.

Glen Gardner

VFW Commander-in-Chief