



If Only in Their Dreams

I'll be home for Christmas...if only in my dreams." With our country at war, the lyrics of this holiday classic take on renewed meaning. Far away in unfamiliar and hostile lands, our men and women in uniform stoically serve tours of duty. We contacted some soldiers from the South, stationed in Kuwait at press time, and asked them about the holidays.

It's difficult to conjure seasonal spirit when you live in a tent or warehouse in the desert. Nippy days and nights bring relief after living through heat so intense that cold-water taps yield hot water. Yet separation from their loved ones far exceeds any hardship the desert doles out.

Army Maj. Rita M. Spence of Columbia, South Carolina, wistfully recalls her last yuletide before deployment. "My husband, children, and I spent the first Christmas in our new

home as a family," she remembers. "Before opening gifts, we always get in a circle and express what Christmas means to us. Then we pray as a family." Along with stories, laughter, and food, the New Orleans relatives of

*"...celebrate the holidays
as if I were there—
no sadness allowed."*

*Maj. William "Bill" Prestage
of Flora, Mississippi*

Army Staff Sgt. Natasha Bacchus Edinburg also pray: "We give thanks to God for allowing us to be able to share another day with each other."

Army Staff Sgt. Anthony Stewart, who marks his third Christmas away this season, says his relatives in Jackson, Mississippi, "usually have a makeup [holiday] when I get back."

Former Marine and current Army Reserves Maj. William "Bill" Prestage of Flora, Mississippi, requests that his family "celebrate the holidays as if I were there—no sadness allowed."

These Southerners also pine for beloved regional dishes. With lip-smacking clarity, Sfc. Cheryl R. Shaw, a Charleston native and Lawrenceville, Georgia, resident, imagines "my mother's sweet potato pie, collard greens, and crab salad."

The soldiers plan to stave off seasonal blues by staying active. "Those of us here will bring the spirit of Christmas in our work areas and places of living," assures Sergeant First Class Shaw. "I wasn't here last year," says Staff Sergeant Edinburg, "but my buddies said they decorated, gave a party, exchanged gifts, and had programs at the chapel." During a past stint in Iraq, Staff Sergeant Stewart "spent most of Christmas Day volunteering with the postal unit, sorting mail so the troops could get gifts from their families. It was a good feeling."

None equate in-the-field festivities with being home for the holidays. "I'll miss not being able to watch my daughters light up when they see the tree on Christmas morning," says Army Reserve Maj. Troy A. "Alex" D'Agostino of Newport News, Virginia. Indeed, across oceans and time zones, his family and others will wait for calls and e-mails, as eager as any child awaiting Santa.

'Tis the season to remember these brothers and sisters in arms. "I've heard that the holidays are often the time when we'll find some of our colleagues becoming more homesick," says Major D'Agostino. "We'll be looking out for each other."

The soldiers request prayers, gifts, and letters from home. "Those are better than gold," says Major D'Agostino. Visit www.americasupportsyou.mil or www.anysoldier.com.

—NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON