

U.S. service members in Iraq focus on true meaning of Christmas

By Cpl. Cullen J. Tiernan | | December 27, 2005



AL ASAD, Iraq -- "Here we are, living in a combat zone in a far away land, where Christmas is certainly not celebrated. We have not been hearing Christmas carols in the streets or stores, we have not seen the excitement of small children or even attended a Christmas program. Many of our Marines, sailors, soldiers and maybe even some of you here tonight may feel as though this is really not Christmas."

Navy Capt. Stephen Epperson, the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing command chaplain and a Pensacola, Fla., native, spoke these words during the candlelight worship service on Christmas Eve at Al Asad, Iraq.

Marines, soldiers, sailors and civilian contractors were present as they celebrated Christmas in their own way.

"Even though I'm away from home, Christmas in Iraq was better than I expected," said Cpl. Erick N. Villalobos, the 2nd MAW supply noncommissioned officer and a Miami native. "We actually had a real Christmas tree, and we received many gifts from the people in the United States who support our cause and care about the difference we are trying to make. Having that kind of support makes any situation better."

Master Gunnery Sgt. Arnold E. Breckenridge, acting sergeant major of Marine Wing Headquarters Squadron 2 (Forward) and a Baltimore native, said the Marines of MWHS-2 did an outstanding job of showing that, even though they are in Iraq, it is still Christmas. He said it was a great honor to share this Christmas with the deployed Marines.

"Being around professionals in this environment during Christmas makes you truly appreciate what being a Marine is," said Breckenridge. "I am proud to serve with each and every Marine deployed as a part of MWHS-2. Being that this is my last deployment, I can honestly say it was one of my best deployments. That is what I will remember the most, the professionals of Deuce."

Villalobos said what he missed most was spending Christmas with his wife and family. This is his third Christmas since he joined the Marine Corps, and his second Christmas away from his wife and family.

"The Marine Corps is my family and Christmas should be spent with those you care about," said Villalobos. "My Christmas experience in Iraq is not much different because I still spent it with people who I care about. The Marines around me made the Christmas experience better."

Villalobos said celebrating Christmas in Iraq was different and gratifying at the same time.

"Knowing what we do here makes a difference in our future makes it all worthwhile," said Villalobos. "We can all look back one day at this Christmas and say we were here and we made a difference."

Lance Cpl. Natalie Jo Mangel, a supply warehouse clerk with MWHS-2 and a Pittsburgh native, said it's been great being on this deployment with Marines who put all their hard work and dedication toward the Corps.

"The Marines here have inspired me to constantly strive to do better throughout my first enlistment," said Mangel. "I feel if they can do it, I know I can. It's been a great experience and I want to thank everyone who supports us and all the Marines who gave up this Christmas for our country."

One of the greatest hardships for deployed U.S. service members was spending the holidays without their families, friends and the traditions they share. But, Mangel said she was happy to have her fellow Marines to celebrate the holiday with, and was thankful to have stayed safe during this deployment.

"Most families go to sleep early on Christmas Eve, but in my family we stay awake until Christmas day," said Villalobos. "We gather around and talk about the good and bad times we've had. We also talk about the things we want to do and change for the next year. That's one of the things I was able to do here with my friends. The one thing I wasn't able to do is open my presents on Christmas day with my family, but I did open the ones my wife sent me."

Epperson said he thinks many miss the big news of Christmas because of all the commercialization and secular traditions. He told the crowd at the candlelight services that just because they are not home, doesn't mean they should miss the wonder of the birth of Christ.

"I want to share with you that Christmas is here," said Epperson. "Even though we may not be able to enjoy the giving and receiving of gifts with family, the seasonal parties, the open houses, family gatherings, Christmas dinners and other traditions of the season, Christmas is indeed here. Maybe, for the first time in our lives, we can separate the true meaning of Christmas from all the commercialization and holiday traditions of Christmas."