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Antlered Marines, surprise visit highlight Baghdad Christmas

Despite a blanket and poncho-liner, I wake at 4 a.m. from the cold. It's Christmas day in Baghdad.

The living trailers in the parking lot of the U.S. Embassy annex keep the wind and rare rain off, but the un-insulated metal walls mean that the inside temperature matches that outside. Each trailer has a heater, a very loud heater, so one must choose between the noise and the cold. Because it is Christmas, I sleep late, so I turn on the heater. I awake again at 7 a.m. The water is off, so I have no shower and a dry shave. Sounds like grim living conditions, but complaints are rare. We all know that there are soldiers, sailors and Marines who do dangerous things and then eat a cold MRE before going to sleep on the floor of a truck or wrapped in a liner under the stars. Compared to them, I live like a king. I pull on my cammies with a green sweatshirt underneath and strap on my 9 mm pistol and two full magazines. Unlike my previous duty station in Iraq, it is only a short walk from my trailer to the ballroom of the Embassy Annex where I work. Just as I reach the entrance I hear the running cadence of the Embassy Marine guard and watch. From the neck down, they look the same as any other day -- a reinforced platoon of young men in matching green PT gear is running in perfect formation shouting a slightly risqué cadence. But on their heads, each Marine is wearing a handmade seasonal hat. The Marines in the front of the formation are wearing cloth reindeer heads and scattered through the formation are other animal heads, bright red Santa caps, and a few with cheerfully wrapped Christmas presents tied to the top of their heads. At the end of the formation is a Marine wearing a boxing helmet, and affixed to it is a two foot tall Christmas tree with balls, tinsel and flashing lights.

The ballroom has been divided into a series of offices. Their walls are covered with colorful handmade cards from school children. Some are well-written, while others have questionable spelling and pictures of U.S. soldiers that seem based on Superman comics, but all are good for morale. There has been a large quantity of gifts, many anonymous. Notable are hundreds of pounds of chocolate and other candy, almost 500 swimsuit calendars, expensive knives, cigars, CDs and DVDs, books and magazines. Although I never went to Vietnam, I was in the Marines during the Vietnam era. The difference in the public's attitude toward those in uniform in the Vietnam era and now is astounding.

I start each day by checking my three e-mail accounts, each with a different security clearance. Not much work-related e-mail this morning primarily because Washington, D.C., is closed for the holiday, but many Christmas greetings from friends around the world. And then it is a short walk to the morning update. The daily update is a fire-hose of information and analysis. It proceeds so rapidly that initially, it is difficult to understand. It also gets everyone on the same sheet of music. If some fact was in the update, you can be sure that everyone you deal with during the day is aware of it.

Before lunch, I go for a run. Or rather two runs. The embassy complex is so small that to get a reasonable distance, one must weave back and forth through four security gates. I lift weights, shower (the water is back on) and walk to the mess hall for Christmas lunch. Quite a feast. Turkey with stuffing, huge slices of ham, multiple salads and fruits, and an extensive dessert table. More for the exercise than to purchase anything, I walk out the gate to the mini-PX which is about the size of a Wa-Wa but with a more limited selection. There I discover that the shelves had been stripped of most snacks and drinks for Christmas parties.

When I go back to check my e-mail again, I have a visitor. No, not Santa Claus, although I think that I would have been less surprised if it had been. U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad himself came in. Without any announcement, the ambassador spent Christmas afternoon going to every office in the embassy to thank people for their service. Considering that the ambassador, along with Gen. George Casey, has the terrible responsibility of planning, coordinating and executing strategy in Iraq; it is amazing that he would spend his holiday personally thanking everyone on the 1,000-plus person embassy team. Out of such small gestures, great loyalty is born.

Back to reading economics until evening chow. I went for the roast beef, corn-on-the-cob and sweet tea. A bit more reading and then I make an early evening of it, since tomorrow should be a very long day. And I think that tonight I will sit on my bunk and read Musashi until I nod off. Otherwise, I'll spend too much time thinking of how much better it would be if I were with my family at home, rather than spending Christmas day in Baghdad.

Frank M. Gunter, a colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, is in Baghdad. Gunter is an associate professor in economics at Lehigh University in Bethlehem. A longer version of this story can be found on-line at mcall.com.

Caption:
Getty Images

Caption:
Zalmay Khalilzad

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