

My Most Memorable Christmas

Fred Davis

In 1968, I was a First Lieutenant in the Army Artillery, stationed in South Korea. My assignment at the time was the Battalion Executive Officer of the 1st of the 12th Artillery, a 105 Howitzer Battalion in support of the 2d Infantry Division at Camp Pendelton, just 7 miles from the DMZ. It was a lonely place to be so far from home with families not allowed to accompany us at that time.

For the most part, officers were restricted to our compounds, although the enlisted men were free to visit the small Korean villages. This created some issues as babies were born to mixed couples, many of the children abandoned when their fathers returned to the States. Orphanages were established to care for these children but were not well supported as the children were ostracized by their communities. The caregivers of one of these orphanages established contact with our Battalion Chaplain, Captain Burns to see if our Commander, Colonel Smeltz would ask our troops to support in any way, gifts for Christmas for the orphans.

When I heard about this request, I sent a letter back to my parents, Warren and May Davis, asking them to check with our church, St. Daniel's Lutheran Church in Robesonia, to see if they could ask for a few things to send back to Korea.

I really hadn't thought much about my request after that until a week or two before Christmas. Low and behold, a shipment arrived at Camp Pendelton from St. Daniel's Church. A full truckload of boxes and boxes of clothing, underwear and toys! It was unbelievable! There were enough coats for each child (a very necessary item for the cold winters there) new packs of underwear donated by a local manufacturer, and age appropriate toys for each child. I remember specifically yo-yos literally falling out of the boxes. I just stood there as box after box was unloaded, with tears in my eyes, thinking about the generosity of my fellow church members. I had never in my wildest dreams expected this outpouring of support and concern for these children a half world away. (I still well up just remembering this moment).

Chaplain Burns arranged to have some troop volunteers work with the orphanage staff to fit children with coats, wrap gifts for each child and to have a Christmas celebration and meal when they received their gifts. We had no holiday wrapping paper, so each bundle was wrapped in plain Kraft paper- but it made no difference to the children. I doubt any of them ever received any gift at all, so just the unwrapping was a delight in itself.

I can't tell you what my wife Barbara and my family sent me for Christmas that year, but I will always remember the generosity of the members of St. Daniel's Church and the gifts they sent to the children. To this day, I'm not sure that they realize the level of positive impact they made on these children. I am forever grateful that in some small way, Christmas was a little brighter for Korean orphans that 1968 year and made it my most memorable Christmas.