

Operation Christmas Star

U.S. troops based in Vietnam in 1965 received morale-boosting gifts and well-wishes courtesy of Air National Guard units from 14 states

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Christmas 1965 promised to be an especially lonely holiday for the 200,000 American servicemen and women deployed to South Vietnam.

They found themselves in a foreign land far from their families, under strange and often very dangerous circumstances. And regardless of their job or duty location, these people had a war to fight.

The cargo ships and transport planes coming into Vietnam had room onboard only for what was absolutely essential for the growing conflict in Southeast Asia. Everything else — including mail — was marked “low-priority,” meaning it could wait.

Without even simple reminders of the holiday season such as Christmas ornaments or candy canes, morale began to sag. Many troops felt like they’d been forgotten by the folks back home.

Actually, the opposite was true. Throughout the autumn of 1965, civic organizations and individuals across America began collecting care packages for their loved ones serving overseas. These gifts, which included baked goods, sweets, and personal comfort items, often came with handwritten notes of gratitude and support.

Even corporations joined in. The Cott Beverage bottling plant in Scotia, N.Y., for instance, donated canned soft drinks by the caseload. Many other businesses also enthusiastically contributed to this cause.

A generous nation gathered 761 tons of holiday cheer for the troops in Vietnam that year. But then a new question arose: how to get these presents, coming from every corner of the United States, thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean to Southeast Asia in time for Christmas?

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No one knew what to do. Aside from some radio and television publicity, this movement had no real organization behind it. Transporting so many gifts overseas sounded like a job for the Pentagon — after all, these packages were intended for U.S. troops stationed in Southeast Asia.

Not so fast, cautioned military officials. All Air Force cargo aircraft, they claimed, were too busy hauling high-priority items like ammunition and repair parts. Pentagon spokesmen also noted that perishable goods would certainly spoil if sent by ship, as freighters often sat at anchor for months waiting to be unloaded at one of South Vietnam's small ports.

SANTA'S ELVES WORE FLIGHTSUITS

A Christmas miracle was needed. And while Santa Claus was very busy that season, some of his elves stepped up to deliver holiday parcels for the troops in Vietnam. These elves, however, wore flightsuits.

The U.S. Air National Guard, a reserve force based in all 50 states, three U.S. territories and the District of Columbia, asked if it could help. Several Air Guard units flew long-range airlifters that could easily carry these donated gifts. All they needed was the brass's permission.

It came with a few strings attached.

First, airmen had to volunteer for what were called "training missions." This meant Guardmembers could not be mobilized (but did receive pay for their service). Further, flight crews were allowed only four hours on the ground in South Vietnam — enough time to unload, refuel their aircraft, and depart the combat zone.

It was called Operation Christmas Star. It began on Nov. 20, 1965, when a Boeing C-97 Stratofreighter belonging to Tennessee's 164th Air Transport Group (ATG) departed Nashville for Vietnam filled with 4,500 pounds of holiday treats and mail.

During November and December of 1965, 78 Air National Guard planes traveled to Southeast Asia in support of Operation Christmas Star. States sending aircraft included Arizona, California, Delaware, Georgia, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

The New York Air Guard's 109th ATG first flew into South Vietnam on Dec. 4. From its base at the Schenectady County Airport, an Empire State C-97 with the call sign "MATS 210" flew first to McChord AFB in Washington State. From there, it hopped across the Pacific, first to Hawaii's Hickam AFB, then to the Kwajalein Atoll, then to Andersen AFB on Guam, before finally landing at Da Nang, South Vietnam, on Dec. 9.

The late Lt. Col. Lionel H. Fallows, aboard MATS 210, recalled his plane's arrival.

“The approach was high with a rapid descent to minimize the danger of ground fire from Viet Cong forces which infested the area,” he said.

As his Stratofreighter touched down in the divided country, Fallows recalled being impressed by South Vietnam’s lush, brilliant-green landscape.

Fallows, who died in 2017, also remembered the hectic pace of operations at Da Nang, observing how AC-47 gunships and other combat aircraft “congested every bit of available space” on the sprawling air base. Sweating ground personnel then rapidly unloaded seven tons of soda and other gifts flown 11,000 miles from upstate New York.

Much like that other Christmastime deliveryman, the flight crew had just enough time to enjoy a quick snack before departure. Then they were off to their next destination.

In 1965, Santa’s helpers from the Air National Guard transported more than 400 tons of holiday cheer to forward-deployed American servicemen and women in South Vietnam. Operation Christmas Star sent a powerful message of love, support and hope to those troops — who indeed had not been forgotten.

Today, the Air Guard’s citizen-airmen continue this tradition of holiday service by organizing toy drives for needy military families, volunteering in VA hospitals and even delivering live Christmas trees to members of armed forces stationed in dangerous places across the globe.

This article is featured in the November/December 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Patrick J. Chaisson. Patrick J. Chaisson is an Iraq War veteran and member of VFW Post 8690 in Broadalbin, N.Y. He writes about military history and nature for a variety of publications from his home in Scotia, N.Y.