U.S. Troops Mark the Holiday Season Overseas

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NBC News reporters in Iraq, Afghanistan and Korea report on how U.S. troops stationed in these three places are marking the holiday season.

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DAVID GREGORY, co-host:
While millions of people headed--here in the US are headed home for the holidays, there are thousands of brave men and women overseas who have to stay right where they are. They're proud members of the US military. And we've got reports this morning from Iraq, Afghanistan and Korea. We're going to start this morning with NBC's Jim Maceda at a military base on the outskirts of Baghdad. Jim, good morning.

JIM MACEDA reporting:
Good morning, David.
Well, I'm coming to you from a forward operating base called Falcon near Dora. That's a staging area for insurgents and where some of Baghdad's worst sectarian violence occurs. Still, soldiers here are trying to mark, if not celebrate, their Christmas.
The First Cavalry Division based in Baghdad will squeeze Christmas, like any other holiday, in between its round-the-clock missions. Whether it's a nighttime logistics convoy or looking for gunmen and weapons in the insurgent hot beds of south Baghdad. Captain Aaron Kikendahl leads a platoon of 21 men from the 114 Cav.

Captain AARON KIKENDAHL: We have a mission Christmas morning and then we have a mission that night. And then we have a mission on the 26th as well.
MACEDA: But he's making a special effort to bring a touch of home to his fellow soldiers with Christmas decorations in the barracks and a communal tree with presents from home anyone can dip into. Gifts like trail mix and oatmeal and banana chips all become luxury items in a place like Iraq, where thinking of
home too much can bring you down.

Capt. KIKENDAHL: And if you have a guy who's depressed, you know, he could become dangerous.

MACEDA: It is why the post office here at Camp Falcon is working overtime to keep the Christmas cards and presents coming in.

Ms. SHANIKA WILSON (First Cavalry Division): They're very happy. They ask, `Did I get mail today? Did I get mail today?'

MACEDA: At chow time, there's even a Christmas band boosting spirits for the more than 3,000 soldiers here far from home, before it's back outside the wire on mission and in harm's way.

Despite the obvious dangers, Meredith, many soldiers here tell us that they prefer to be outside the wire focused on a mission especially at Christmas time when anyone can get nostalgic and even more so in a war zone.

Meredith, back to you.

MEREDITH VIEIRA, co-host: Jim Maceda, thanks very much.

Now let's head to Jalalabad, Afghanistan, and NBC's Martin Fletcher.

Martin, good morning to you.

MARTIN FLETCHER reporting: Meredith, good morning. Or rather, it's late afternoon here already at the Jalalabad airfield. This is the logistics base for American troops in most of eastern Afghanistan. They're getting ready for Christmas. But real Christmas does seem a long way away like their families. They're getting gifts, messages of support, of course, but the greatest gift they could receive is simply to go home safely.

But first, there's a job to do and they're proud of it. Shortly after dawn, Afghan workers arrive at the base. They're searched for weapons, bombs, anything that could endanger the troops. The soldiers doing the searching are Afghans, trusted by the Americans.

Unidentified Man #1: I trust him with my life. That's for sure.

FLETCHER: The 132 Battalion of the 10th Mountain Division shares the base with the Indiana National Guard and others. Most finish a year's tour of duty in the spring. It's been hard. Eighteen dead since February, around 80 wounded.

Specialist JAMES GURDGIEL (10th Mountain Division): I was shot in both legs.

Specialist JAMIE LOCASTRO (10th Mountain Division): I got hit in my arm and my hand and twice in my leg from shrapnel.

FLETCHER: The decoration in the mess hall is messages of support from back home. From Laurie, "Thank you for fighting for our country." Another one, "Thank you for keeping us free. You are heroes." Reminders of home and support from the American people. Specialist Locastro has three other brothers all in the military.

Spc. LOCASTRO: I call my brother's house. It's kind of--you know, it's not unusual, but you know, it's kind of sad when we can't all be together.

Spc. GURDGIEL: I've been in Kosovo during Christmas, I've been in Iraq during Christmas and now Afghanistan during Christmas.

FLETCHER: Well, merry Christmas.
Man #2: Merry Christmas to you.
FLETCHER: One sergeant major told me he was leaving the base for Christmas to go join his men in the mountains where they're fighting the Taliban. He was proud of his soldiers. So proud, he said, he was getting a hair cut to look his best on Christmas Day for his men. David:
GREGORY: Martin, thank you very much. Martin Fletcher for us this morning in Afghanistan.
Now, to the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South Korea. NBC's Martin Savidge is there.
Martin, good morning to you.
MARTIN SAVIDGE reporting: Good morning, David.
Actually, it's good evening here from the DMZ where it is already Friday night and not a lot of holiday cheer up here. You have a lot of search lights, a lot of spotlights, security lights, yes. But Christmas lights, no, you won't find any of those. The--North Korea, that is, begins about--I can't point, but 20 yards in that direction behind me here. It is the most fortified border to be found anywhere in the world. Two million soldiers, almost, stand ready to fight tonight if the need were to arise, including 28,000 Americans who are stationed here in Korea and who often feel that their mission here is overlooked because of everything else that is taking place in the world.
The small amount of Americans that help protect this part of the DMZ got a special treat, though, today. Some teenagers came up from Seoul and they were delivering Christmas stockings. Inside you had peanuts, popcorn, knickknacks, little things, but to the soldiers that are stationed way far forward up here, it really did mean a lot. It's a reminder that they weren't overlooked at this time of the holidays. And it also eased some of the tensions.
And if you want a feel for that tension, take a look at what was taking place here today out here at the DMZ. A meeting that took place between leaders, but on the outside, North Korean soldiers, South Korean soldiers and US soldiers came face to face. If looks could kill, the body count would have been pretty high today. Everything went very peacefully, but there are very strong feelings that are felt up here. Christmas Eve, they'll have midnight Mass, and then for many of the soldiers, they'll be back on station. What do they want most? What every soldier wants, peace and to make sure they get it, they'll be on guard. David, back to you.
GREGORY: Martin Savidge at the DMZ for us in Korea, thank you very much.