

# Michael Carolan: A soldier's heartfelt holiday dispatch

By MICHAEL CAROLAN  
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BELCHERTOWN - This holiday season - with the last of the American troops finally leaving Iraq - my thoughts returned to those armed services members, however many, who remain apart from their loved ones.

I also reflected upon my own family's experience and being apart.

It was the end of 1945; the Second World War was over. Most soldiers were spending their first Christmases in years back at home in the States.

Nevertheless, my grandfather was not. He was a part of the Occupation - troops that remained to restore order to war-ravaged Europe.

So that year - for the third in a row - my grandmother and mother, then a 5-year-old, spent the holiday in their small Midwestern town without him.

My grandfather was a captain in the U.S. Army Dental Corps, a dental surgeon in temporary hospitals across Europe - the 186th Hospital in England, the 55th General in France, the 12th Field in Belgium.

For three years, he repaired the faces, jaws and teeth of countless young American men as best he could.

From all reports, he missed home. So from his bunk in an ancient fortress converted to a hospital in Liege, Belgium - he wrote to my grandmother in Missouri. She gave me the letter before she died.

Dated "Christmas Eve, '45," the letter expresses his homesickness for everything, including his shotgun and his dog, Tramp.

He writes, "My Darling, I haven't gotten exactly straightened out on this getting home business. I have to look up a new circular that just came out. So I'll look it up in the morning before I mail this.

"Darling, by gosh, as yet, I don't have your Xmas present and it should have been here two weeks ago. So it will be late getting there. I know you'll like it, as it's quite unique. I'll tell you what it is. It's a pitcher that's made out of a large shell casing. There's a boutique here that makes an engraving on the outside so I'll send it when he brings it in.

"However, this little poem is sure as hell a lot more appropriate.

Been thru all the stores and crowds,

And filled up several boxes,

As much as the law allows.

But thru all this I've had, sweet,

An idea in my head

That in place of nuts and candy

I'd like to send myself instead.

When Santa Claus would reach you

Your eyes would open wide

When you opened up your Christmas box

For there I'd be inside.

I'd quickly jump into your arms.

How happy we would be!

I'd tell you how I've missed you

And how dear you are to me.

But even though this Christmas Day,

These wishes can't come true.

My love, my thoughts, and all my dreams

Will keep me close to you."

I never spent a Christmas with my grandfather. He died before I was born.

And this year, I won't spend the holiday with my mother - that once 5-year-old who my grandfather surely missed 66 years ago. She lives 2,000 miles away and it's too difficult to travel there with children and pets.

Like my grandfather, my mother sends me gifts from a distance.

It occurs to me that what takes place this time of year - that longing to be with those for whom we have great affection - is basic to understanding the holidays.

As is the fact that when we cannot be with them, our "love, thoughts and all of our dreams" can.