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Wendy, Ryan and Chuck Kolakowski
photo provided by Chuck Kolakowski



Welcome Home for the Holidays

By Cynthia Howe

Benjamin Bovard
photo provided by David Love



CHRISTMAS, and all the images the holidays evoke, set against the backdrop of a world in conflict, at war. This stark contrast reflects the moments we cherish and the moments we fear. As we sing our Christmas carols that speak of peace on earth, good will toward men, we will no doubt reflect upon our soldiers, those defending our country, liberties and faith.

In the story, *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott, readers follow Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy through the difficult wait of Christmas during the Civil War. The movie depicts it beautifully, as we are welcomed to a family of women waiting, hoping and praying their father makes it home in time for Christmas. Thousands of hearts this season can relate to the scene of loved ones gathered, with laughter in the air but always mindful of the missing voice. Faces, pieces of our hearts, with names that continue to swirl about us without a presence. Names such as Matthew, Stu, Ben.

The Bovard's of Little Elm are thankful to be awaiting the return of their Ben.

Liz and Tom Bovard are grateful that, with their son's return home in October, they will not have to experience the emotionally gnawing chasm of having a loved one in harms way. Ben has served our country for four years in the US Marines, stationed most recently in Al Anbar Province in Iraq, along the Iraqi and Syrian border, where he spent his last Christmas.

When the sun rose that Christmas Day, it was the same as any other day. He was on a mission, concerned with the safety of his fellow Marines – "his Marines" as he endearingly refers to them. He had been attentive and alert these past four years, trying to make sure his Marines were safe, that no one was being shot at or blown up by an Improvised Exploding Device (IED). He put aside his thoughts of Christmas back home, "It's sad that we had to think of

it as just another day, but we needed to stay sharp and not think too much about what day it was – what we were missing back home." As to his surroundings, they only accentuated the contrast.

Christmas day doesn't look or feel the same overseas by any stretch of the imagination. "No Christian holidays are allowed to be observed in Iraq," Ben explained. There are no Nativity scenes to argue about, nor are there Santas ringing bells. They don't argue over

*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.
And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."*

- I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

whether it should be 'Merry Christmas' or 'Happy Holidays.' Such words are hostile words in a hostile environment. For our soldiers overseas, it appears one day blends into the next, with many experiencing the holidays as they go by with very little differentiating the passing of hours.

Ben's heart went out to the Junior Marines in his Company who had never experienced being away from their homes and families during the holidays. While he methodically went through his day, with the safety of his men in the forefront of his mind, he wasn't aware that a special surprise was awaiting him back at camp.

Unbeknownst to Ben, his family back

home had worked for weeks to deliver a very special surprise. Last Thanksgiving, the extended Bovard family had gathered together and stuffed 160 stockings. When the handiwork arrived in Iraq at Christmas, there was a stuffed stocking for each member of Ben's Company. Although the Marines were thrilled to discover their gifts, stuffed with gloves, face masks, socks, cards, Frisbees, NERF footballs, personal care items and candy, they were most touched by the hand-written notes they found tucked inside the stockings.

The Bovards had made arrangements with two local schools for hand-written letters from a variety of students. The participating schools were Brent Intermediate of Little Elm ISD and the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox School. The encouraging letters, with sweet anecdotes and comments, were distributed with each stocking. For some Marines, it evoked memories of their childhood--what they had experienced back home in holidays past--and their thankfulness overflowed.

"We received a letter thanking us from the chaplain and his First Sergeant," stated Mrs. Bovard. "Ben was very happy with his gifts from home, but what moved his heart is that we made it special for his entire company." Ben's holidays this year will be very special to him as he looks forward to Gran Jeanne's green bean casserole, presents under the tree and smiling faces serenely in place around the holiday table. He still remembers racing his little sister, Allie, down the stairs to be the first at the tree, holding back only when he remembered to allow her youth to win.

Ben faces two difficult tasks this Christmas: transitioning back into civilian life, and buying Christmas presents for his family. His first task will be his greatest challenge as his nerves continue to bombard him. After being on edge for



Jason Morrow and friend (right); Welcome home banners on base (above)
photos provided by Chuck Kolakowski

so long, it will take time to recondition himself to not respond to external stresses.

His second challenge will most assuredly be a more enjoyable task. "The hardest thing for me this year will be buying gifts for everyone." His sister, Allie, is not the same little girl he left behind and shopping for her will keep him a bit occupied. But this may be just what he needs to keep his mind from drifting back to the Al Anbar Province and all those he left behind.

Along with Ben, but not in his company, Corporal Ryan Kolakowski served in the U.S. Marine Corps and is a member of the First Marine Division, 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, India Company. He hails from Plano and also served in the Al Anbar Province at the same time as Ben. Ryan has served there for the past 21 months, three separate tours, for the most part as a machine gunner operating from a Humvee. His first tour saw the fall of Saddam Hussein, the rebuilding of schools, power plants, roads, security and, when time allowed, a quick game of soccer with local children. During his second tour he helped plan and execute

the battle of Fallujah, for which he later won a prestigious military award. During his third tour he was brought face-to-face with danger in a variety of ways, as he searched door-to-door for insurgents throughout the Al Anbar Province.

Ryan's family anxiously awaits him back home in Plano. It's been years since they've enjoyed a holiday meal with the son they are so proud of. Ryan graduated from Plano West High School in 2002. He has been decorated by the Department of the Navy with a Marine Corps Achievement Medal with Combat Distinguishing Device for Valor because of his work in the battle of Fallujah. While the tangible recognition is something his parents are proud of, they are more proud of the man Ryan has become.

He has stood side-by-side with other young men, built valuable friendships forged on the battlefield, knowing he could lose such a treasured investment in the blink of an eye. Ryan spent last Thanksgiving with his best friend, Jason Morrow, while they were on leave at Camp Pendleton, California. Jason's family lived close by, and they looked forward to a home-cooked Thanksgiving meal with all

Local Soldiers Lost in Combat

Our hearts, thoughts and prayers also go out to those who have lost loved ones. To the family of Sgt. Michael L. Boatright of Frisco, lost to us in Baghdad in 2004; to the family of 2nd Lieutenant Brian D. Smith of McKinney, lost to us in Habbaniyah in 2004; to the family of Pfc. Ryan M. McCauley of Lewisville, lost to us in Baghdad in 2004; and the family and friends of Cpl. Tyler S. Trovillion of Richardson, lost to us in Ramadi in 2005; to the friends and family of Major Matthew W. Worrell of Lewisville, lost to us in Yusufiyah in May of this year; and to the other families who have lost loved ones throughout our nation. Our condolences, as well as our wishes for a loving, full holiday season.



Welcome home hug (above) photo provided by David Love
Ryan Kolakowski (left) photo provided by Chuck Kolakowski



the trimmings and being surrounded by family. It was the only Thanksgiving, or holiday, Ryan has spent stateside during all three of his tours, and he will remain grateful to have shared it with Jason. The memories made around the holiday table, the laughter and the love they all shared, will remain vivid in Ryan's mind, with a mixture of bittersweet sadness. During his last tour, on June 27, 2006, Jason was killed in action, six weeks before he was scheduled to return home to his family in California.

Ryan will be out of the Marine Corps in time for the holidays this year. He will no doubt be enjoying his family, going to worship services at The Reformed Church in Plano, and making plans for his future. His dad tells of the adjustments Ryan will have to make once he's home. "Ryan's hardest adjustment returning home is trying to relax and escape from the stress of war. It is a different world there, however, we know that Ryan has helped free the people of Iraq," stated Chuck Kolakowski, proudly.

Ryan plans to go back to college and build a career in psychology or perhaps become a therapist. While he'll be glad to be home, he has some fond memories of the holidays in Iraq. He was fortunate

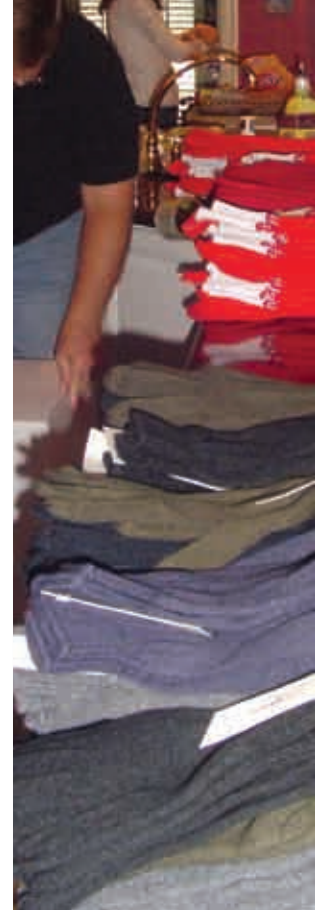
to enjoy good holiday meals, watch some football and enjoy some fellowship with others. Care packages were sent from home and Ryan enjoyed portioning out his cookies and candy with the kids in Iraq, as well as sharing a quick game of soccer with them.

The laughter and love they all shared around the holiday table, will remain vivid in Ryan's mind, with a mixture of bittersweet sadness.

Most of the soldiers aren't as lucky to share in the football experience away from home. Tony Sok, a member of the US Army Reserve, would have loved to watch football, but where he

was, indulging in such a game was not possible. Tony spent September 2005 to April of 2006 serving in a Security Camp just north of Baghdad, having been called up through the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR). Although he is a Chemical Operations Specialist, he served in a small High Value Detention Center, where he worked the night shift. Tony's holiday experience was much like other soldiers, with one day blending surreally into the next.

His Christmas spent there, however, was a bit more memorable for the wrong reasons. "I remember we were served cold spaghetti with meatballs. The next day I was rather ill from their effect." He doesn't recall it being spaghetti sauce as much as some sort of "gravy." "It didn't feel like Christmas. It was a bit better if you had the opportunity to go to Chapel, otherwise it just wasn't much different." Care packages and letters recognized the days surrounding his holiday experience and, while they



The Bovard family stuffing stockings (left); Piles of gloves and stockings for the Marines (right); Stockings boxed & ready to go (below) photos provided by Liz Bovard

were greatly appreciated, there was no significant time of celebration. But the greatest celebration of Tony's young life awaited him back home.

A month after arriving back in the states, on May 20th, Tony was thrilled to marry his fiancée, Lauren Hirsrunner. To say that these holidays will be quite different from what they were last year is saying it mildly, as Tony will be enjoying his first Christmas as a married man.

Tony and Lauren are looking forward to building their own holiday traditions, which will include going to church at Grace Community in Frisco and settling down to some good old-fashioned, all-American football! "Watching football or playing football, surrounded with laughter--that's what I'm looking forward to this year." Tony remembered how sobering it was to spend the holidays away from his family and to be so far away.

"I'm just grateful to be back. I'm looking forward to being with family this year and enjoying my wife's and my first Christmas together." Although his holidays will be surrounded with happiness, there will be memories, as there always are, of



I'm grateful to be back. I'm looking forward to being with family this year and enjoying my wife's and my first Christmas together.

what he encountered last year. Faces and names of those he knows that remain overseas. "It's like a chapter of your life that at times you forget you experienced, until it comes back to you, like opening the book again," Tony said, until the cover closes and you go on.

Franklin Wayne Sarratt has volumes in his family's military scrapbook of memories. He serves our country, just as his father did before him, and his father before him. More significant than before, however, he finds himself serving at the same time as his son, Seth. It appears to be a family tradition, or perhaps a family commitment to the ideals instilled by generations of strong patriots. Franklin serves in the Army, while his son, Seth, is currently serving in the Air Force, just as Seth's great-grandfather did.

Seth Sarratt, 26, is preparing for his next deployment and will be stateside until the beginning of the year. While both Franklin and Seth were overseas during the holidays last year, they find themselves blessed to be home, together, this year. "Last year we were both in Iraq. I knew about where he was, but we weren't together," Seth mused. While



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this had to be hard, he found Christmas wasn't as bad as it could have been.

Christmas morning was rather mundane, but in the evening Franklin enjoyed a Christmas dinner with his military family. "We built a tree out of water boxes and painted it green. And we had lights around the office buildings." He had never been in that situation, and found it to be a bit surreal. "We had calls and packages from home, but we were in the middle of a war." Franklin however found it hard to miss church services on Christmas day. "It's the first time I missed going in 15 years." While they tried to paint Christmas across the canvas of their barracks, Franklin constantly thought of his son.

"It's a bit two fold, with both of us over there. First, we bond a little tighter knowing that we're doing the same thing and, being over there on this mission, we're proud of each other. But as a dad, I'm ultimately concerned with the fact that he's my kid. I rest in knowing that he's had as much or even better training than I've had. I have to take myself out of the dad role and rely on the fact that

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Franklin Sarratt's Christmas Tree (above); Franklin Sarratt in Iraq (above, right); Adoptasoldier.com (center, right); Seth Sarratt (bottom, right) photos provided by Franklin Sarratt

he knows what he's doing. I'm proud of him." Franklin feels strongly that what has benefited the Sarratt men and other soldiers is the support they receive from back home.

"No matter what the media says, how they convey what they say, and no matter how the politicians try to paint it, or use it, the soldiers need the support of the people back home." Franklin was fortunate to serve his fellow service people, amidst other services as well, by delivering the mail. He saw first-hand what letters, notes, tokens and gifts meant to the men and women. While Franklin and his family will surely be sending their best wishes to soldiers overseas and praying for them, he is more than happy to be home this year for Christmas, before he leaves again early next year.

Franklin's wife, Domenica, purchased a bigger Christmas tree back in September, with the expectations of having her family home for the holidays. "I will be doing the things I love to do this year," Franklin shared. Along with the usual gatherings

and abundance of feasts, he looks forward to attending services at The Reformed Church in Plano. Seth, Franklin's son, is looking forward to the possibility of sharing the holidays with his family, as well as his girlfriend, although the possibility is not guaranteed.

"There is a chance I may not be home for the holidays. I'm not suppose to return to Iraq until February, but if things shift, I may need to leave early." Seth has served in the Air Force for the past five years as an Airman First Class. His last tour led him to Kirkuk.

While he was there, he found the holidays to be pleasing, albeit not the same as back home. He enjoyed the Thanksgiving feast, with Commanders, Generals and Colonels serving the food, dressing up as pilgrims and Indians, and going all out to make the holiday nice, but other than the evening meal, everyone had to stay on their military toes.

For Seth, Christmas morning last year



Soldiers departing from buses (above) photo provided by David Love
Eric Knowlton in the streets of Iraq (right) photo provided by Eric Knowlton



was a good example of why they must stay on constant watch: they were attacked. No thoughts of sugarplums dancing in his head, Seth had to get to work. “They know when our holidays are and when we bring soldiers in, whenever we might have our guard down.” Although it quieted down in the afternoon, it left little energy to throw into the Christmas festivities, though they made a great effort nevertheless.

We hung the stockings we received outside our door. We had to put lots of sand in them to keep them from blowing away.

“A lot of us had registered at adoptasoldier.com and other websites that help connect the folks back home

with soldiers,” Seth explained. These foster families sent stockings, food and gifts of all sorts. One even sent a small Christmas tree. Along with the packages came letters from all over the nation, letters of encouragement and support from strangers who were back home thinking and praying for them. “It became real emotional at times, as we read the letters. We tried to always write back,” Seth continued. The barracks became quite festive in the days leading up to Christmas.

“We hung the stockings we received from family and care packages outside our door. We had to put lots of sand in them to keep them from blowing away,” Seth further explained. Everyone in Seth’s unit went out and bought presents for each other. They loved getting CDs and movies of their favorite sights and sounds of home. They did the best they could to make their holidays as special as possible. While his father’s company built a tree out of boxes, Seth’s company built one out of Popsicle sticks, with their friend’s small tree attached as a final touch. They decorated it with a variety of food, socks

and whatever else they could find. “It was great for morale, which is so important,” Seth explained.

“I believe very deeply in what we’re doing over there and it’s something I want to be a part of. It’s something we all believe in. We keep morale up by telling jokes, praying and doing everything we can to make sure we all get home.” Morale seems to serve as a soldier’s overcoat, something that protects them, keeps them going and either encourages or discourages other soldiers when they see it. “I get mad when I hear people back home bad-mouthing the president or the politicians. You may not see the whole picture--what we do--but we believe we’re making a difference. We see the Iraqi people; we’re helping them

Websites Assisting in Contacting Soldiers

DEFENDERSOFFREEDOM.US

is a website where individuals can donate money that is spent directly on soldiers who have signed up to receive care packages, and what they would like in their care packages. See their website for details on how you can help. Some soldiers report receiving girl scout cookies, salsa and chips, and one received cigars for all his company, with instructions that when smoked, to blow the smoke to the west and think of home.

WWW.LETTERSFROMHOME PROGRAM.ORG

is a website where you can write letters and cards to anonymous soldiers. See website for instructions. The letters will be mailed out from the organization to soldiers overseas. As you reach and touch someone, you may be rewarded with a note of thanks back.

WWW.FORGOTTEN SOLDIERS.ORG

is a website where you can write an e-mail directly to an anonymous soldier. See website for instructions. This is a great way to support a service person who may not receive much news from home.

WWW.USTROOPCARE PACKAGE.COM

is a website that sends a packages to soldiers with a suggested list of preferred personal care and food items.



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Returning soldiers collecting their gear

photo provided by David Love

as they try to make a better country.” While it gets scary for him, it’s more nerve wracking for Seth thinking about his dad.

“My Dad is in the heart of it (the conflict) a lot of times. I know about where he is and what’s going on there. It’s worse when I can’t contact him. In the back of my head, it’s kind of scary knowing one of us could go.”

For now he’s going to enjoy his time home, with his family and his girlfriend. “I’m looking forward to some good ol’ southern cooking, food and family. All the stuff we usually take for granted,” Seth said. He’s looking forward to the honey ham, mashed potatoes, stuffing and pecan pie buried in ice cream, not to mention the presents. “After what I’ve seen and been through, Christmas has a whole new meaning.” No matter if Seth is here, or over there, he will be lifting prayers for the servicemen he’s grown to love and admire.

On Christmas morning, many visitors to Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, will be happy to find a list of soldier’s they

can pray for in the church’s Prayer Room. Good men such as Marine Corps Major Eric Knowlton, who is currently in Iraq. It’s unknown where he will be at Christmas time this year. He drives through the city streets of Iraq, knowing combat could challenge him at any moment. His parents are a part of the Stonebriar family. Major Knowlton acknowledges the importance of the prayers that are raised on his behalf back home. This soldier calls those praying his “prayer warriors.” “What prayer warriors do is infinitely more important and more powerful than anything I’ve ever done.”

Other names appear on this special prayer list: Private Second Class Brian Cochran, Lance Corporal Shane Collins, Major Shiloh Eischer, Spc. Marcos Garcia, Captain Ronald Gordon, Colonel Larry Greene, Sergeant Matthew Grezeszak, Colonel James Hartline, Petty Officer First Class Alan Jones, Sergeant Martin Kittridge, Commander Brad Knowlton, First Lieutenant Tim Kraftson, Second Lieutenant Jeff McMillen, Clayton Smith, First Lieutenant Ryan Thornton, Staff

Sergeant Martin Williamson, Petty Officer Third Class Ted Williamson and Sergeant Jason Young.

He’s looking forward to honey ham, mashed potatoes, stuffing and pecan pie buried in ice cream, not to mention the presents.

This Christmas, may we be thankful for the men and women who serve this country. There are numerous opportunities to reach out to our servicemen, either through websites that can connect you to soldiers overseas, injured veterans and to programs established by schools and places of worship. This year my family will be doing something a little different, a bit special.

My husband and I, along with our



four sons, plan to write notes of encouragement to unknown soldiers in unknown lands, knowing that our support will not fail to hearten. We will also be setting a place for the unknown soldier at our table. It will remain empty, and it will serve to remind us of those that received our letters, wherever they are. Hopefully our small effort will strengthen morale and perhaps color their world with shades of the holidays.

No matter where they lodge, until this combat is over, our soldiers will suffer the pains of a world torn into many pieces. On one shore lie their families, their wives, their children, their brothers, sisters and friends. On the other shore lie their comrades, their brothers in arms and their sisters in the trenches. A soldier cannot rest until all are on one shore--their shore. This Christmas our prayers and thoughts will be with them, encouraging them and strengthening them across the oceans, cultures and miles.

Cynthia Howe is a freelance writer living in Little Elm.



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- Eye Drops
- Saline Spray/Drops
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- Q-Tips
- Feminine Hygiene Products
- Disposable Razors
- Baby Powder, Foot Powder
- Dr. Scholls Moleskin

- Blistex, Vaseline, Carmex
- Toothpaste, Toothbrush
- Mouthwash
- Dental Floss/Picks

FOOD ITEMS

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- Crackers, Cookies, Power Bars
- Cereal
- Fruit and Nuts
- Pudding, Jell-O
- Soups & Meals in a can
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- Powdered Drinks
- Spices
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