

# A Christmas Story: Paratroopers in Baghdad enjoy Christmas Eve dinner at a local sheikh's house

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Foxboro, Mass. native 1st Lt. William Lord (right), a platoon leader with B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division, and his platoon members enjoy Christmas Eve feast at the home of Sheikh Ali Mijbil (left), a local businessman who has become a trusted ally and friend of the 2nd Bn., 319th Abn. FA since the unit began operating in Baghdad in early 2007. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Mike Pryor, 2nd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division Public Affairs) Photo by [Staff Sgt. Mike Pryor, 2nd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division Public Affairs](#)

BAGHDAD - It was a bitterly cold night, and the heater in Spc. Adam Van Winkle's humvee was no match for the frozen air blowing in through the open turret. Van Winkle was sitting behind the wheel as the humvee idled in the darkness beneath a highway overpass, providing the security escort for a team of engineers. The night was no different than a hundred other nights just like it. Except for one thing . . .

"Hey, what's today?" Van Winkle suddenly wondered.

"Today is Monday, Dec. 24 - also known as Christmas-freakin'-Eve!" shouted his gunner.

"Oh yeah," Van Winkle said.

It's easy to see how he could have forgotten. For Van Winkle's platoon of mechanics-turned-infantrymen from Company B., 407th Support Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, the mission tempo is pretty much 24 hours a day, seven days a week - holidays included. Most of the 3rd Platoon members weren't hoping for anything more than a good night's rest for Christmas.

But thanks to a friend from the local community, they got much more than that. Sheikh Ali Mijbil, a local businessman who has become a friend of the platoon since it began operating in his East Baghdad neighborhood almost a year ago, was determined to give his paratrooper friends an opportunity to enjoy the holiday in style.

On Christmas Eve, the Sheikh hosted 3rd platoon at his house for a feast to celebrate the holiday.

"We invited the Soldiers because we know that Christmas is an important holiday for them," Sheikh Ali said. "It makes me happy to give them a place to eat on a special night when they are away from their families."

The plan was developed several days earlier, when the Sheikh approached platoon leader 1st Lt. William Lord, of Foxboro, Mass., about having a special dinner at his house on Christmas Eve. Lord happily accepted. At the agreed time, though, the platoon got stuck with a last-minute escort mission. They were a few hours late when they finally showed up at the Sheikh's house.

He was waiting for them. Sheikh Ali greeted the paratroopers at his front gate and ushered them into the house. As they stepped inside, the platoon members were met with a blaze of light. The Sheikh's living room was covered by a gold-colored carpet and gold-trimmed drapes and couches, all lit by a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

"This is the nicest house I've been to in Iraq," one of the paratroopers said.

"In Iraq? I don't know anybody who lives this nice in the states," said Sgt. Daniel Lizanne, a team leader from Washington, D.C.

As the paratroopers got comfortable, Ali sat talking with Lord on the couch while children brought in plates of chicken and lamb. When the tables were completely covered with plates of food, Ali told them to eat, and everybody dug in.

Lord looked happily over at his men as they wolfed down kabob sandwiches.

"This made a huge difference. It's a big morale boost for the guys," Lord said.

Other than Lord, none of the platoon members had been aware that Ali was going to be throwing them a party. They were impressed by the gesture.

"It's very generous of him to offer up his house. I definitely appreciate it and I know the other guys do too," said Sgt. Daniel Lizanne.

Lizanne said the dinner proved that people don't have to let their differences separate them.

"It shows that it doesn't matter if you are a Christian or a Muslim - you can still get together and have some food and have fun together," said Lizanne.

The fact that an Iraqi would be willing to have a Christmas party for American Soldiers in his own house is a testament to how far U.S. forces have come in earning the trust of the local people, said Spc. Richard Cordova, of Bakersfield, Calif.

"Now that we've been here (almost a year), we've got to know people well enough that they will invite us into their houses with no problem," Cordova said.

As they stood around happily munching on kabobs and cracking jokes on each other, the platoon members had to admit that it was a much better Christmas Eve than they had expected.

Cordova, who was spending his first Christmas apart from his family, said the dinner at the Sheikh's house made him forget about what he was missing and appreciate what he has.

"Of course you still miss your family back home, but all these guys you're here with, they become your family in a way. So I'm just glad we are all together tonight," he said.