

marketplace **detroit**

- find a car
- find a home
- find a job
- classified ads

freep / news / wayne

Home [News](#) [Sports](#) [Entertainment](#) [Business](#) [Features](#) [Opinion](#) [Tech](#) [Help](#) [Marketplace](#)

COLUMNISTS

- [Susan Ager](#)
- [Desiree Cooper](#)
- [Brian Dickerson](#)
- [Rochelle Riley](#)

SECTIONS

- [Today's stories](#)
- [Metro](#)
- [Wayne](#)
- [Oakland](#)
- [Macomb](#)
- [Michigan](#)
- [Casinos](#)
- [Roadwork](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Children First](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Religion](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Nation/World](#)
- [AP wire](#)

HELP

- [Search](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Death notices](#)
- [About us](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

MARKETPLACE

- [Classifieds](#)
- [Find a job](#)
- [Find a home](#)
- [Find a car](#)
- [Yellow Pages](#)
- [Place an ad](#)



CHRISTMAS AWAY FROM HOME: Military families cope as duty calls

Threat of war makes holiday tough for relatives of troops

December 23, 2002

BY PEGGY WALSH-SARNECKI

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Sgt. Wayne Sisto of Allen Park won't be there when daughters Melissa, 16, and Melanie, 14, unwrap their presents on Christmas day.

He's one of the approximately 300,000 military troop members deployed overseas this holiday season. Sisto is with the 127th Wing of the Air National Guard out of Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Harrison Township, deployed to Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Not being with family during the holidays is tough for anyone. But for those in the military, spending the holidays away from home is often

HOW YOU CAN HELP

There are several ways Americans can help those in uniform celebrate the holidays. It's not too late to:

- Send a greeting via e-mail through Operation Dear Abby, www.OperationDearAbby.net.
- Donate a calling card to help troops keep in touch with their families at Operation Uplink, www.operationuplink.org.
- Sign a virtual thank-you card at www.defendamerica.mil/nmam.html.
- Make a donation to the Military Relief Societies: Army, www.aerhq.org;

NEW TODAY

- [Boasts spurred tip in Livonia slaying](#)
- [4 plotted, witness in terror case charges](#)

- [Body is that of missing girl, 15](#)

SPECIALS

- [Latest area road closings, maps and information](#)
- [One week of Oakland County stories](#)
- [One week of Wayne County stories](#)
- [One week of Macomb County stories](#)
- [One week of Metro stories](#)

a reality.

"It's definitely not easy. I've never been away from the family at Christmas," Sisto said.

He and his daughters celebrated before he left Dec. 11, but that doesn't take the place of being together on Christmas.

"I really don't like that he's away over Christmas, and we're not going to be able to spend the holiday with him," Melanie said.

"The day he gets home, we're probably going right over to his house," her sister, Melissa, added.

The 127th is scheduled to return in January, but the possibility of war with Iraq makes that uncertain.

"We know we're going to be here through the holidays at least," Sisto said. "We just hope we make it home on time, because as unsettled as the world is today, you never know.

"But we knew when we signed up for the job, we'd be taking that risk."

The uncertainty of war with Iraq will make this holiday season even more stressful than usual for the families of military members, said Shelley MacDermid, a Purdue University family studies expert who specializes in military families.

"I think for any family, military or civilian, uncertainty is a difficult thing to deal with. But for military families, when uncertainty is combined with the possibility of a dangerous

Navy and Marines at www.nmcrs.org; Air Force at www.afas.org, or Coast Guard at www.cgmahq.org.

- Donate to the Red Cross Armed Forces Emergency Services, www.redcross.org/services/afes/.

Because of security concerns, the Department of Defense asks people not to send unsolicited packages and letters without going through these or other channels.

Source: Department of Defense

situation, it just makes that even more challenging," MacDermid said.

But she said military families tend to be equipped for the challenge.

"I think it's very much a part of the culture of the military," MacDermid said. "The people are strong; the children tend to do well in school; people try to meet the demands of the job."

"That doesn't mean it's easy," MacDermid said.

How they cope

Most of the troops deployed overseas are there without their families, according to the Department of Defense.

That includes more than 60,000 troops stationed in what the military calls the Central Command area in the war against terrorism: southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. It also includes about 37,000 troop members in South Korea and all the troops stationed aboard ships at sea.

Tom -- he can't give his last name for security reasons -- was to be shipped overseas before Christmas with the 110th Wing of the Air National Guard out of Battle Creek. His wife will celebrate their 4-month-old son's first Christmas without him.

That's just the way it is, Tom said.

"It's not like it's a happy time, but we have a mission and that's what we have to do," Tom said. "We'll celebrate when I get home."

National Guard members and reservists are almost never accompanied by their families, even when deployed in the United States, because of the uncertain nature of their assignments.

Capt. Joseph Sullivan is part of the National Guard's 144th Military Police Co. out of Owosso, which has been deployed to act as Pentagon security officers in Washington, D.C.,

since last April. Their menu for Thanksgiving included turkeys cooked by some of the troops still at home.

"Just being deployed is a challenge, based on separation from family," Sullivan said. "Obviously, if we can afford them the opportunity to go home, we do."

On Christmas day, some of the 144th will be home. The rest will remain in Washington, D.C., at their security posts.

The number of guard members and reservists on active duty appears to be climbing. There are 55,530 National Guard members and reservists on active duty, up about 5,000 in December alone. This includes 30,330 in the Army National Guard and Army Reserve, almost 5,000 Naval reservists, another 15,675 in the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, 3,800 Corps reservists and 750 in the Coast Guard Reserve.

Bill, another member of Battle Creek's 110th Wing, is grateful to be home for the holidays this year. He has been deployed twice since the Sept. 11 attacks, once to southeast Asia.

He was in Nebraska for Christmas last year. Although he was able to wrangle four days of leave in December, his leave did not include spending Christmas day with his wife and three children, ages 13, 15 and 19.

"We have a mission to perform," Bill said. "If they had a preference, they'd have us home. But my wife and kids understand the need for performing the job that we do."

In Germany, Sisto and the rest of the 127th crew talk often about their families and spending Christmas without them. But their conversations are most often about how their families will cope, rather than their own loneliness.

"We compare notes on our kids and what they're doing, how they're probably going to react on Christmas when we're not there," Sisto said.

The 127th plans to have a turkey dinner on Christmas day at the Ramstein Noncommissioned Officers' Club.

"We're going to make it as close to traditional American home-cooked style as we can," Sisto said.

Contact PEGGY WALSH-SARNECKI at 586-469-4681 or pwalsh@freepress.com.

[MORE WAYNE COUNTY STORIES](#)

[FREEP FRONT](#) | [NEWS FRONT](#)

Comments? Questions? You can reach us at [The Freep](#)

[Home](#) [News](#) [Sports](#) [Entertainment](#) [Business](#) [Features](#) [Opinion](#) [Tech](#) [Help](#) [Marketplace](#)

All content © copyright 2003 Detroit Free Press and may not be republished without permission.