

# Saudi version of holidays a mental struggle

## From Associated Press reports

IN EASTERN SAUDI ARABIA — The only thing white about Christmas here is the desert sand.

Families and loved ones are far away for the American military personnel deployed in Operation Desert Shield.

Outward Christmas displays are barred so as not to offend the Islamic sensibilities of the Saudi Arabians.

Twinkling lights don't go with military tents.

It's enough to give the toughest troops the Christmas blues. But a psychologist says Desert Shield won't be completely barren of holiday cheer.

"There will be kind of a blue haze over everything. It's kind of a funk," said Capt. Frank Mullins, 54, of Mobile, Ala., a psychologist at the U.S. Navy's Fleet No. 5 Hospital.

"But the average person will find a lot of solace being among friends, sharing Christmas dinner, singing a couple of carols," he said.

What helps people get through the holidays are personal things sent from home: a card, a trinket, a snapshot, Christmas music, yule decorations, Mullins said.

Army Maj. Doug Bidle of Chicago received a candy cane house complete with fake snow and an artificial tree from his wife.

Navy Petty Officer Diane Escobar of Austin, Texas, has a nativity scene, and a paratrooper in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division was mailed the artificial tree his father had in Vietnam.

"The troops here should try to have as normal a Christmas as they can, with as many customs and rituals as they can get from home," Mullins said.

"People are upset, don't get me wrong. If you don't feel upset, maybe there's something wrong with you," he said. "They may get depressed. They

may cry a little bit. But they'll be fine the next day.

"We don't expect to be overflowing with psychiatric casualties on Christmas Day."

What's also absent in Saudi Arabia is spiked eggnog and alcoholic spirits because liquor is banned in Saudi Arabia.

But Mullins said the absence of booze, a depressant, is one of the reasons why the mood of the troops has been so good despite the desert life, scorpions, vipers, isolation and harsh living conditions.

"I'll be the first to say I'm glad there's no alcohol," he said. "What it does is cut down on the mental health business."

We've had surprisingly little business."

"The truth of the matter is the mental

health of many of troops is going to improve," Mullins said. "They can cope with normal developmental pressures without alcohol."

"They're going to find they can engage in more adult behavior and operate in their environment more realistically."

Most of the problems troops have sought help for are personal ones: the Dear John letters, the death of a loved one back home, the first child born while a serviceman is on desert duty.

The military recognizes that stress, fatigue and anxiety can be daily enemies than can dull the fighting edge of young service members.

"The kids we're seeing are not bitching about living in the sand," Mullins said. "The harshness of the

living conditions since we've been here has not been that big a problem.

"How many times have you heard that morale is good when people are bitching? When people get too depressed to bitch, you've got problems. They withdraw socially, go into themselves."

What's important is the coping skills that people develop from the hardships, the psychologist said.

"For a lot of young men here, this may be the major growth experience in their lives," Mullins said.

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