

# The Special Gift

*Fortified with rum and love the package traveled halfway across the world to say “Merry Christmas!”*

*By James D. Doggette Jr.*

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Christmas in old New Orleans was a time of celebrating home, family and close friends. A very special way to share the love was baking and sharing treats—everything from cookies to shortbreads.

Some of the best things to come out of Grandma’s kitchen at Christmastime were her secret-family-recipe fruitcakes. These devilishly delicious morsels were the size of pound cakes and filled with everything from apple bits to walnuts, jellied fruits to mincemeat. Grandma baked them for friends and family as Christmas gifts every year from the time I was old enough to remember.

As a kid, I used to slip into the kitchen and watch her work. You can imagine my surprise when I saw her grab a bottle of rum and pour it into the mix, for Grandma was a teetotaler!

The smell of those luscious fruitcakes baking would permeate every room in that tiny old shotgun house and make my mouth water. When they were baked and cooled, she’d give us kids a small slice with our milk for a bedtime snack. What a wonderful treat! She always kept one or two on hand to slice and serve to guests with coffee.

I never dreamed then that such a small childhood memory would one day make a bleak and gloomy Christmas very merry indeed.

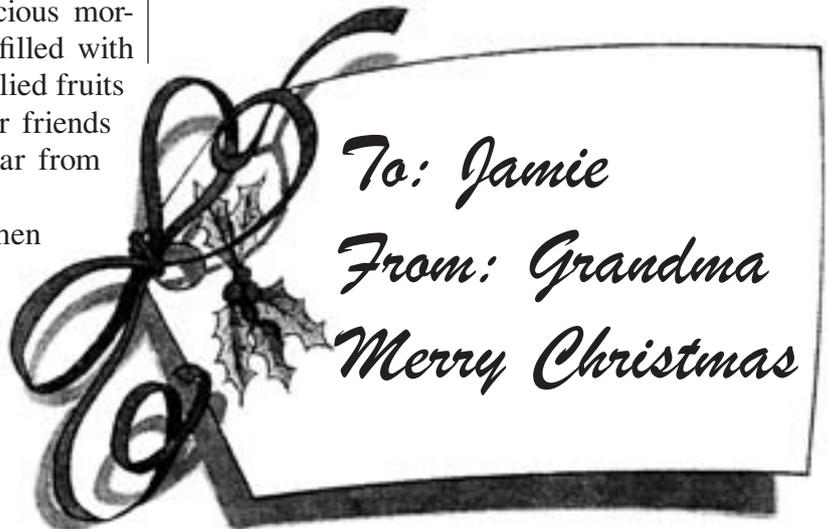
Christmas Eve 1966 found me on a guided-missile frigate patrolling the coast of Vietnam. We were in the middle of a 45-day combat cruise, and the mood on board was somber and dreary. Our thoughts turned to home, hearth and kinfolk. It tore out our hearts to think that our families would be opening gifts while we were opening ammo boxes half a world away.

I was a young seaman apprentice, and I was assigned to mess duty. On Christmas morning, I

reported to the galley at 0430 hours (4:30 a.m.). The master-at-arms told me to go look under the aluminum tree we had erected in the corner of the mess decks.

“Santa Claus came for you last night,” he said.

We didn’t know it until later, but the crew of the helicopter gunship that we had on board had volunteered to make a midnight mail run for all



of us. The Jolly Old Elf and his helpers had really outdone themselves this time for sure.

Timidly, I walked over to our tree. Somehow, it looked much grander than it had the night before. Our letters from home were hanging from the limbs like ornaments. I found mine—about five in all. The master-at-arms told me to pay attention to the present under the tree. It was wrapped in strangely familiar blue paper with wreaths and green ribbons. The bow had a cluster of small pinecones and a tag dangling from it that read, “To Jamie, From Grandma.”

With shaking hands, I picked it up and felt it. My heart began to beat fast. I ripped open a flap or two, then held it close to my nose and sniffed deeply. *Ahhh!* That familiar aroma filled my nostrils, blasting me back to my childhood once again

as golden memories burst forth, spilling over like a shaken-up bottle of soda pop.

Yes, it was one of her fruitcakes, and yes, we shared it. With my piece of cake and my letters

from home, I seemed to become stronger. The closeness I felt with family and shipmates gave me the strength and endurance to manage my first Christmas away from home. ❖