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A soldier's surprise for the holidays

Michael Kelly

Every Christmas Eve, **the** Williams boys recall their mother's intuition. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer in **the** fall of 1970 and underwent **a** mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiation. She kept **a** good attitude, but was sick **a** lot.

The oldest of her three sons, Bob Jr., was in **the** Army, stationed in Germany. Though he was **a** long way from Vietnam, his parents worried that he might be sent there.

But in **the** fall of 1971, he began shipping possessions home in anticipation of his discharge in late January 1972.

Luella Williams, **the** mother, thought **the** arrival of his things meant he was actually surprising her at Christmas. She thought her husband and her other two sons, Gary and Rick, were in on it.

No, they told her, he's not coming until late January. And they meant it. There was no conspiracy.

When his skis arrived, though, she was sure he'd be right behind them.

"We were worried that she was getting her hopes up," Gary said. "We told her no. But she was absolutely convinced he was coming home **for** Christmas."

She even bought presents **for** Bob and placed them under **the** tree at **the** family's home near 47th Street and Bedford Avenue.

"It was kind of funny, but it was sad," Gary said. "We were doing everything we could to dissuade her. **The** more we did, **the** more convinced she became that we knew something."

Unknown to **the** family, on Dec. 20 Bob Jr. received word that **the** Army had bought more plane tickets to get GIs home in December than there were GIs scheduled to leave. So if he could get through Army processing, he could take an early out.

Everything fell into place, just barely. Late on Dec. 21, he caught **a** ride to **the** train station - arriving as **the** train was pulling out. Two young German soldiers saw him running and held **the** door open.

He got to **a** military post in Germany, **the** last to arrive in **a** gymnasium filled with soldiers hoping to get home.

"Amazingly enough," recalled Bob, who now lives in Denver, "although I was literally one of **the** very last to get **a** ticket, I did get one and began **the** long flight home on Dec. 22."

He arrived at Fort Dix, N.J., and on Dec. 24 flew to Chicago, where he made connections to Omaha. **The** plane **for** home had to return to **the** terminal because of **a** warning light, and then left Chicago late. Everything was such **a** close call that Bob didn't call ahead.

He arrived in Omaha and took **a** cab home, walking **the** final block to take in all **the** old sights and lights.

At 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve, he knocked on **the** door. His brothers ran out and hugged him. Luella, who was on **the** phone, dropped **the** receiver and ran to **the** door.

Bob Sr., who worked at Woodmen of **the** World, arrived later. He dropped his cigarette and burned **a** hole in **a** decorative Christmas tablecloth.

Luella died in 1978 and Bob Sr. in 1981. Bob Jr. is soon to retire from **the** U.S. Geological Survey. Gary is manager **for** corporate communications at **the** Omaha Public Power District. Rick is **a** professor at Notre Dame.

The sons say **the** Christmas of 1971 was their most memorable. Bob Sr. told Bob Jr. that **the** homecoming mimicked his own at **the** end of World War II - all **the** trains and buses were packed, but **a** stranger gave him **a** ride from Denver.

In that case, Bob Sr. came home to his young wife, Luella. Bob Jr. was born **a** little more than nine months later.

At Christmas 1971, she knew her soldier son was coming home. Said Bob Jr.: "Mothers seem to know things that simply can't be explained."

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