

Holidays were, I guess traditional, just like it is the United States. We celebrated all the traditional holidays—Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween—in the same manner that they were celebrated in the States. What was interesting about Christmas was that, of course, it's the tropics and it's hot. You wouldn't expect evergreens to grow there and they didn't. But we imported them from the United States. Early in December, as soon as the word got out that the Christmas trees had arrived in the commissary, families would rush to the loading docks and try to pick out the best tree that they could, buy and take it home. And just like people do here in the States we would set the tree up in the house. Everybody would buy Christmas tree lights at the commissary and decorate their trees with lead stencil. I don't know if you see lead stencil now, icicles. So, we would decorate the trees and some of the people would go caroling, very much the same as in the States. And of course, we had traditional Christmas presents under the tree and get up Christmas morning and enjoy your presents. The best thing about Christmas was that long after the holidays, the trees would really dry up and they were a fire hazard. In order to reduce the load on the people that collected the garbage, what we used to do with the Christmas trees is we would collect them in somebody's yard or in an area and save the big piles of Christmas trees. And sometime around the middle of January, every community, every neighborhood would have a Christmas tree burn. Now what this was, everybody that collected these trees would bring them to this open field and there would be volunteer firemen to supervise, or maybe an official guy in his uniform with a fire engine close by. We would have hot dog roasts, and marshmallows, and potato chips, and Cokes, and we would sing around this big bonfire. We kept feeding the bonfire with trees because they go up very quickly. It was like a big party. It was very interesting; I never heard of anything like that done in the United States. But leading up to the Christmas tree burn, what would happen sometimes, and I have to admit me and some of my friends were as likely to do it as any others, we would locate where somebody's stash of trees were in another neighborhood and sneak over in the middle of the night and steal them and bring them to our community and increase the size of our stash to make the fire bigger and brighter and last longer. One night, five of us actually made a big deal of it. We got stuff on our faces, camouflage, wore dark clothes. Around midnight we snuck up to this guy's house where he was saving the trees for his neighborhood and he had them wired together with cable. He drilled holes in the trunks and had them all wired together. So, we brought our little wire cutters and we sneaked down the hill in the back of his house and we were getting ready to start stealing the trees and the next thing you know lights go on and he comes out with a big flashlight: what the hell are you doing? Get out! The mistake was that this guy's name was Blades. He was Officer Blades; he was a Canal Zone policeman. Big mistake. Of course, we all booked, we just as fast as we could all four of us. One of my friends, Mike Carpenter, when the officer hollered, stop! He stopped [laughter]. And of course, he got in all kinds of trouble. But to his credit, he didn't squeal on me and my buddies Larry and Lee Cotton, and Paul Glassman. We got away with it and he never told on us. But anyway, that's just a small bit of chicanery that we got involved in, stealing Christmas trees.