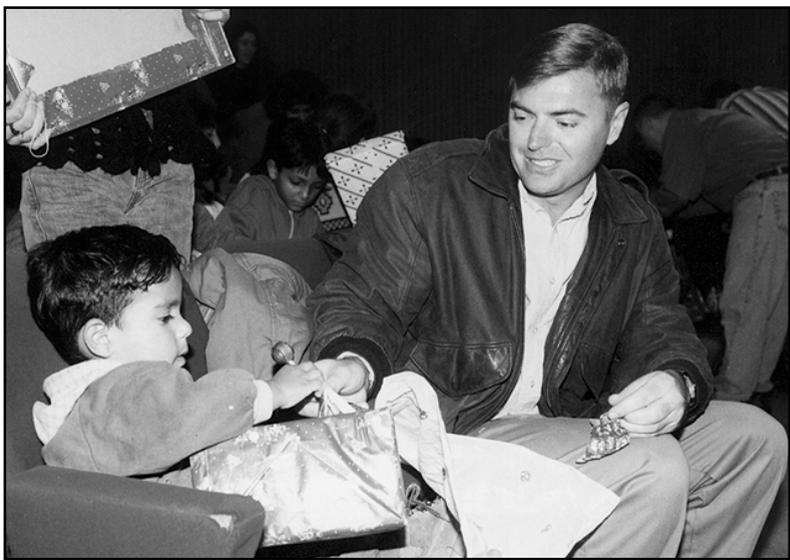


Charleston delivers Christmas cheer



Left to right, Staff Sgt. Scott Haak, 17th Airlift Squadron loadmaster, Maj. Dean Rosenquist and Capt. Chris Eden, both 17 AS pilots, hand out shoe boxes filled with Christmas gifts to Macedonian children.



(above) Maj. Dean Rosenquist, 17 AS, helps Raman unwrap a lollipop. Rosenquist was one of 10 crewmembers from the 17th AS taking part in Operation Christmas Child.

(below) Raman takes time away from opening his Christmas box to wave the red, white and blue, while Rosenquist looks on.



Raman, a three-year old Macedonian child, holds a Samaritan's Purse Christmas Child shoe box gift he received from members of the 17th Airlift Squadron. Raman is one of 45 children who wouldn't have a Christmas this year if it weren't for the efforts of Samaritan's Purse and Team Charleston.

More than 18,000 boxes filled with candy, toys and school supplies were delivered to poor children in Macedonia

**Story and photos by
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The auditorium in downtown Skopje, Macedonia, was quiet as members of the 17th Airlift Squadron, led by Lt. Col. Scott Grunwald, walked through the door with gifts for the 45 anxious Macedonian children assembled.

The awkward silence that seemed to last for an hour, but was only a few seconds, was shattered by an enthusiastic "Hello children" from Grunwald.

The response from the children was just as enthusiastic.

After a short introduction through an interpreter, the crewmembers handed out shoe boxes filled with candy, toys and school supplies, and spent an hour sharing and enjoying the smiles and hugs of thanks.

And so began the conclusion of a mission many months in the making.

For the past three years, Samaritan's Purse, a Christian non-profit relief organization from Boone, N.C., has coordinated with Charleston AFB and The Denton Amendment Program, to provide humanitarian relief for needy people all over the world.

Dubbed Operation Christmas Child, the program "sends a message of hope to children in desperate situations around the world through gift-filled shoe boxes and Christian literature."

"We're really excited to be a part of this mission," said Tech. Sgt. Reynold Albright, a loadmaster with the 17th AS. "It means a lot to be able to help those less fortunate."

Albright, one of three loadmasters on the trip, was responsible for ensuring the 16 pallets of precious cargo was secured for the long flight to Macedonia.

Grunwald commented that not eight months ago, C-17s were taking war-fighting equipment into the region. "Now we're taking things in that will bring smiles to children's faces."

Originally, the flight was to go to Kosovo. "Because Kosovo is still considered a high-threat area," explained Grunwald, the final destination was changed to Skopje.

Once on the ground, most of the boxes were readied for trucking into Kosovo.

The aircrew and media representatives loaded into vehicles for the 20-minute drive downtown. After introductions were completed, the crew handed out the shoe boxes, much to the delight of the children.

Grunwald brought with him two boxes his children personally put together. He presented them to two Macedonian children the same age as his.

"That was a real treat to be able to do that," Grunwald said.

Charleston's own Top 3 organization collected more than 370 shoe boxes to be sent.

The flight is part of the Denton Amendment Program which allows humanitarian relief supplies to be flown on Air Force planes when there is space available on a previously scheduled flight.

In 1998, more than 2.3 million shoe boxes full of presents for Operation Christmas Child were flown all over the world. Last year, the organization used four Antonov 124s – a Russian cargo plane. This year, the U.S. military is helping by sending the newest cargo plane – the C-17 Globemaster III.