From: **William Lewis** wrldmd@aol.com
Subject: Fwd: Army Navy football--THE BEST CHRISTMAS STORY YOU "NEVER" HEARD
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To:

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Great story. Big time help from the War College

Really neat story. Enjoy.

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Xmas story

THE BEST CHRISTMAS STORY YOU "NEVER" HEARD

Here's a 'today' Yule story that occurred 4 weeks ago – and now, during the holidays, I bring you the best Christmas story you “never” heard.

It started last Christmas, when Bennett and Vivian Levin were overwhelmed by sadness while listening to radio reports of injured American troops. "We have to let them know we care," Vivian told Bennett.

So they organized a trip to bring soldiers from Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Hospital to the annual Army-Navy football game in Philly, on December 3, 2019.

The cool part is, they created their own train line to do it. Yes, there are people in this country who actually own real trains and Bennett Levin, a native Philly guy and a self-made millionaire is one of them.

He has three luxury rail cars. Think mahogany paneling, plush seating and white-linen dining areas. He also has two locomotives, which he stores at his Juniata Park train yard. One car, the elegant Pennsylvania, carried John F. Kennedy to the Army-Navy game in 1961 and '62. Later, it carried his brother Bobby's body to D.C. for burial. "That's a lot of history for one car," says Bennett.

He and Vivian wanted to revive a tradition that endured from 1936 to 1975, during which trains carried Army-Navy spectators from around the country directly to the stadium where the annual game is played. The Levins could think of no better passengers to reinstate the ceremonial ride than the wounded men and women recovering at Walter Reed in D.C. and Bethesda, in Maryland.

"We wanted to give them a first-class experience," says Bennett. "Gourmet meals on board, private transportation from the train to the stadium, perfect seats – real hero treatment."

Through the Army War College Foundation, of which he is a trustee, Bennett met with Walter Reed's commanding general, who loved the idea. But Bennett had some ground rules first, all designed to keep the focus on the troops alone:

No press on the trip, lest the soldiers' day of pampering devolve into a media circus.
No politicians either, because, says Bennett, "I didn't want some idiot making this trip into a campaign photo op" and no Pentagon suits on board, otherwise the soldiers would be too busy saluting superiors to relax.

The general agreed to the conditions, and Bennett realized he had a problem on his hands. "I had to actually make this thing happen," he laughs.

Over the next months, he recruited owners of 15 other sumptuous rail cars from around the country into lending their vehicles for the day (these people tend to know each other).

The name of their temporary train? **The Liberty Limited**.
Amtrak volunteered to transport the cars to D.C. – where they'd be coupled together for the round-trip ride to Philly – then back to their owners later.

Conrail offered to service the Liberty while it was in Philly. And SEPTA drivers would bus the disabled soldiers 200 yards from the train to Lincoln Financial Field, for the game.

A benefactor from the War College ponied up 100 seats to the game – on the 50-yard line – and lunch in a hospitality suite.

And corporate donors filled, for free and without asking for publicity, goodie bags for attendees:

From Woolrich, stadium blankets,

From Wal-Mart, digital cameras,

From Nikon, field glasses, and

From GEAR, down jackets.

There was booty not just for the soldiers, but for their guests, too, since each was allowed to bring a friend or family member.

The Marines, though, declined the offer. "They voted not to take guests with

them, so they could take more Marines," says Levin, choking up at the memory.

Bennett's an emotional guy, so he was worried about how he'd react to meeting the 88 troops and guests at D.C.'s Union Station, where the trip originated. Some GIs were missing limbs.

Others were wheelchair-bound or accompanied by medical personnel for the day. "They made it easy to be with them," he says. "They were all smiles on the ride to Philly. Not an ounce of self-pity from any of them. They're so full of life and determination."

At the stadium, the troops reveled in the game, recalls Bennett. Not even Army's lopsided loss to Navy could deflate the group's rollicking mood.

Afterward, it was back to the train and yet another gourmet meal – heroes get hungry, says Levin – before returning to Walter Reed and Bethesda . "The day was spectacular," says Levin.

It was all about these kids. It was awesome to be part of it."

The most poignant moment for the Levins was when 11 Marines hugged them goodbye, then sang them the Marine Hymn on the platform at Union Station.

"One of the guys was blind, but he said, 'I can't see you, but man, you must be beautiful!' " says Bennett. "I got a lump so big in my throat, I couldn't even answer him."

It's been three weeks, but the Levins and their guests are still feeling the day's love. "My Christmas came early," says Levin, who is Jewish and who loves the Christmas season.
"I can't describe the feeling in the air." Maybe it was hope.
As one guest wrote in a thank-you note to Bennett and Vivian, "The fond memories generated last Saturday will sustain us all – whatever the future may bring."

God bless the Levins … and God bless the troops, every single one.

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'Something to Ponder'

"Politicians should wear sponsor jackets like NASCAR drivers. so we know who owns them."

--Robin Williams