Dec. 5, 2004

"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas…" Are you kidding? We love it here is sunny Southern California, where you can wear shorts on Christmas morning or take a dip in the ocean, if you want to. We have the best weather in the country, never too hot or cold, and never too humid. When you live in a place with more palm trees than snow, dreaming of a white Christmas just doesn't work. It's awfully hard to go on a sleigh ride at the beach, after all. And that's why Santa doesn't arrive on his big red sleigh here. Instead, in the L.A. South Bay area, he arrives on a surfboard. Decked out in a red wetsuit with all the white trimmings, Surfin' Santa can sometimes be seen riding the waves around Manhattan or Hermosa Beach.

When Santa hits the beach, you know the holidays are here in Southern California. And that means it's time for our annual holiday letter. If you didn't receive our letter last year, that's because we didn't write one. With me starting a new job in Southern California, Priscilla getting her left knee replaced, and then traveling across country from the Washington, DC, area to our new home in the Los Angeles area, there just wasn't enough time for us to complete our regular holiday routine. So we'll try to make up for it a little with this letter starting with my military retirement in 2003. As many of you know, I retired from the Navy on Aug. 31 of last year, after 20 years of active duty service. I had a nice ceremony at the Navy Memorial in our nation's capital, and then thanks to a donation by my cousin Bruce, we had quite a party up near Beltsville, MD. We rented a hall and a DJ, and had plenty of good food and drink. If you missed it, you missed a traditional Navy good time provided by the Chief.

Shortly after the ceremony, I departed for California. Priscilla stayed back east with her cousins (Karen Patterson and family) because she had her knee replacement scheduled at Walter Reed Army Medical Center Hospital. I had to start my new job at the City of Bellflower in L.A. County on September 8th. This was my fourth trip across the country, and this time I didn't take a full month visiting friends and seeing the countryside, like I did the other three times. But you know me, I can't just drive straight through, so I did stop at a couple of places.

The first place I visited was Appomattox Court House in Southern Virginia. There is a court house there, but the actual village is named "Appomattox Court House. " There are 27 original 19th century structures on the national historical park and I spent a few hours walking the same old country lanes where Robert E. Lee, commanding general of the Army of Northern Virginia, surrendered his men to Ulysses Grant, General-in-Chief of all United States forces, on April 9, 1865. I imagined the events that signaled the end of the Southern States' attempt to create a separate nation. The four years of the Civil War had caused approximately 630,000 deaths and over one million casualties. The actual surrender site wasn't at the court house like I always thought, but it occurred at the McLean home. The home is open to visitors, but the visitor center and a museum are located at the court house. Thinking back to this trip over a year ago, the next place of note that I can remember stopping, wasn't until I got to the panhandle of Texas. There I stopped in Amarillo at the Big Texan Steak Ranch restaurant, home of the free 72oz steak (if you can eat it and all the trimmings.) It's a huge bright yellow building with a giant bull out front. You definitely can't miss it. Bob Lee opened his first Big Texan Cowboy Steak House in 1959, and he was once asked why he served a 72 ounce steak.

"Well, I found this cowboy who had the biggest appetite I'd ever seen," Lee said, "and I sat him down and started feeding him steak. When he was finally full, I calculated how much steak he'd eaten. All total he'd eaten 72 ounces, so that's how big I knew my biggest steak had to be."

I stopped twice in Arizona, the first time at the Petrified Forest National Park. It's a surprising land of scenic wonders. The park features one of the world's largest and most colorful concentrations of petrified wood. Also included are the multihued badlands of the Chinle formation known as the Painted Desert. What's amazing is how quickly, once off Interstate 40, the terrain changes into the incredibly beautiful badlands of the Painted Desert, a grand variety of geological formations, and arrays of richly colored petrified wood ranging in size from gigantic logs lying on the desert floor to hints of logs poking out from conical-shaped hills, to very small chunks scattered across the terrain.

My second Arizona stop was at Meteor Crater, also known as the Barringer Meteorite Crater. It's a gigantic hole in the middle of the arid sandstone of the Arizona desert. A rim of smashed and jumbled boulders, some of them the size of small houses, rises 150 feet above the level of the surrounding plain. The crater itself is nearly a mile wide, and 570 feet deep. When Europeans first discovered the crater, the plain around it was covered with chunks of meteoritic

iron - over 30 tons of it, scattered over an area 8 to 10 miles in diameter. Scientists believe the crater was created approximately 50,000 years ago. The meteorite which made it was composed almost entirely of nickel-iron, suggesting that it may have originated in the interior of a small planet. It was 150 feet across, weighed roughly 300,000 tons, and was traveling at a speed of 40,000 miles per hour. The force generated by its impact was equal to the explosion of 20 million tons of TNT. Some think this might have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs.

I arrived in California a couple of days before I was to start my new job. I've been working for the City of Bellflower now for more than a year, in the public affairs office as a public affairs specialist. My primary job is the city's newsletter called "The Bellflower Citizen." I also layout the employee newsletter called "City Scope," and many other computer graphic items like flyers, posters, brochures, programs, ads, etc. Additional responsibilities include the city's website (www.bellflower.org), writing stories for publications, producing stories for "All About Bellflower" (our TV news program for community access cable), and special events. In other words, I do a lot of the same things I did as a Navy Journalist.

For my first few months in California, I stayed with our good friend Greta Reafsnyder and her folks in Garden Grove. Thanks for the great hospitality Greta, Oma and Ray! I arrived just in time for all the big fires in the mountains and hills surrounding the L.A. area. The fires didn't get close to Garden Grove or Bellflower, but we did get a lot of ash falling from the sky, and you could see the glow in the mountains from the fires.

In October I flew back to Maryland for Priscilla's knee surgery. She had her left knee replaced the day before Halloween, and it went just fine. Her surgeon was the same doctor who worked on the famous POW Jessica Lynch. While Priscilla was in the hospital, I picked up our new car, a hybrid (gas and electric) Toyota Prius (we had ordered it six months earlier from Alexandria Toyota, where Priscilla used to work.). We love our new environmental friendly vehicle and its great gas mileage. Priscilla said it was about time we lived up to our preaching concerning the environment. Priscilla stayed in Maryland after the surgery to rehab her knee. She received a lot of help from Karen and her sister-in-law Tracey Powell, who drove her back and forth to physical therapy. Thanks Karen and Tracey for all your help! She'll never forget her time at the Army hospital's physical therapy department. There were a lot of soldiers there who had lost limbs in Iraq, and they were so positive and truly motivated. It really inspired Priscilla. And she really liked her physical therapist, too. He was a former New York Giants football player.

My next flight back to Maryland was for Thanksgiving, thanks to Aunt Edith who paid for the airline ticket. So Priscilla and I spent the holiday together with the crazy Patterson cousins. It's traditional for us to spend Thanksgiving with the Pattersons when we're living in the D.C. area. They're great people and we always have a good time. The next time I flew back was in December to bring Priscilla out to Southern California. Actually she brought herself and I just tagged along, as Priscilla drove our new Prius the entire length of the country. We spent Christmas on the road and chose a nice bed and breakfast in Houston to spend Christmas Eve. We stayed at the historic Lovett Inn located in the heart of the Montrose-Museum District. The quaint, comfortable and elegant inn was once the home of Houston Mayor and Federal Court Judge Joseph C. Hutcheson. Plus, it was decorated for the holidays, and the owners baked some wonderful muffins and cookies for us. We spent Christmas Eve driving by some wonderful light displays in a local park, and we had breakfast Christmas morning at the only place open, a Jewish Deli called Katz's… great food and friendly waiters.

We also spent some time in New Orleans, as neither of us had ever been to the Big Easy. We ate dinner at the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company in the French Quarter. As we walked through the doors of the restaurant we entered the world of Forrest Gump. His sayings were everywhere, and the place actually reminded me of Joe's Crab Shack with its entertaining casual atmosphere (we like Joe's). Of course I had the shrimp gumbo soup and a shrimp po' boy sandwich… all very yummy. After dinner we toured the French Quarter and took a stroll down Bourbon Street, where we heard great blues and jazz seeping from the crowded clubs. We stopped at well-known Pat O'Brien's, enjoyed their famous hurricane and listened to some good music. New Orleans and Houston were really the only two places we spent any time visiting during our third trip across the U.S. together.

Before the trip, I had rented an apartment in Cypress, a small suburban town in Orange County sitting on the border with L.A. County not far from Long Beach, and only 15 to 20 minutes from Bellflower. So when we arrived in California we went straight to our new apartment. I

actually had looked for a place to buy and submitted a few offers, but every time they saw we were using our VA loan and weren't going to make a down payment, they chose other offers. So we've been here in our little apartment now for about a year, but we've decided to look again, and this time we have a down payment. We're hoping to find a townhouse not too far from my work in Bellflower. I've already told you about my work for the City of Bellflower, but I didn't mention some of the celebrities I was fortunate to meet during some of our special events. Last year in October I met Morgan Fairchild. She was the grand marshal of our Liberty Day Parade. The grand marshal for this year's parade was Misty May, winner of the Olympic gold medal in Beach Volleyball this past summer. And then there's Hollywood legend Kirk Douglas, who gave the keynote address at our BRAVO awards in February. Oh, I also recently got to meet USC football legend Anthony Davis, during his visit to City Hall to meet with our city administrator, a USC alum and avid football fan.

I did meet one more celebrity this past year, but it wasn't through the City of Bellflower. The celebrity was Ralphie May, from the TV show "Last Comic Standing." May is also a gastric bypass patient, and it was through weight loss bariatric surgery that I got a chance to meet this very funny big man. You see, I also had the Roux-en-Y Gastric Bypass surgery and I met Ralphie during a seminar my clinic was giving. May was the featured speaker at the event. Most of you know how I battled my weight all through my military career, and once I retired from the Navy, I started putting on even more weight, topping out at 327 lbs in April. Plus I had developed high blood pressure, high cholesterol, sleep apnea and acid reflex. So I decided to have the same surgery my wife had back in 1998, except mine was laparoscopic. During my pre-op appointment in June, my weight was still high at 322 lbs. However, on Aug. 3rd, the day of my surgery, my weight had dropped to 297. I had lost 30 lbs since April without trying and it was all caused by diabetes. On the surgery day, my blood sugar was above 300.

The surgery went fine… three days later I went home, and the following day I was down to 294 lbs. Ten days after surgery, I was back to work, but just prior to going back to work, I saw my surgeon, and he took me off Prevacid, my acid reflex medicine. One week later I saw my diabetes doctor and he was very pleased. At the two-week point my blood sugar had dropped to below 80, my high blood pressure was looking good, and my high cholesterol was looking better, so he allowed me to stop my daily insulin shots, took me off my diabetes and high blood pressure pills, and all the high cholesterol medication except the Zocor, which he cut in half about a month later, down to 10 mg a day. Right after surgery my eyesight turned bad and my body heat went down. I started getting cold more often. The doctor said that was caused by my diabetes quickly getting fixed. So I had to start wearing glasses. A month out my eyesight settled down and I don't really need my glasses for distance, but they do help. However I do need them to read my computer, and especially books and maps.

On Sept. 3rd, one month after my surgery, my weight was down to 266 lbs. One month later I was down to 239 and on Nov. 3rd I weighed in at 222. As of this writing on Dec. 5th, a little more than four months after my surgery, I weigh 206 lbs. That's 123 lbs of total weight loss, 93 lbs since my surgery. I've only had two minor complications so far. One was a stricture at about the two month mark. This is where the esophagus swells, tightens or closes down where it enters the stomach pouch. Mine wasn't entirely closed. I was sent to a specialist who did an outpatient procedure in the operating room of a hospital with a scope and dilated the opening for me. The second complication was more serious. I was on my way to go hunting with my brothers in Southern Oregon when I developed some internal bleeding and had to spend a few days in a Sacramento hospital. The doctor thought maybe I had an ulcer on the bypassed stomach (not the small pouch) caused when I stopped taking Prevacid cold turkey after the bypass surgery. But he's not really sure where the internal bleeding came from (although scans showed it up high), because he says I should feel pain if it was an ulcer, and I didn't feel pain. He doesn't think it's my pouch though, because he did a scope and did not find any bleeding. My blood count dropped all the way to 8.4 before it came back up. The doctors now have me back on Prevacid, and I haven't had any more internal bleeding problems. I need to thank my cousins (the Bailys) in Sacramento for letting me stay a few days after I got out of the hospital, and Jessica even rode with me back to Cypress. While I was in the hospital, Priscilla was back east visiting family and friends. She was a little more than worried and almost flew back, but the doctor said it was more precautionary and not to worry. She did have a great time though, and even got to spend Halloween with her nephew and niece, Eric and Brook, in New Jersey.

You can read my entire 10-page weight loss story with before and after photos on my website at www.FreedomExpress.net. We made our weight loss a family affair as Priscilla had Bariatric surgery again this year. I already mentioned that Priscilla had open RNY gastric bypass surgery in 1998. She lost over 100 lbs then but when the Navy transferred me back to D.C., she went back to some old destructive eating habits and regained more than half of it back. So Dr. Owens (the same surgeon I had) decided to do a revision on June 29th. It was another open (not lap like mine), but when Owens got in there, he found a hiatal hernia (the largest he had seen), which created a second stomach pouch (which also helped her gain weight). The doctor repaired the hernia, took out the second stomach pouch, but because the first gastric bypass was completed differently than he is used to, he didn't do the revision. Instead he put a LapBand around her stomach. Since her weight loss surgery more than five months ago, Priscilla has dropped 58 lbs.

Wait, wait… Priscilla isn't done with surgeries. She recently had her right knee replaced (Nov. 12th) and the surgery went fine according to her doctor. She did have some problems at the hospital after the surgery (with the nurses and the care received) but that's behind us now, and she still has quite a bit of pain, which I'm told is normal. She gets to the restroom using a walker, and when we go out (dr. appointments, support group meetings, etc) we usually use the wheelchair (except she used her walker at a holiday party recently). She has a physical therapist who comes to the house three times a week. I think she's is doing well, quite a trooper, and her surgeon says she is right on schedule as far as recovery and rehab is concerned. He did increase her pain meds a little. In a few months we'll be out dancing together (her number one goal) and she wants to learn how to horseback ride.

We are members of the San Diego Zoological Society again (so we can go to the zoo and Wild Animal Park anytime we want) and we have year passes to Sea World. Plus we enjoy Disneyland, California Adventure and Universal Studios. Except for Disneyland, we've been to all these places this past year and Priscilla can't wait to try them with good knees. We're hoping to see Disneyland during the holiday season but it depends on how her knee is doing. We did drag our good friend Cherie with us to Sea World and to the Wild Animal Park, and we spent a nice Thanksgiving at Cherie's house, but only stayed a couple of hours because of Priscilla's knee.

One of the best times we had this past year was our day trip to the mountains and the San Bernardino National Forest in the fall. Cherie joined us as we spent a few hours at a huge pumpkin patch at Live Oak Farm in Redlands. I bought a green pumpkin and the girls got their faces painted. Then we went to the San Gorgonio Wilderness and visited the Aspen Grove with all their leaves turning yellow, what a beautiful sight. And we wrapped up the day driving around Lake Arrowhead where Cherie's family had a cabin when she was little.

We have made a lot of new friends moving back to Southern California. Starting with the wild bunch I work with at the City of Bellflower… we quite often get together to celebrate someone's birthday at some local watering hole. And since our weight loss surgeries, we now attend support group meetings every Monday and Thursday evening (with dinners following the meetings), and have participated in a few activities (like the seminar with Ralphie May) with this group of great people. Spending time with great friends and family, and thinking about your loved ones who live far away, are what the holidays are all about. We'd like to wrap up this holiday letter with a Christmas wish for you…

"It can happen every Christmas. You're listening to a carol or a memory comes back to you, or you're simply looking at a tree glowing with tiny lights and a star on the top. Unexpectedly your eyes glisten with their own stars for no particular reason other than it's Christmas. Your heart has been touched by something unexplainable, something that makes you feel tender and alive and filled with wonder for one shining moment. It can happen every Christmas… May it happen to you. Happy Holidays!

With warm affection,
Bill and Priscilla