

It could have been a complete and unmitigated disaster.

It turned out to be one of the most rocking parties Fort Bragg had everseen.

Not too long ago, my mom and her best friend -- who we all call Auntie Fran -- were telling tall tales when the famous Christmas Party story came up.



I realize most people who know my mom know what a gracious, lovely, polished hostess she is. She throws a party, everything is perfect. She has folks over for dinner, they get the imperial treatment. Auntie Fran is the same way.

Both of them are just amazing folks; they do more in one hour than most of us do all day. Either of them can put on elegant affairs for hundreds at the drop of a hat. But back in the day, when they were new brides of up-and-coming second lieutenants, well, let's just go with diplomacy and simply call them unschooled.

For anyone who has partaken of the delights of my mother's table in the past forty or so years, the very idea that there was ever a time when she could not cook is unfathomable. But before she married Dad, she probably had not even so much as boiled water in her life.

My dad, of course, found humor in every situation, including personal starvation. One evening, he took a gander at what Mom had put on the table and remarked, "Sweetie, you must worship the very ground I walk on."

Mom might have been a little unschooled but she hadn't just fallen off the sugar beet truck.

"What makes you say that," she said, steam rising.

"Every night you bring me another burnt offering."

Dad apparently ducked a lot of flying utensils that first year, a practice which probably helped save his life in combat in places like Korea, Vietnam, and the dining room.

Despite all this Dad and Auntie Fran's husband, Uncle Ed, decided that these two beautiful but somewhat unskilled flowers of the south could probably handle a cocktail party. Very little cooking involved. A little punch, a few hors d'oeuvres, and they'd be golden.

The day of the party, the first thing Mom and Auntie Fran noticed was the Christmas tree. Mom had set it up a couple of weeks before but never watered it. So it sort of hunkered in the corner, ten feet tall against an eight-foot ceiling, not a single needle on it, randomly festooned with these awful fuzzy Christmas balls. This apparently put them into gales of hysterical laughter.

Then there was the food. Mom had bought this monstrous frozen ham, maybe 25 pounds, but didn't start trying to cook it until the day of the party. So as this frozen pork boulder slowly unthawed/burned -- ranging from candle grease black outside to cold rubbery pink inside -- it dripped ham grease and water onto hot oven coils, causing this noxious ham-funk cloud to envelop the entire building. The average mustard gas attack during World War I probably didn't produce fogs that thick or lasted that long.

By party time, the entire apartment complex smelled like the ghost of Porky Pig had just received a high colonic over the nearest radiator.

Then there was the apartment itself. It was about the size of a large hall closet, yet some 250 soldiers and their spouses would attend this bash.

Meanwhile, as the ham squatted truculently in the oven, Mom and Auntie Fran were busy cutting tiny squares of cheese and adorning them with cocktail olives. This operation took about five minutes per square, so by party time,

Mom and Auntie Fran had prepared almost a dinner plate and a half of these things. This was all the food they planned to serve.

Then there were the beverages. Mom and Auntie Fran had borrowed someone's sterling silver punchbowl and mixed up a single batch of champagne fruit punch, figuring so many servings per bottle, so many drinks per guest. The problem was, they were figuring on serving three little cups of this wimpy, high tea punch to a bunch of guys who had been jumping out of airplanes all week.

Within ten minutes the punch bowl was empty. And the soldiers, including the regimental commander -- if one can excuse a Navy quote in an Army story -- "had not yet begun to fight," as it were.

Since by now all liquor stores were closed, Dad and Uncle Ed frantically raided liquor cabinets all over the apartment complex to keep that punch bowl full, with innovative and ghastly results; at one point they served a tasty concoction mixed from two half-gallons of bourbon, what was left of three ice trays, and a package of frozen strawberries.

The guests kept on coming. And drinking. And staying. By the end of the evening Dad could have poured Vitalis in the punchbowl and they wouldn't have cared.

Yet everyone had a blast. Especially the old crusty regimental commander, who as it turned out, drank everyone under the table and was the last to leave.

No one ate the ham, though.

Not even severely inebriated paratroopers would do that.