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Caution, planning help keep thieves from stealing holiday cheer

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U.S. Army Europe Office of the Provost Marshal Public Affairs Office

MANNHEIM, Germany -- The holiday season is a time of shopping and gift-giving, dining out and vacations, and celebrations with friends and family. Because it is also a time when thieves are active, the U.S. Army Europe Office of the Provost Marshal is offering some precautionary advice to help keep the holiday season a merry one.



When traveling and celebrating at any time of year, USAREUR OPM officials said, pickpockets are a major concern.

“Our statistics show that about 25 USAREUR personnel fall victim to pickpockets every month,” said Lt. Col. Lon Walker, chief of law enforcement operations at the USAREUR OPM.

Most victims are targeted in bars and clubs, or in other crowded places such as on buses, in train stations, airports, stores or restaurants, he added.

To deter pickpockets, Walker recommends that women carry their purses in front of them, close to the body, not dangling by straps, and zipped or snapped shut. Wallets are safest in an inside coat pocket or front pants pocket. “Don’t leave valuables in coat pockets hung on a public coat rack or draped over a chair at a restaurant,” he advised.

In general, it is best to be aware of distractions and surroundings. Common distractions include an approach by a stranger asking questions, or an offer from a stranger to help move packages that may be a ruse to allow an accomplice to attempt to steal a wallet, backpack or purse. Entrances and exits to public transportation are a favorite hangout for pickpockets.

Vehicle break-ins are another concern at holiday time.

Walker said car break-ins occur most frequently when the thief sees a popular item such as GPS navigator in plain sight inside a car. Portable navigation systems are popular items in Europe, OPM officials said, and should be secured when not in use. In addition, the serial numbers should be recorded, to help military and German police track and recover them if they are stolen. Other magnets for thieves are laptop computers, wallets, purses or items of military clothing. Walker noted that thefts often occur when cars parked are on the street and in poorly lit areas.

To prevent break-ins, the colonel recommended parking in garages or other well-lighted areas with the doors locked, as German law requires. Shopping bags and other valuables should be secured in a vehicle's trunk, especially when visiting major tourist cities.

Security is just as important at home, OPM officials said, particularly for anyone traveling during the holidays.

Walker urged people to lock their doors and windows -- even second floor windows -- whenever they leave their houses, apartments or barracks rooms, even for a short time. He also offered the following tips for holiday travelers:

- Don't advertise that you will be away from your home or barracks. Only give that information to people who need to know.
- Stop newspaper and mail deliveries.
- Leave a light on in the house.
- Let trusted neighbors know the dates you will be gone and ask them to watch for suspicious activity and report it.
- Soldiers living in the barracks should secure personal belongings in a wall locker.
- Take photos of valuables and make a list of valuables and their serial numbers, to aid in their recovery if they are stolen.

More useful tips to keep holidays safe are available online from the U.S. National Crime Prevention Council at www.ncpc.org/cms/cms-upload/ncpc/files/holiday04.pdf.

The Army in Europe military police emergency number is DSN 114. To call from a non-DSN phone, dial the appropriate civilian to military prefix for your area, then 114.



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