

A Memorable Christmas

Christmas is a time of joy and celebration, of giving and receiving, of peace, hope, and goodwill. To proclaim the nobility of Christmas in the presents of war or the attributes of war could be considered blasphemy. In fact, it could be argued that Christmas and war are diametrically opposed. However, maybe, just maybe in the chaos of war, in the adversity created by war, we might discover that the true value of Christmas becomes more obvious than under any other circumstances.

Vietnam, December 1966: Christmas did not find a room at the Inn, not even a stable was available for this most sacred of all holidays. Drenching monsoon rains, Bone chilling winds, thick sticky red mud was the home of the grunt and therefore the quarters awaiting this Christmas. The season of merriment and hope had been replaced by the demands of war, pending mutilation or death.

Although a Christmas cease-fire was being discussed, daily patrols continued, but with a caveat; patrols were to avoid areas of heavy concentrations of Viet Cong or North Vietnamese regulars. The patrols were to be a deterrent, a means to prevent the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong from taking advantage of a pending cease-fire by moving troops into strategic positions. Three platoons, each in rotation ran a daily patrol, searching for any irregular movement of the VC or North Vietnam troops. Except for a few skirmishes, the days leading up to Christmas were uneventful, to the point of boredom. The VC appeared to be avoiding our patrols as much as we were avoiding their strongholds.

I believe it was December 22: it could have been the 23rd; without a watch or calendar to track time, the day of the week had little meaning as days ran into weeks and weeks into months until the day on a calendar was meaningless. Whichever the day, the 26th Marines had been ambushed and Echo Company had been awoken a little after midnight with orders to march all night and at daylight attack the VC, breaking the stranglehold on the 26th Marines. With only a few casualties, Echo Company completed its part in the skirmish by 1400 hrs then turned toward the Regimental Compound and the monotony of the weather and patrols every third day.

As I sit down to put my thoughts on paper, I realize how ironic it is that my most memorable Christmas does not involve my family or childhood friends. The Christmas I am about to convey, was shared with a few men I knew eight short months; But in spirit, I was closer to these men than I was to my maternal family. These men, as I call them, were eighteen, nineteen years old, but they were men in every sense of the word. We had fought together, killed and died together; we were a family of Marines.

My memorable Christmas started in September with a letter. A sorority from the University of Illinois wanted to adopt twenty men of our company for Christmas. Captain Pratt, in correspondence with the sorority explained that it would be unfair to the Company for a few selected men to receive attention from a sorority, so with great regret he was unable to accept their generous offer. The sorority, with immense misgivings, decided to adopt an entire Marine Company, Echo Company. We never knew all the details or how much arm twisting the Skipper had done, but in the end the Skipper had won for his Marines. The company was not aware of the sorority or the arrangements until the Skipper had called a Company formation to explain.

Boxes of all sizes began to arrive from Urbanna, Illinois about the second week in December. Whitish-gray boxes wrapped in plain brown shipping paper. Boxes stacked neatly in the Company Office for all to see as we lined up for our next patrol. A few weeks before Christmas mail call became more exiting as we began to receive Christmas cards from the sorority. Each girl in the sorority must have written Christmas cards to seven to ten Marines in order to insure each received a card. Each card contained a short seasonal message, not much of a note, but enough.

Hope all is well with you, and you return home safe. Good luck. Best wishes of the season.

Helen Rhodes

It is snowing in Urbanna. Finals are next week. Hope all is well with you, Merry Christmas and best wishes for a better New Year.

Joyce Allen

It is snowing in Urbanna today; several of the sorority sisters are going skiing Saturday. We hope for an early end of the war and your safe return home. Have a Merry Christmas.

Linda Ward

Short generic notes, the kind that if received in the "Real World" would have been promptly read and placed on the fireplace mantel with other ignored seasonal salutations. However, in Vietnam these generic notes written on the inside of a simple yet colorful Christmas card; the kind that sold for \$2.50 for a box of twenty-five, were worth their weight in gold. Christmas Cards, a little piece of home, passed from man to man and read with great reverence. The short generic notes from girls we would never meet; notes from someone other than family, provided hope that our sacrifices were understood.

Reading my Christmas card reminded me of college and friends. Of activities, I would have been enjoying; a football game on a cool October night, quail hunting on a cold crisp November morning, raking autumn leaves of yellow, red, and bronze; activities associated with fall and seasonal euphoria.

By reading the cards, we were given a glimpse, however brief, into a life we had forsaken in order to serve our country. A chance to revive memories we were forced to suppress by the drudgery of war. Christmas cards that made us dream of home; of friends and family enjoying seasonal

festivities. Each of us was careful to reclaim his card. Letters were quickly written thanking the sorority for the Christmas cards and the boxes whose contents we were yet to enjoy.

While standing in front of the Company Office, waiting to be dismissed from our last patrol, a three-sided oblong box was noticed at the corner of the Company Office. An oblong box, whose proportions equaled those of plywood sheets. The interior of the box had been treated to a thinly applied coat of watered down white paint. The oblong box was placed on a stand made from disused scrapes of lumber still brandishing relic nails from a previous life. The Oblong box had been placed in such a position that the missing side faced inward, toward the center of the camp. Upon being dismissed, members of the patrol walked toward their tents, scratching their heads and looking over their shoulder at the strange edifice now standing next to the Company Office.

With time, the oblong box develop character, distinction, although its final metamorphosis was still uncertain. Each time we returned from a patrol or chow, the oblong box had under gone a new transformation, first in subtle almost invisible ways; then like the ugly duckling the purpose of the oblong box became obvious. First, someone wired the box for electricity. It may have been December 15th, when a small artificial tree of six feet found its home inside the oblong box and was quickly decorated by the secretive elves of Echo Company.

Tiny twinkling lights of red and yellow, blue and green adorned the tree, while an eclectic collection of Christmas ornaments decorated each bough. The grayish-white boxes that once held the tree and its adornments were themselves transformed. With an application of brightly colored Christmas wrap they were placed under the tree, empty boxes filled with memories and dreams of each Marine of the Company. Shortly after dark, An elf (Office clerk) would switch-on the tiny twinkle lights that spiraled down the tree's length. Lights enclosed in an oblong box provided momentary gaiety to an otherwise dismal Vietnam night. The Echo Company elves were inventive little creature, to say the least.

After dinner, groups of one, two or more would walk to the tree and stand. Battle hardened Marines standing in the

rain, water running off olive drab ponchos, soaking red-mud-stained boots. Exposed to bone chilling cold that caused the body to shake. Yet, they were as warm and dry as if they were sitting next to a fireplace in their own living room admiring last years Christmas tree. Our little tree was never alone; every night individuals came, forming a group, a group whose character ebbed and flowed as the individuals of the group changed through the night. The necessity for conversation was absent as the crowd in front of the tree quickly became engrossed in individual thoughts of Christmases passed and each oblivious to the presence of those around him. The Nations Christmas tree, standing proudly in front of the White House, decorated with thousands of lights, would dim in the presence of our humble Christmas tree.

On Christmas Eve, men encased in canvas tents, overwhelmed by the thick silence of melancholy, heard a sound from outside. Although the sound was obviously human, the human or group of humans creating the sound was in question. Some in the tent grabbed rifles and proclaimed we were being over run, while others were just as confident that the cook had poisoned us and the group out side was in the late stages of food poisoning. The truth, however, was worse than the previous assumptions; the Skipper, officers, and staff NCO were serenading the Company with their rendition of The Twelve Days of Christmas.

*On the first day of Christmas, my true
love gave to me one MMMMMM fourrrrteen.*

*On the second day of Christmas, my true
love gave to me two grenades.*

ETC.

ETC.

ETC.

Tents emptied to find the motley group of five or eight, or maybe fifteen; there was uncertainty as to the groups size as people were continually joining. One of the Officers was wearing a red ski cap with a white fuzzy ball attached to its upper reaches. Sheets of paper inscribed with the lyrics were passed around as the choir grew quantitatively. Goodies from home were produced from tents and freely shared with those present; an act of generosity seldom observed out side ones squad or platoon.

The group, now numbering over forty, passed among darkened tents of other Companies while continuing to sing their song of the season. The melodic melody worked its magic; as they passed candles were lighted and half-dressed Marines stepped into the rain to be serenaded by Echo Company Raiders. As we passed through each Company, Marines wearing floppy unlaced boots sloshed through the mud to join us. A dismal night, an emotionless evening of melancholy which can not be explained with words and yet a night which can not be forgotten by those present. The emotions and reality of that night might fade with the age of time, but the value and esprit de corps of that night will last a lifetime.

A rainy down pour greeted Christmas mourning, with rifles slung upside down; we walked to the mess hall. Being Christmas morning; the mess cooks treated us to a delightful breakfast of; dehydrated scrambled eggs (burnt on the bottom), beacon (extra, extra crispy), Oatmeal glue, and burnt toast, better suited as an antidote for poisoning. A breakfast of such extraordinary quality did not elevate spirits. Although not spoken aloud, we knew there were Marines consuming C rations for breakfast, while others, less fortunate, ate cold C rations. Our meal of reconstituted eggs, shriveled beacon, wallpaper glue, and charcoal, was hot and resembled real food, but maybe that is giving the cooks too much credit.* As we left the mess hall, we recognized a newly posted notice: The Mess Hall will not be serving lunch today. Dinner to be served from 1500 hrs to 1930 hrs.

The little Christmas tree could not keep our spirits up forever; with Christmas morning, the reality of a Christmas so far from home once again sank into our numb minds. During the morning hours, Marines would slowly drift past the little tree in silence, seldom stopping; lacking purpose; they aimlessly withdrew from its view. Not even the little tree could replace the melancholy; its magical power had dwindled with this day's sunrise.

* It should be noted that a Marine not complaining about the job, living conditions, or chow, is dead or near death.

The morning hours passed as slowly as cold molasses poured from a jar; tents remained closed up tight in an effort to keep the ever-persistent rain out. Trenches around each tent ran full as did each fighting-hole. The EM club was closed until 1600 hrs; the PX was closed for the holidays. Stuck inside wet canvas only reinforced the melancholic atmosphere.

Time weighted heavily as we waited for the mess hall to open, if breakfast was an example of holiday fair, then dinner could prove lethal.

As 1500 hrs approached, reluctantly individuals began to stir from their lethargy and consider evening chow. The need to stir from their stupor was not provoked by the desire for activity, but by the necessity for nourishment, however dismal the prospect might be.

With rifles slung upside down to keep rain out of barrels and receivers, we took the death walk toward the mess hall. Mud, deep sticky red mud clinging to boots, once dry utilities soaked by rain, but the walk to the mess hall continued. As we got closer, something unusual was noticed by all. Odors, to be more precise, fragrances, mouth watering aromas, tantalizing nasal bouquets; were emanating from the direction of our mess hall. A mess hall incapable of boiling water without burning it could not be the source of the gentle fragrances tempting our taste buds at this moment. The pace quickened.

The odors, fragrances, aromas became more intense, familiar, as we approached the mess hall. "It can't be, said someone, but I think I smell turkey." "I smell more than turkey" replied another. "Could it be, real food," asked someone? "If it is," replied another "you can bet those assholes have burnt it."

An unfamiliar sight awaited us as we approached the mess hall on Christmas afternoon. Cooks and mess men, standing in front of garland festooned steam tables, wearing crisply starched white mess uniforms and caps. Pine Boughs and garland decorated a table of cold dishes: salads, fruit, fresh bread, and sauces; while another table, covered in red paper, was stacked with every pie, cake, or pudding ever known by man. There was not only turkey, but also

roast beef, steaks, pork chops, ham, and even more. They had not seen these delicacies in this quantity or variety since entering Country. Near the door was a small table stacked with menus, Gods honest truth, menus. Menus embossed with the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor as well as the First Marine Division insignia. A menu by design and craftsmanship suited for the finest restaurants in the world. Standing next to the menus was a lieutenant handing out cigarette lighters with the first Division insignia attached and inscribed First Marine Regiment. As we partook of the meal, there was boisterous conversation and Marine joking, rude and crude, was in abundance, however, derogatory statements in regards to the, quality, quantity, or preparations of dinner were not forth coming.

Tomorrow will find us back in the field doing our Countries business, knowing that as tomorrow's sun sets some of us will no longer be present to enjoy the site. Because of the generosity of a University sorority, for a few days in December we were not forgotten. Our holiday was brightened through their kindness: trivial yet significantly precious symbols of the season provided the opportunity to look back and remember, to know we find hope. A little artificial tree, a bastardized Christmas carol, and a Christmas dinner had transformed a bleak melancholic winter day into a Christmas I personally will never forget.

LCpl. sits on bed with VC underneath

By: LCpl. Lowell L. Carson

DA NANG—As the patrol patiently waited until light to assess damage done to the Viet Cong that night, Lance Corporal William B. Davenport sat above a hiding VC also patiently awaiting a chance for a scape in the darkness.

It began at 3 a.m. It was raining and the patrol from "E Company, 2nd Battalion, First Marines, 1st Marine Division was heading for an ambush site when they heard voices in a nearby hamlet.

The patrol leader, Second Lieutenant Louis M. Croy, took four men to investigate. Locating the house where the voices were coming from, Croy slipped around to cover the back while Sergeant Joel Campanella and three others covered the front.

The Viet Cong suddenly made a break. Croy shot one trying to escape through the back of the house as five more spilled out the front.

In the darkness Campanella and his men killed another.

One more was wounded by Corporal Johnny G. Greene.

The wounded VC ran inadvertently into the remainder of the patrol still on the road. In the darkness he disappeared.

Three of the half-dozen Viet Cong were unaccounted for.

Rather than risk a search in the dark, Croy set his men in for the night and detailed them to keep a vigilant watch over the bodies of the dead Viet Cong to prevent their being carried away in the night by their comrades.

Davenport sat awake the remaining part of the night on a bed in the house. He kept watch on one of the enemy bodies lying in the yard in front of him.

Another, that of a live enemy, lay rigidly under the same bed.

During the night the VC did make an attempt to recover the bodies of their comrades, Greene said. The try failed as two more Viet Cong were wounded.

As Davenport left the house the next morning he glanced back into the room. He gave a surprised yell when he saw the VC hiding "under my bed."

The yell brought Campanella to investigate.

"Before I realized it," Campanella said, "the VC had pulled the pin on a grenade. I yelled 'grenade' and flipped out the door. Davenport did the same but not before he put three rounds into the Viet Cong. Because of Davenport's fast thinking, the grenade went off under the VC."

Whether by plan or by acci-

dent, the patrol's night hunt netted three confirmed kills, two wounded and capture of belts and American and Chinese grenades.

One of the dead Viet Cong had over 21,000 piasters on him in new 500 P notes. "He was possibly a Viet Cong paymaster," one of the Marines said.

Khe Sanh show

By Sgt. Roger Ynostroza

PHU BAI—No one really felt the light rain which came with cloudy skies here Christmas Day—a top notch Marine talent show took their minds off it.

Clad in rubber rain suits, flak jackets and helmets, 1st Battalion, Third Regiment Marines dined on creamed turkey, then came an added treat.

Show coordinator and master of ceremonies, Corporal L. W. Heiderscheidt, began "D" Company's 14-man revue with a folk-singing duo. Navy Hospital Corpsman Third Class Daniel J. Wilson played guitar while he and Corporal D.D. McBride sang popular songs and comedy tunes.

Lance Corporal James A. Pruitt and Private First Class Reuben Jones then brought roars to about 200 throats with a comedy skit about the battalion's final defensive lines.

The comics were followed by the "Six Soul Brothers."

Lance Corporal Clarence Dickens and Privates First Class James K. Crew, Frank Smith, James L. Rucker and John Carroll, and HM3 Michael C. Priest made up the crew which rendered a half-dozen "soul songs", and an arrangement of "White Christmas".

A highlight of the show was the singing of Lance Corporal Ralph Robinson, and Privates First Class James R. Schultz and Larry Kazakovich.

In a rather localized slapstick version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," the trio substituted "cartridge" for "partridge" and "grenade rings" for "golden rings," etc., and had the audience