

Christmas 1965: A Season of Sorrow

A long-ago Christmas, revisited and resolved

December 17, 1993

by Ed Kozak

I was a crew chief on a USMC UH34D Sikorsky helicopter. It was December 16, 1965, somewhere near Quang Ngai, Vietnam. Earlier that day, for the first time, I had shot and killed another human being. He was the enemy. The M60 machine gun can instantly turn flesh and blood into a unrecognizable gob. Especially when it is a child.

Flying into a forward observation post, I had a rare pleasure of seeing a friend I first met at boot camp, three years before. We hadn't seen each other since, but in just a few minutes that the mission allowed us, we renewed our friendship. Prepared to take flight, I asked Dave if there was anything I could do for him. He asked me to bring him a Christmas tree. Hours later, the day's sorties completed, I took the time to paint a primitive Christmas tree onto two pieces of cardboard taken from C-ration boxes. The paint was Marine green, the decorations were primer yellow, all drawn with a brush made from a piece of writing paper. On top was the Marine Corps eagle.

The early morning mission to again supply that out post gave me the opportunity to present Dave with his Christmas tree. He, his crew and I laughed about it, being so crude a decoration, but Dave liked it. I waved and smiled as my chopper took off for other duties. By chance the next day, December 18, 1965, an unexpected radio call directed my helicopter to Dave's outpost. There had been a fire-fight very early that morning and we were requested to carry a KIA out. As we neared the outpost, all the men were standing outside the sandbag bunker - all but Dave. I could barely make out their faces through the dust that the rotor wash kicked up as we touched down. Once settled on the ground, two Marines brought out the litter. The dead Marine was covered with a cardboard Christmas tree.

I denied to myself that it was Dave. In just a few moments, the KIA was loaded on board and we took off for the hospital and graves registration. My eyes now wet, I forced myself to untie the straps which held the muddy, blood soaked cardboard in place. Dave had taken automatic weapons fire full in his chest, and probably died instantly. Since there were no body bags available, the men covered him with his Christmas tree.

Sometimes the mind can block out terrible memories, sometimes those memories come back to haunt. Since the early '80s, my family has not enjoyed a Christmas tree. I did not permit it as I had not learned to accept those things which I could not change. Today, through the efforts of my family, Ray Blandford at the Vets Center in Dayton and my own battle to resolve those memories which have long dominated my life, I have begun to understand what I must, how to deal with it in my everyday living so that I am in command. It is not easy, but there is hope. I have discovered that many people do not realize what Christmas is until they lose one.

I no longer see cardboard Christmas trees when I see the real thing, except when I want to remember a Marine buddy who wanted his own Christmas tree. I try to remember Dave the way I saw him alive the last time - joyous with his cardboard Christmas tree.

There will be no Christmas tree at our house this year, but next year looks very promising. A joyous Christmas to all.

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This true story was printed in the Dayton Daily News on Thursday, December 23, 1993 with a side bar detailing the Vets Center of Dayton and their treatment of PTSD in Vietnam Veterans, with some words from Ray Blandford, the senior team leader.

Update:

Christmas time and the time around February 12 is still a very tough time for me, but I am working on it. Ed

Christmas, 1996 saw no Christmas tree at the Kozak house.

It is now March, 1999. My wife has died (May 10, 1998) and living alone now, there is no room for Christmas decorations nor reason for it.