

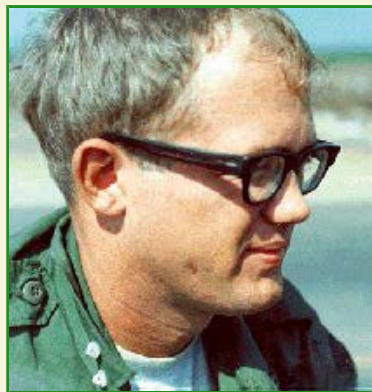
A Christmas Message

...from Charlie!

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A Christmas Message From Charlie - It was nearing the last week before the holidays. AFVN news broadcasts continued to talk of a Christmas truce. The news cheered the new-guys, such as myself, into thinking we would somehow get out of this place early. The short timers knew better. They talked to each other, "Yeah, another cease fire like Tet. That'll work." One thing was certain, it didn't take long to turn you into a cynic around this place.

Major Chick had been pleased with the first few "Duty First" shows we had put together. He had apparently forgiven me for my inability to knock out a Christmas message from the general to his staff. I was glad to be back in his good graces. Now each work week began to fall into a pattern, something that never happened to me back at First Signal. I began to feel as if I were somehow giving the army an honest day's work even though it had nothing to do with fighting the war.



The work week moved quickly. In the morning, Wayne, Will (photo) and I would depart for I An, Long Binh, Saigon and back. The night was open. I did not have *officer of the guard duty*. The next show was scripted and waiting our trip to USA for editing. The rest of the troops were off somewhere and I pretty much had the office tent to myself. I decided to use the time to get some final Christmas notes off to friends back home. Outside was pitch black and moonless. From time to time a shower passed, marking its path with a sudden rise in the wind and soft plats of heavy rain drops on the canvas roof above me. I was in a good mood for once and my notes found my sense of humor reborn. I lost myself on a letter to Mark Palmer, my fraternity little brother. I knew he would love any exaggeration, any sentence dripping in sarcasm, that reinforced his thoughts against the war and the military and so I let loose a barrage. I reread the thing to myself several times, enjoying each punch line, each caustic phrase, laughing out loud at my own jokes. I found it difficult to give the letter up and seal the envelope. That finished I moved on to other friends who would also appreciate a well turned soldier's complaint.

The hours moved by. The noise of the TV in the other tent ended. I heard the door slam and the watcher's conversation fade as they headed towards their hooch. Stoked by the fun I was having, I continued on. Soon I was into my fourth letter, an unprecedented volume of work for me. The quiet of the night was broken only by rain and the sounds of insects, lizards and Charlie Gibbon's (the office's monkey) pleas for freedom from his chain.

The smell of the canvas, the soft breeze, the naked bulb that swayed ten feet above my head making slow moving abstract shadows on the walls of the tent, it all set a writer's mood that worked for me. Ideas just seemed to flow and the thoughts began to stack up over the pen and hand waiting their turn to land on the paper.

Then I heard Charlie Gibbon scurry somewhere. One small nerve in my ear picked up a high pitched whistle. I felt my breath suck in and my stomach knot, those reactions grabbing me before I could reason what was going on. Then, **BLAM! Pitch black. BLAM, BLAM, BLAM!**

The second blast took all 185 pounds of me and threw me under the desk, onto the floor. I lost consciousness for a few seconds and sat in the dust, confused, stunned, unable to think clearly and react. The alert siren began to scream its urgent, but now useless, message.

BLAM, BLAM, BLAM!!

Each explosion pushed against my face, my arms, seeming to squeeze the breath out of my chest. The light bulb flickered and then came back on, swaying, bouncing, crazily on the end of its tether, casting bizarre shapes onto the olive drab walls. I remained, befuddled, beneath the desk, gathering information and trying to make a decision of whether to run for the bunker or crawl further beneath the sturdy desk.

My mind worked so slow. Thoughts and reasons crowded out training and so I sat instead of reacting. I shook my head as if to clear my thoughts and then felt something soft, wet and warm slide down my lip and drop onto the gritty dust of the concrete floor.

"Blood! Oh, crap!"

Then BLAM, BLAM, BLAM!

Something, more felt than seen, whizzed past my legs and hands, something thudded on the desk top, something clattered to a stop just beyond my hand, something bounced off the concrete floor, stung my arm where the rolled up sleeve of my uniform made a pad

of cloth. In my confusion and the gloom I saw something spinning and jumping on the floor. It sat there like a tiny toy top until its energy was spent and it wobbled to a halt. I reached out to pick it up, to inspect its jagged edges.

HOT!



I dropped it instantly, and shook my fingers to cool them. My head cleared. "Will you grab a hold of yourself? That's shrapnel. *This is an attack!* Get your butt moving!" I staggered up, moving in slow motion, unable to do what my mind screamed. Smoke and dust filled the tent, the smell of fresh concrete and explosives filled my nostrils. The light continued to jump and flicker. Finally I pulled my senses together, bolted for the door and sprinted toward the bunker, my ear again picking up the shrill whistle along with the sounds of other panicked soldiers. I cleared the entrance to the bunker not bothering to touch a single step. Gibbon hunkered there on the top beam chattering and shivering in his fright.

BLAM, BLAM, BLAM!

More sirens and then the deeper thuds of the eight inch battery, our guns, giving this mortar crew something to ponder.

Again, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM!

Charlie had this place zeroed in and continued to fire. Then our guys found the range. More and more deep throated thuds boomed into the wet night, their heavy shells making that sound of a slow train as they pushed through the tropic air, seeking those who were tormenting the base camp.

The noises, incoming, outgoing, voices shouting and calling out, running feet, all continued for a few minutes and then came an eerie silence. I stood in the complete darkness of the bunker. I felt my heart pounding in my chest, I thought I could hear my blood coursing my veins. "Good. I'm okay then." My ears still were ringing and my nose was just now beginning to clear of dust and gun powder enough to sense the dank, mildew smell of the bunker. I shivered and noticed that I was sweating profusely despite the relative chill of the night. My personal inventory continued as the "all clear" siren began to wail. I remembered that I was bleeding somewhere. I put a finger to my nose and found the source. "A nose bleed, a stupid nose bleed! No cheap purple heart there."

I sat down on the bench, leaned back and pressed my handkerchief to my nose. I was suddenly aware of how exhausted I was. I relaxed, took a deep breath through my mouth and then I felt a shudder run through my whole body. It passed. My senses restored. In a couple of minutes the nose bleed stopped also. I pulled myself up and mounted the steps of the bunker and stepped back into the night.

The office tent still stood. The light swayed but no longer flickered or jumped. I entered and looked at the desk where I had been working. A wicked piece of shrapnel rested there, irregular shaped, one pointed end embedded in the very spot where I had been writing. I reached out to touch, this time sacrificing just the bare tip of a finger. It was warm but no longer hot. I grasped the inch and a half piece with my thumb and two fingers and tugged. It didn't budge. I wiggled and then tugged again and it popped free. My death warrant had failed to be served by the narrowest of margins. I found my letters scattered on the floor, picked them up and considered rewriting all of them. I stepped on something, more shrapnel. I looked at the back of the swivel chair. Another smaller, more round piece of shrapnel was stuck in the back rest. I looked at the tent top. Tiny holes appeared above my desk and ran the length of the southern half of the top. The shell(s) must have hit one of the trees outside and sprayed the tent below.

My curiosity served, I turned out the light and headed toward my hooch. I knew the interior guard would be jumpy so I made myself as conspicuous as possible on the way back. Upon reaching my hooch I sat on the edge of my bed and peeled off my uniform, simply piling it next to my cot and leaving my boots and socks close by ready to redeploy should Charlie have anything more to say. I laid down and felt my head thumping with thoughts and pain. My legs and arms felt heavy, as if I had just played a day's worth of basketball. Sleep kept eluding me until fear finally let go and my exhaustion, and thoughts of Christmas at home, wrapped me in its warming blanket.

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