

Thumperman!



Christmas - 1968

by James L. Worthington

James L. Worthington, a registered nurse, is director of nursing at the Central Florida Rehabilitation Complex in Mount Dora. He was with the 11th Armored Cavalry Division. The author, Worthington, has submitted copyrighted *Christmas 1968* to War Stories, although it first appeared as the winning Christmas Essay in *The Orlando Sentinel*.

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Memories of Christmas in Wartime *Silent, Holy Night* Respite in Vietnam

For most Americans, Vietnam was a pop-art oddity 12,000 miles away; for me, it was as real as the blood coursing through my veins and oozing onto the ground. A *helter-skelter* piece of a Chi-Com grenade had found its mark.

As I lay there in pain, watching my life's blood steal away into the earth, the phrase "ashes to ashes and dust to dust" brought a whole new reality into perspective for this 19-year-old man-child. As I felt myself about to slip away into the black realm of unconsciousness, the thoughts and memories of home seemed to envelop my whole being, and I found peace and solidarity in remembrances of a simpler time. I devoured this sense of tranquility like a ravished scavenger. Then, in the distance, I heard a voice yell, "Medic," and next I felt a hand on my shoulder. In a voice that would calm an angry sea, he said, "You're going to be fine, son." At that instant, I released myself to drift into sweet, sweet sleep.

When I awoke, I was back at base camp in a real bed, the likes of which I had not seen in six months. It actually had white sheets that smelled of Ivory Snow and were as soft as a mother's touch. I knew I was safe now. The metal that had invaded and ripped my body had been removed, and my limbs that had been scorched with fire were now wrapped so delicately and precisely with white gauze. The smell of iodine flowed over me, and it was as refreshing as the smell of newly mowed grass after a summer rain.

The next voice I heard was that of a nurse. She spoke softly, and the sweet melody of her voice was a harmonic orchestration of every woman's voice I had ever heard. Her visits to change my dressings were more powerful than any narcotic. As soon as she would come into view, the pain would cease. In the cradle of her care, I healed - not just my wounds but the hatred for an enemy I did not know.

Christmas Eve, I returned to my unit. The stench of burning excrement hung in the air as thick as molasses. Everywhere the business of war was being attended to - sandbags being filled, bunkers being dug, rifles being cleaned - plans for survival regulated everyone. I had always thought there was no recognizable smell for impending death, but this country reeked of it: It was everywhere, no one left unscathed, no one left untouched, no one emotionally unscarred. We all had seen death, and we all had helped him, and I had returned to help him more.

I had reached my unit in time for mail call. I had not anticipated receiving any mail; I didn't write letters; what was there about war and death worth writing home about? I was stunned beyond belief when I heard my name called, but a quick punch from a buddy snatched me back to the present. I had received three huge packages from home. Each one filled with all the love and warmth a family could squeeze into a box. There was candy, cookies, canned fruit, pictures, newspapers and more, and, there was enough for everyone. Others brought out packages they had received and we all sat around devouring this slice of home.

For the moment in time there was no war, no death, no dying, no pain. The feast of love our families had sent could not be rivaled in any banquet hall. We sang every Christmas song we knew, and, if we didn't know all the words, we improvised. Everyone had a story to tell about a special Christmas back home. We shared a camaraderie that crossed all racial and religious backgrounds. It was the only time in my life I've ever felt a mutual, *unconditional love* for man and mankind, and I know it was shared by all of us.

Toward dusk we had just about succumbed to all the merriment when someone yelled, "Hey Jim, you forgot a package over here."

As I weaved my way through everyone, I looked up and there in the doorway stood that wonderful *angel of mercy* who had helped heal my wounds. In her arms was a package that had been delivered to the hospital. We both tore into it as if it were a last-ditch effort to prolong this night of revelry. Surely the wonderment within this box would rekindle the joyous hours we had just spent together.

As I lifted the lid, she let out a yell so loud that everyone stopped and all eyes focused on her and what she held in her hands. In that instant nostalgia had turned to joy as everyone caught a glimpse of flashing silver streamers.

A roar went up as someone recognized, "It's a Christmas tree." Everyone moved feverishly to make a place to display this silver Christmas tree. Then someone began to sing "Silent Night," and soon everybody was singing from everywhere in the compound - from foxhole, from bunkers, from guard towers "Silent Night, Holy Night" resounded from the small country, in that small corner of the world, and I'm sure it was joined at some faraway rendezvous with millions of other voices singing "sleep in heavenly peace."

Twenty-seven years later, my war is over; my personal battles have been won and now another generation of young soldiers prepare to endure a Christmas away from family and friends.

My hope for them is that somehow they are able to believe in the Spirit of the season and "sleep in heavenly peace," among friend and foe.



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