

CHAPTER 13 - CHRISTMAS DINNER

Now here's an incident which I *can* pinpoint in terms of time: it was December the 24th and 25th, during the Year of Our Lord One Thousand Nine Hundred and Sixty-Eight. The place was somewhere near the Laotian Border with South Vietnam. We were way west in Indian Country.

In a way, we liked it Out West, a long, cool chopper ride to get there, with booby-traps and land mines practically nonexistent. You probably could walk down a well-worn trail without fear of an explosion, except there *weren't* any well-worn trails out there.

The terrain was characterized by lush green vegetation concealing outcroppings of gray granite boulders and sharp precipices. The hills and mountains could best be described as "vertical" in most instances.

We were deep in a valley-sized ravine, thrashing around under triple-canopy cover and doing battle with "wait-a-minute" vines - thick thorny tentacles of the devil, which even the fortieth man back in a column had to negotiate. Men up front on the snail-like advance were cursing and struggling to keep all their equipment, which the greedy vines seemed to snatch off their sweaty bodies as we advanced like sloths. Unless the bushes grabbed a grunt's rifle, grenades or ammo, he oftentimes would yell: "Screw you! Keep it!" accepting his loss and moving on.

-1-

It was in this green sordid arena that the Christmas Dinner incident played out and became legendary in the minds of the hundred and twenty or so souls of D Company who found themselves out there with me those two days.

- - - 0 - - -

My birthday is in early January, and like most Capricorns, I never was all that excited about Christmas. Relatives tend to cheap out on the Yule presents for Capricorns, since they have to come up with money again for the birthday in short order; or they would cut back on the birthday present, since they had just come up with cash in late December. My fellow Capricorns' Christmas jokes are usually morbid, like the story of the red bicycle [which you may choose to skip.]

A little snot-nosed kid demanded that his parents buy him a bicycle for Christmas, "and it better be a red one!"

His father said: "Look, goddamit, if you want a red bicycle, write a letter to Santa Claus." The kid said he didn't believe in Santa. "Well, you believe in Jesus, don't you? Write a letter to Jesus."

The kid made an attempt, but couldn't get anywhere. He got as far as "Dear Jesus, I've been good all year, please give me a red ...," when he scratched it out, realizing that Jesus would know that was a lie. And he knew damn well that "I'll be good next year if only You would ...,"

couldn't wash, because the kid had a reputation for not keeping his promises.

He said: "Dad, I'm having a real problem with this letter to Jesus. His dad yelled: "Don't bother me any more about the goddam red bicycle, go to church and pray for a way to get it!"

The kid was kneeling before a huge marble statute of the Blessed Virgin when the idea came. He somehow managed to manhandle the statue onto his wagon, and pull it home and into his bedroom, locking the door with a bolt and chain both.

Then he got his pad and pencil and wrote: "Dear Jesus, if you don't get me a red bicycle for Christmas, You'll never see Your Mother again!"

--- 0 ---

Now comes D Company's Christmas Eve, 1968; the pageant developing there near the Republic of Laos.

I purposely stayed comfortably to the rear of the easternmost column fighting its way up the steep slope through the "wait-a-minute" vines. You couldn't buy a breeze, and you could cut the humid, steaming air with a knife. An entire SWAT Team could be outfitted with the amount of equipment and munitions already lost to the vines, and even my privileged rear position in line didn't afford much relief.

At one point, my prescription sunglasses went flying off my head, and I was forced to dive and dig deep into the rank green "shredder" after them, and pay the price of the thicket's thorns tearing my exposed flesh and almost stealing my .45 pistol.

-2-

The excitement was punctuated by a radio message from Battalion that its mess hall crew at Duc Pho, our Brigade Headquarters in the rear with the gear, would be magnanimous and cook a real holiday meal for people other than themselves for a change, *like doing their jobs for the very first time*.

Accordingly, we were scheduled for an early Christmas Morning drop off by helicopter of twenty-or-so "mermite cans" (like 3-gallon hinged aluminum thermal containers) of hot turkey, gravy, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, breads, pies and other trimmings'.

The catch was (and there was **always** a catch) that we had to first have a secure and proper landing zone carved in the primordial forest, in an area devoid of dangerous "downdrafts", or the chopper pilot would surely bypass us without a second thought.

--- 0 ---

My first reaction was: "So screw it, then!" But Prince, all of a sudden the original Christmas Elf, ratted me out and told everybody that I had to be the Ebenezer Scrooge of South Vietnam.

I was immediately petitioned by all the kids apparently with sugarplums dancing in their heads, who claimed, virtually to the man, that they actually **wanted** to tear themselves to bits

getting to the top of the mountain to carve a landing zone like friggin' Seabees, just to get a shot at this holiday cheer.

Far was it from me to take a chance on maybe even getting fragged over such an issue: I remember saying: "Go for it, Red, knock yourselves out!"

- - - 0 - - -

In order to accomplish this, we would have to reach the top by nightfall, and at least get started on clearing away the overgrown area, with the knowledge that we would ultimately subject ourselves to some faceless prima donna pilot's unappealable decision as he overflow our location while shaking his head "no".

I had never, and never since, seen such enthusiasm, cooperation and high spirits by military personnel. The word "Christmas" seemed to be on everybody's lips, and totally replaced the cursing from the impact of the thorny vines and debilitating heat. There was a point when I even thought they were *putting me on*, but their doubling and tripling of effort totally belied participation in such a ruse.

- - - 0 - - -

As the long lines of Army Ants ate their way up the steep slope, as the unforgiving clock ticked away towards "Santa's" arrival. I was surprised they didn't come up with cookies and milk and promise to go to sleep early. The virtual clawing of our way to the top could be the

-3-

subject of a book in itself. The entire episode was eerie in that it was totally devoid of the customary Infantry cursing and attitude exhibitions, and sometimes replaced by the humming of off-key Christmas carols and excited, giddy talk about the "Big Dinner."

Even Red was full of Christmas anecdotes, stories like the Christmas Eve his dysfunctional father discovered that his teenage sister was pregnant, and screamed that "There goddam' well better be a star rising in the East tonight!"

- - - 0 - - -

As we reached the crest in our exhausted and dehydrated condition, we realized that nature had been particularly cruel in taking measures to protect the pinnacle, having weaved the vines as if with a giant loom. Teams of Elves brandished their machetes, bayonets, and even Swiss Army knives to attack the only thing that stood in their way to Nirvana.

To make matters worse, there had been a recent issue to the Company of a newly-developed experimental type of field combat ration, the "LRPP" (Long Range Patrol Packet). It had been developed by the good folks at the Army Development Commands in places like Huntsville, Alabama, to foster the concept of a lightweight dehydrated meal instead of the traditional heavy olive-drab cans of "C-Rations" which, while not as high on the priority chart as the carrying of an equal amount of ammunition, could at least be thrown at the enemy as a last resort.

It was said that some field troops got so sick of the C-Rations, that they would open the cans,

throw out the grub, and eat the cans.

The missing ingredient necessary to give the LRPPs consistency, and that which made them even marginally digestible in the first place, was plenty of hot potable water. Since we were always short on water due to the attendant circumstances, and especially short that Christmas Eve, some of the hungry hackers, whom I had dubbed “Eddie Machetes”, had gobbled down the lumps of sponge-like material that afternoon, only to succumb to ferocious cramps a few short hours later, as the lining of their stomachs and intestines gave up the fluid fiercely demanded by the swelling intruders.

Nevertheless, even those on their backs in pain, with arms and legs flailing like dying cockroaches, would not allow their Christmas spirit to be dampened, and refused to give up the ghost as to the construction of The D Company International Airport and Port Authority.

There was hacking and grunting through the night, and I must say that the view from the top that Christmas Morning was overwhelming to the senses. The heavy snow-white clouds were below us, and laid on the lush emerald valleys, teasing the tops of the deep ravines. Outcroppings of light gray granite in the even higher terrain gave the area a surreal atmosphere, and it looked like a different, better planet. Peace on Earth and all that. Even Sir Hillary couldn’t have enjoyed such a view at Everest. Not really.

-4-

Then it happened!

The PRC 25 radio crackled and in response thereto, get this: Mitch popped not only a *red* but an additional *green* smoke canister.

The responsible platoon leader didn’t have to designate an offload team as usual, since volunteers came forward and fought for the privilege, fidgeting and posturing like pre-schoolers ready to wet their pants. Within minutes the Huey (and its eight tiny reindeer) came into view on the horizon, and a hundred and twenty-or-so hearts pounded into overdrive (a hundred and nineteen or so, less mine.)

A bunch of olive-drab hinged aluminum canisters were kicked off the iron bird by the cursing door gunner, and the supply Huey climbed up and away, not taking a chance on falling victim to one or more of the unpredictable and deadly downdrafts characteristic of the region. A lot of names on The Wall in Washington are probably there because of downdrafts.

- - - 0 - - -

In response to the rhetorical “What Next?”, I had my answer in seconds.

Giving the door gunner the benefit of the doubt, he had unintentionally screwed up and kicked out canisters of **mashed potatoes only**, and not even a drop of gravy!

Mitch got on the radio like the shaking Morse Code guy from the Titanic, and I had to remind him that there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of that pilot swinging around and correcting his mistake at the risk of his bird and its crew. Anyway, the chopper was already well beyond the horizon and heading towards another bunch of fools, probably A or B Company's International Airport and Port Authority.

Nevertheless, being a softie, I let myself be talked into a call to the A Company Commander and some sort of initial inquiry. Mitch handled the conversation in my name.

The C.O. of A Company complained to Mitch, my radio-voice impostor, that all his people had received was turkey and cranberries. Infinitely better than mashed potatoes with no gravy, but likewise lacking his men's full expectations of The Christmas Dinner. Why wasn't I surprised?

"What should I say?" asked Mitch, with the face of a kid who's puppy was just run over by a truck. "Tell him 'Merry Christmas!'" I mouthed, with dripping sarcasm.

At this juncture in the story, you should know that in those days there were countless pampered rear area snoops monitoring the radio airways for the slightest breach of military communication procedure, such as mentioning rank or location in the clear. They would cut into even critical, desperate conversations and chastise whoever was trying to get the job done out there with a firm "Hot mike! Hot mike!" (Reminding that the enemy is always capable of listening.) This would particularly piss off troops in the bush, who were sweating into their handsets while their tormentors were undoubtedly in some safe rear area bunker drinking beer out of a cooler.

-0-

After another pregnant pause, I saw Mitch depress the handset and heard him say in a soft voice: "Dragon Six, this is Nefarious Six. Merry Christmas, **Captain.**"

-5-

His face immediately took on the appearance of a punctured tire. "What did he say?" I had to ask.

"I donno, somebody butted in."

"**Well**, what did **they** say?"

"Uh, they said '**Hot Mike!**'"

I laughed and laughed for the first time in a long time. Really.

-0-

After everyone settled down, we used the hot, mashed potatoes to mix with cold C-ration fare, spreading out the combo on the wet paper plates also kicked out the chopper door. I

observed that everyone once again took the turn of events in stride, and not much was really said about that incident ever again. To their credit, it seemed that everyone had most enjoyed the *anticipation* of finally getting a break, almost as much as they could have experienced the real thing.

And, what jumps into *my* mind when I think of *that* day, is my present desire that I could be with them again, just like that, leaning up against a tree, engaging in small talk with a mouth full of mashed potatoes. What was especially enjoyable was that overwhelming, warm feeling of pride and admiration for them, as they once again made the best of a bad turn of events.

end of chapter thirteen