

The Day it Snowed in Vietnam: Christmas 1969

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Carols played in the mess hall and the calendar read "December 24, 1969," but it didn't feel like Christmas Eve. We were tired from a long day of flying many missions picking up infantrymen and recon patrols from field locations, bringing them back to the big airfield at Phan Thiet for the Christmas cease-fire. Gunship helicopters had escorted us because they were usually needed, but today not a shot had been fired in either direction. Soldiers on both sides of this war were glad to allow the cease-fire to start one day early.

It had been a hot day, and even in the evening, after the withering sun had dipped below the horizon, we sat sweltering in tee-shirts in the pilots' hooch. The air was somber. The usual discussions of recent close calls and superior airmanship were subdued by the subject on everyone's mind, but nobody would talk about: the recent loss of four pilots and four crewmen. We joked about the cease-fire and wondered how long it would last. One man predicted that the base would be hit with mortars just before midnight. It seemed there was nothing to celebrate. One pilot tried to change the mood and proclaimed "We have to do something happy! Let's sing Christmas Carols!" But nobody started singing.

Mike Porter, my copilot, finally blurted out, "Let's take up a collection for the Project Concern hospital!" I thought back to the first time I saw the Project Concern hospital at Dam Pao; I was copilot for Ted Thoman. A medic showed us a baby in desperate need of medical care, suffering from convulsions and dehydration. Flying that Huey helicopter at top speed, Ted soon had the baby girl and her parents at the hospital at Dam Pao. That 'mission' made me feel good; it had been the only mission, so far, that was not part of making war. The memory was vivid because only hours before we had extracted a recon team under fire. The bullet holes in the aircraft had been counted, but not yet patched.

Mike shook my shoulder to wake me from my reverie. "Hey Jim, let's ask to fly the Da Lat Macvee mission tomorrow to take money that we collect tonight." Under his crew cut blonde hair, Mike's boyish face lit up, and I had to remind myself that he was among the older Army helicopter pilots; he was 22.

Mike's excitement was contagious--I jumped up, said "Great idea, let's go ask!" and almost ran out the door. We stopped at the crew chiefs' hooch and asked Bascom if he would like to fly tomorrow. He and Dave quickly agreed, also wishing to escape the prevailing sadness.

Major Stringer, the company commander, was in the operations bunker. I explained our plan but he answered: "We don't have the Da Lat Macvee mission. In fact, there are no missions; there's a cease-fire tomorrow . . . remember?"

I pleaded the cause: "Please, Sir, could you call battalion and see if some other company has Da Lat Macvee?" Macvee, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam was the US Army unit of advisors to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. One or two US advisors were assigned to small military compounds in almost every large village. A Macvee mission usually meant flying the province Senior Advisor around to visit the villages. Macvee missions were a respite from the tension and danger of combat assaults or recon team missions, but had their own risks of weather, wind, and being without gunship escort. Flying near the beautiful city of Da Lat, up in the cool mountains, was an additional treat.

The CO picked up the phone and then started writing on a mission sheet form. He handed it to me and said, "Da Lat Macvee helipad, oh seven thirty; We took the mission from the 92nd." He opened his wallet, and handed me some money. "Here. Good luck!"

When we reached the gunship platoon hooch three pilots looked on sadly as one man raked a pile of money across the table towards himself. We made our sales pitch about the hospital. The lucky gambler pushed the money towards us and said: "Here-- take it! I'd just lose it all back to these guys anyway, Merry Christmas!"

Similar responses began to fill our ammo can with money of all denominations as we roamed among hooches and tents, collecting money from men whose generosity made me believe in the Christmas spirit again. At one stop, a pilot gave us a gift package of cheese. Food! We could take food! We decided to make another pass through the company area, asking for cookies, candy, and other foodstuffs. As we left one hooch with our arms full, the men inside began singing "Deck the Halls," and soon those in other buildings were competing. Christmas Eve had arrived in this tropical land of heat and war and death!

When we reached the mess hall, the cooks were still there, preparing for Christmas Day. To our question the mess sergeant replied: "Do you have a truck with you? We have a surplus of food because so many guys went home early." One pilot went to get the maintenance truck while the rest of us sorted cans and cartons of food. We then drove to the 50th Mechanized Infantry mess hall where we accepted four cases of freeze-dried foods. The medic at the dispensary gave us bandages and dressings.

We tied down the huge pile of booty in the Huey. After returning the truck, the four pilots walked together back to our hooch. One looked at his watch and said, "Hey guys! It's midnight. Merry Christmas!"

My alarm clock startled me out of a deep sleep. A check with my wristwatch verified the time, but something was wrong. There was no shouting, no rumble of trucks, no roar of propellers and rotors. Mornings had always bustled with the sounds of men and machines preparing for the daily business of war, but today there were no such sounds. I thought to myself, "Is this what peace sounds like?"

In the shower building, Mike and I talked about what our families would be doing

today on the other side of the world. As all short timers do, I reminded Mike that in just two weeks I would be going home, my year in Vietnam over. My wife promised me another Christmas celebration, with decorated tree and wrapped presents. I would be meeting another Mike for the first time, my son, now only a few months old.

After breakfast, the others went to the flight line while I called for a weather briefing. When I reached the helicopter, Mike was doing the preflight inspection and had just climbed up to the top of the Huey. Together, we checked the main rotor hub and the "Jesus nut" that holds the rotor on the helicopter. Everything was fine; we were ready to fly. We took off and headed for the mountains.

It always felt good to fly with this crew; we were a finely tuned team. The rugged and muscular Lee looked every bit like the cartoon cowboy he chose for his nickname "Bad Bascom." He was the crew chief of this Huey and did all the daily maintenance on it; it was his "baby." With Mike as copilot and Dave as door gunner, we had taken that helicopter into and out of many difficult situations, from landing supplies on a windy mountain top to extracting recon teams from small clearings while taking enemy fire. The radio call sign of the 192nd Assault Helicopter Company was Polecat; we were Polecat Three Five Six and proud of it. This day was beginning to feel even better because we were going to use our combat skills for a mission that seemed so unrelated to war.

I decided to climb higher than usual in the smooth morning air. As we left the jungle plains along the coast, the green mountains of the Central Highlands rose up to meet us. On the plateau, a thick blanket of fog lay like cotton under a Christmas tree. It spilled over between the peaks in slow, misty, waterfalls. In the rising sunlight the mountain tops cast long shadows on the fog. The beauty and serenity of the scene were dazzling. Had I noticed this before? I think I had, but today the gorgeous scenery wasn't a backdrop for the unexpected horror of war.

The mess hall had been quiet. The airfield was quiet. The radios were quiet. We weren't even chattering on the intercom as we usually did. Our minds were all with different families, somewhere back home, thousands of miles away. Everything was quiet and peaceful. It felt very, very, strange. Was this the first day of a lasting peace, or just the eye in a hurricane of war?

As our main rotor slowed down after we landed at Da Lat, a gray-haired Lieutenant Colonel walked up to the Huey. "Merry Christmas! I'm Colonel Beck. We have a busy day planned, my men are spread out all over this province, and we're going to take mail, hot turkey, and pumpkin pies to every one of them!" He handed me a map that had our cross-stitched route already carefully drawn on it. The colonel's distinguished look turned to a big grin as he added, "Oh--would you guys like to have some Donut Dollies with us today?" Four heads with flight helmets were eagerly nodding "YES" as the two young ladies got out of a jeep.

Donut Dollies were American Red Cross volunteers, college graduates in their early twenties. Although no longer distributing donuts like their namesakes of World War II, they were still in the service of helping the morale of the troops. At large bases they managed recreation centers but they also traveled to the small units in the field for short visits. For millions of GI's they represented the girlfriend, sister, or wife back home. Over the Huey's intercom, Colonel Beck introduced Sue, with the short, dark, hair and Ann, a brunette, the taller one.

Soon we were heading towards the mountains with a Huey full of mail, food, Christmas cargo, and two American young women. For the soldiers who had been living off Vietnamese food and canned Army rations at lonely, isolated outposts, these touches of home would be a welcome surprise.

As we approached the first compound Colonel Beck, by radio, told the men on the ground that we were going to make it snow. Sue and Ann sprinkled laundry soap flakes out of the Huey as we flew directly over a small group of American and Vietnamese soldiers who must have thought we were crazy. Several of them were rubbing their eyes as we came back to land. I will never know if it was emotion or if they just had soap in their eyes.

The three Americans came over to the Huey as we shut it down. Ann gave each of them a package from the Red Cross and Sue called out names to distribute the mail. After 15 minutes of small talk, Colonel Beck announced, "We have a lot more stops to make" and got back into the Huey. The soldiers stood there silently, staring at us as we started up, hovered, and then disappeared into the sky.

At the next outpost, Colonel Beck left us so he could talk privately with the local officials. The crew and I didn't mind escorting the Donut Dollies. It was easy to see how happy the soldiers were to talk with them. I wondered how Sue and Ann were feeling. Their job was to cheer up other people on what was probably their own first Christmas away from home; if they were lonely or sad, they never let it show. Throughout the day, the same scene was replayed at other small compounds. Some soldiers talked excitedly to the girls, while others would just stand quietly and stare, almost in shock to see American women visiting them out in the boonies.

Finally, with the official Macvee work finished, we were above the hospital at Dam Pao. Mike landed us a few hundred feet from the main building. Several men and women came out, carrying stretchers. They showed surprise that we were not bringing a new patient, and then joy when we showed them the food and medical supplies. Mike opened the ammo can full of money and said, "Merry Christmas from the Polecats and Tigersharks of the 192nd Assault Helicopter Company." One of the women began to cry and

A doctor asked if we would like to see the hospital. He talked as we carried the goods from the Huey to the one-floor, tin-roof hospital building. "Project Concern now has

volunteer doctors and nurses from England, Australia, and the USA. We provide health services to civilians and train medical assistants to do the same in their own villages. We try to demonstrate God's love, so we remain neutral. Both sides respect our work, and leave us alone."

One of the women described a recent event. Two nurses and a medical assistant student were returning from a remote clinic in the jungle when their jeep became mired in mud. Many miles from even the smallest village, they knew that they would not be able to walk to civilization before dark. A Viet Cong foot patrol came upon them, pulled the jeep out of the mud, and sent them on their way.

There were homemade Christmas decorations everywhere; most made on the spot by patients or their families. Inside, the hospital was clean and neat, but stark; there were few pieces of modern equipment. The staff lived in a separate small building.

As we moved into one ward, a nurse gently lifted a very small baby from its bed, and before I could stop her, she placed him in my arms. He'd been born that morning. Although they had expected complications, the mother and baby were perfectly healthy! As I held the tiny infant, I started to tell the others that I would soon be meeting my own baby son, but the words got stuck in my throat. So I just stood there, marveling at the warmth and hope in that tiny new human being nestled peacefully in my arms. Would this child grow up in peace, or would this tiny life be snuffed out by a war that had already claimed thousands of Vietnamese and Americans? Would the deaths of my friends this past year help ensure for him a life of peace and freedom, or had they died in vain?

The staff invited us to stay for supper with them, and I could tell the invitation was sincere. However, the sun was getting low, and I didn't want to fly us home over eighty miles of mountainous jungle in the dark. I also would have felt guilty to take any food, even so graciously offered, from the most selfless people I had ever met. As we started the Huey, the doctors and nurses were about fifty feet away, still talking with Colonel Beck. The Colonel took something out of his wallet and gave it to one of the men with a double-hand handshake. He then quietly climbed on board.

There was no chatter on the intercom as we flew back to Da Lat. Mike landed the Huey softly. I asked him to shut down and got out quickly. Then we all stood there silently; I wanted to hug Sue and Ann, but I knew Donut Dollies were not allowed to hug. Instead, we all exchanged warm handshakes and Christmas wishes. Colonel Beck thanked us for taking him to the hospital. We, the crew of Polecat 356, got back in and flew away and out of the lives of our new-found friends.

Silence also marked the flight back to Phan Thiet. I thought of my family and friends back home and couldn't wait to see them. I also thought about the good friends I would soon be leaving behind, and other good friends who would never go home to their families.

I reflected on the rare nature of the day. I would always be able to remember Christmas Day in Vietnam as very special. Here, in the midst of war, trouble, and strife, was a time of sharing, happiness, love -- and peace.



Lee Pearson, Jim Schueckler, and Dave Lissow

Epilog: I attended the 1993 dedication of the Vietnam Women's Memorial to place letters of remembrance from the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association. As friendly and helpful as 24 years earlier, other Donut Dollies were eager to help me find Sue and Ann, identified from a photograph I had taken at Dam Pao in 1969. One Donut Dolly finally exclaimed: "That's my sister!" and led me to Ann. I collected on a long-overdue hug. Sue and I talked by telephone a few days later. I felt good to learn that Christmas Day in Vietnam was also special to them.

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