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Christmas in Khe Sanh

Posted By [Bill Cowan](#) On 11:45 AM 12/23/2013 In | [No Comments](#)

This Christmas my oldest son is serving his fourth combat tour overseas. With him in mind, my thoughts wander back to the vivid memories of one of my particular Christmases past.

Like most veterans of today's military, I served more than one Christmas season away from home and those I loved. It's one of the unwelcome prices of military service, yet servicemen and women somehow always seem to find a way to mold the sadness of being away from loved ones at special times into a way of sharing with new friends and comrades.

Never was this truer for me than one Christmas at an isolated combat base in the mountains of Vietnam.

My unit at the time, the 3rd Battalion of the 26th Marines, had endured a hellish September along the Demilitarized Zone dividing North Vietnam from the South. One particular battle had cost us 55 Marine and Navy lives and scores wounded, many of whom were evacuated for medical treatment. The losses rendered the battalion ineffective for combat operations, and we were shuffled to a safe camp along the coast to begin a rebuilding process. Besides those we had lost to the fighting, others had completed their 13 month tours of duty and were going home at last.

By December the battalion was almost up to full strength. Some of us were seasoned combat veterans, but most were new arrivals to Vietnam. As a consequence, we still weren't being given front-line duty. Instead we were moved to a small base along the mountainous border with Laos.

A few Montagnard tribesmen were the only civilians in the area, and an airstrip was the principal avenue of supply and refurbishment. I had already spent three months in the area before September's battles, and it seemed a suitable place for us to rebuild the battalion into an effective fighting force.

As Christmas neared, so did the holiday spirit. The war somehow seemed rather far away. We awoke each morning under cool mountain fog. By noontime it had burned off, revealing the green jungle atop the hills and mountains which surrounded us.

In the far distance, along the coastline, our fellow Marines were still skirmishing against the North Vietnamese units trying to surreptitiously move south. We could often hear the artillery and airstrikes which accompanied the battles, large and small. Somehow we seemed relatively safe at our small base.

In our bunkers and foxholes, our small transistor radios would find Armed Forces Vietnam (AFVN), the military sponsored radio station which kept us abreast of the 'real world.' We would often have to point our antennas in every conceivable direction until we found a strong enough signal to hear clearly. In the mountains, when the signal was good it was really good. And, simply listening to a Christmas carol could wistfully take our minds away from where we were.

In the middle of December, Christmas packages from families and friends at home began pouring in. Most were wrapped in foils and papers which glimmered with reds, blues, and golds unfamiliar to our base existence. Other packages came from across America addressed simply to "Any Marine" or "Any American Serviceman in Vietnam." They were simple reminders that anonymous Americans back home still cared about those of us serving overseas.

When Christmas Day finally arrived, the division headquarters sent cases of hardboiled eggs and eggnog to our battalion. Our glee at these unexpected delicacies was almost childlike. Even so far away from home, Christmas again seemed quite real. A few of us were even prepared to successfully debate the existence of Santa Claus.

As the day went on, some of us sang along with the Christmas carols beaming over AFVN. Others broke out pictures of their families or loved ones and talked about home. Nearly all of us ate eggs and drank eggnog until we were sick.

As was customary, a holiday truce had been called between warring factions. Although neither side

was known to be meticulous about honoring such truces, each of us shared a slight sense of relief in believing that we weren't at risk for at least one special day.

Amidst our joy, however, and unbeknownst to us, the enemy was amassing thousands of troops for an attack on our base and the small company outposts on the outlying hills. Even as we sang, talked, and drank eggnog, North Vietnamese scouts were peering down at us from the looming hills to the north and planning their strategy for attack. Within less than a month, the biggest battle of the Vietnam war commenced — the siege of Khe Sanh, our small mountain base.

For many servicemen at Khe Sanh, that Christmas was their last. It was also the last for thousands of North Vietnamese troops who, like us, were away from home serving their country.

Today, 46 years after that Christmas and as if it happened only yesterday, I can still see the smiling faces of my Marine friends, hear the holiday music of AFVN, and taste the eggnog.

This small story of mine can be echoed a thousand times over by other veterans who have served through World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Beirut, Iraq, Afghanistan, and a hundred other places where men and women stood in harm's way in service of their country. The particular place, time, faces, and events may be different, but the memories and feelings down inside won't be.

If you know a veteran, you might want to ask about one of his or her Christmases past. There's probably a story waiting to be told.

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