

Through the Rocket's Red Glare

Zack Space

Near the northeastern tip of Ohio, East of Cleveland along Lake Erie, is Madison Ohio, my hometown. Growing up, Christmas in Madison was steeped in family tradition and community. When I joined the service Christmas never entered my mind, but my first Christmas in Vietnam was lonely and frightening: cut off from everything that felt humanizing. Ironically that's the Christmas which remains most memorable.

Christmas Eve in Madison: Santa settled into his chair on the stage of the large gazebo in the town square park. While kids disliking the cold headed to the church basement to make decorations for the big pine tree in the park, older kids helped younger kids meet Santa, hefting them onto Santa's lap or taking pictures. Every child grabbed handfuls of candy after whispering to Santa their wishlist. The night always ended with everyone singing Christmas carols as we walked to the church on the square for the Christmas Eve service.

On Christmas Day we tore into our gifts. Family and friends gathered in our house settling kids in front of the TV for "King Kong" followed by "The Wizard of Oz", distracting them while the meal was completed.

We're a family of hunters so the table was laid with game: rabbit stew, squirrel noodles, roast pheasant and duck, fresh caught fish with venison chili. Everyone added something to the meal. The Greeks in the family brought Spanakopita, kofta patties and moussaka, while pans of stuffed grape leaves were judged as the cooks observed. My moms we're always best. From across the road, old mister Stern brought chipmunk gravy: perfect complement to mashed potatoes. Finally, there was enough baklava to last four days. That's the Christmas I left behind when I joined the service.

My first service Christmas in 1968 was stateside in South Carolina, but there was no leave available to go home. My second Christmas found me Tan Son Nhut Airbase as an E-4 Fuel System Specialist. We worked in teams of two. Henry, an E3, became my "assistant" and buddy. We went TDY together (temporary duty) living out of a jump bag and duffel wherever we landed in Vietnam.

Our options for Christmas dinner were the chow hall or the In-Country Terminal. The chow hall was a long and often dangerous walk due to snipers. Our Chow Hall had history as a preferred target. It was hit three times by Vietcong Rockets. This made the In-Country Terminal the easy choice for our holiday meal. We dined on ice cream sandwiches and beer. Yes, it was Christmas but it was just so hot. At the row of booths sponsored by the AmVets, Eagles, Moose and Elks, we picked up free packs of cigarettes, coffee, cigars and sometimes beer. It was the best stop on base.

The hour was almost 9:00pm. With an ice cream sandwich and a couple more beers in hand, we strolled outside behind the terminal - the side facing the flight line. We looked up at the giant electric star on the main water tower. It really lit up the tower. It was so bright it could be seen for miles. The Vietcong also could see it. Around 9:30 the Vietcong started launching rockets at the star. The first one hit the ground eliminating the night sky like lightning. Boom! The Rockets hit about every about every 20 seconds. I could hear the hiss in the air as they came in. Each time one went off I could feel the air compress and the pressure against my chest. Boom! The ground shook under our feet. Henry was

standing next to me. His hands covered his ears, his eyes wide open, just taking it in. I'm sure mine were too. Boom! The whole attack lasted about 15 minutes. There must have been twenty rockets fired, hitting the ground all around the tower. Boom! In all this spectacle not one rocket found its mark: the water tower star.

Once the rocket stopped, we stood there, stuck in place, marveling at the star's survival. Finally, I looked at him. He nodded his head. It was time to walk back into the terminal. We needed more beer.

I missed Christmas back home. Like everyone, I longed for my family. After nineteen wonderful Christmases with my family, this was the Christmas I was going to remember most of all. Watching that big, beautiful star withstand that attack filled me with the joy that I can only describe his pride. The star took a place in my heart and soul as the spirit of our resolve, our willingness to face whatever this war would send our way.

I cried that night knowing my family was enjoying the joyful Christmas of my memories. Henry and I were alone, and yet we were alone together. This was our Christmas: our time.

I've never shared this experience: not with my family, not with my wife, not with my buddies. I doubt that Henry did either. However, sharing the story finally brings some peace.

I wish Henry a Merry Christmas, wherever he is.