

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

1ST Battalion 50th Association

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December 2021
and all the Association

From the TC Hatch



By Jim Segars

Dear Members, Happy Veteran's Day

We hope all of you are well. We are doing fairly well. Lorretta fell and was hospitalized for four days about eight weeks ago. She is beginning to walk better now. I, however, am still on care duty for her, the house, and the dog—wrong timing for a puppy since June. Hopefully, this go-round will be over soon. We go back to Vanderbilt next week for another body scan. We're expecting the test result will tell us where we stand with her cancer.

We hope all of you had a good Veteran's Day. I got to golf and go out to eat with part of the family.

The Battalion has been busy with graduations, a Change of Responsibility, a Hail and Farewell event, among other things. I was privileged to attend most of these as your president. Outgoing Command Sergeant Major SGM is Erik Gonzalez. The incoming Command Sergeant Major CSM is Richard E. Bell. We appreciate the service these men have given/give the 1/50th.

We said good-bye to Mike McCardell, who has been an invaluable asset in planning our reunions, and a good friend! Many other soldiers were also greeted as newcomers while those going to new posts were given our best wishes for success.

This newsletter also includes a Happy Thanksgiving and a Merry Christmas to all of you from Lorretta and me and all the Association Officers and their wives. Take care. We hope 2022 is a good year for everyone!

Play the Game,

Jimmy



Editor: Lorene Burch

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Chaplin's Corner

John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Sometimes it is hard for us to find hope in an ever changing world. As we remember we need to remind ourselves that God sent His son, Jesus Christ, to give us hope. As you listen to or read the Christmas story I pray you will realize that isn't the end of the story. It is just the beginning.

What can you do to give others a new beginning and to help you through troubled times?

My prayer for each of you is that you find that hope of living in the arms of our Lord.

Christmas Blessings!!!

My email address is:

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Editor's note:



Greeting all:

As we are entering into the holiday season as I write this, I am reminded of how often we get caught up in all the parties and the many list we make for ourselves of the things we think we need to do. I have lived off lists this month as it seems everything I am involved in has come about over the past two weeks. I have been busy, more so than usual.

I have found the most important thing on my list is to allow time for me to get some rest and to take time out to enjoy my family, all else may help to make good memories, but they don't mean anything if I can't enjoy the events as well.

So I am praying that each of you will take time for yourselves and to sit back and relax with your family as you never know how much time is left for you to enjoy them.

Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year.

Lorene Burch

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Historian of the 50th Infantry Regiment
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OBITUARY INFORMATION FORM

Please mail completed form to Jim Sheppard at the address in the header of this form

Name:

Unit and dates of service:

MOS:

Awards Received:

Surviving Spouse & Family:

Any other information you would like to have in your obituary posting on our website,

(for example: information on your career/life's work after the war through retirement): 06/24/2021

I will keep these on file. Rest assured I will add a fitting memorial page for you. In the event of my own death, I will see to it that the information is passed along to whoever assumes the duties of website caretaker

I hope you all have many more years to enjoy, but I have been disappointed recently that I did not make this effort sooner...as several of the men who recently passed left little information with their surviving loved ones.

Sincere Regards,

Your Historian,

Jim Sheppard

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A Vietnam Christmas
The Day it Snowed in Vietnam
By Jim Schueckler

Christmas carols played in the mess hall at supper and the calendar said "December 24, 1969," but it didn't feel much like Christmas Eve. We were tired from a long day of flying many missions picking up infantrymen and recon patrols from field locations. We brought them back to the big airfield at Phan Thiet for the Christmas cease-fire. Gunship helicopters had escorted us because they were frequently needed on other days, but today not a shot had been fired in either direction. It seemed that 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 T-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 that there was nothing to celebrate. One pilot tried to change the mood. "We have to do something happy! Let's sing Christmas Carols!" He said, almost in anguish.

But no one 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 that 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 was the only one, 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 Higginbotham, 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?"

It had been Mike's idea, but the prospect of not being able to make this mission was too much, so 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!"

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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 young 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 edibles. As we left one hooch with our arms full, the men inside started singing "Deck the Halls," and soon those in other buildings were competing. Christmas Eve had arrived in this tropical land of heat and snakes and death!

When we reached the mess hall, the cooks were still there, preparing for Christmas Day. 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 checked dates on cans and cartons of food. **Then we drove to the 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 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 were usually bustling 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 also 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 a cowboy from Wyoming and had chosen his nickname "Bad Bascom" after a comic-strip cowboy. 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.

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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. His 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 smaller units in the field for short visits. For millions of GIs 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 about 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 may have been 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 folding stretchers. They first showed surprise that we were not bringing an injured 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 then hugged Mike.

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PCI staff and Donut Dollies at the Huey. The Donut Dollies normally wore blue and white striped uniforms, but a few had the red and blue uniforms just for the holidays.

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.

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Lee Pierson, Jim Schueckler, and Dave Lissow with Polecat 356.
Photo by Ted Hopkins

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 the photograph at Dam Pao in 1969. One Donut Dolly finally exclaimed: "That's my sister!" and led me to Ann, where 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. My experiences in Vietnam and at The Wall led me to conceive and develop [The Virtual Wall](#) in 1997.

[Project Concern International](#), 3550 Afton Road San Diego, CA 92123
is still doing similar humanitarian work in Asia and several US cities.

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Please send in your articles to Lorene Burch, 821 Meadowbrook Rd., Salina Kansas 67401. Or my email address thelmaburch@gmail.com. Feel free to visit the association web site at: <https://www.ichiban1.org/> to find more stories and information as to what it going on within the unit.



**WISHING YOU ALL A VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS
AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!**

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