

Christmas Story 1961 in Vietnam and a guy named Limpy

Vietnam 1961. As they moved into December of that year, a group of 51 USAF personnel found themselves living in a hastily improvised cluster of tents on the edge of the Vietnam Air Force(VNAF) Base at Bien Hoa, about 30 miles Northeast of Saigon. This newly formed group was the first American combat unit sent to a corner of the world that in 1961 was unknown to 99.9% of American, including the military, but within the next decade was destined to become a bitter cauldron of American political, military and social turmoil.

If as Tennyson wrote, "In spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love", as Christmas approaches the fancy of American military men throughout the world turns toward thoughts of children. This Air Commando Detachment (Det 2A as it was designated) was no exception. With their own families back in Florida, they looked around for some surrogates. They didn't have far to look. The VNAF enlisted families billeted a short distance away were among the poorest of the poor. The Commandos decided to hold a Christmas party for the young children of this group.

A collection was taken up and about \$500 raised. This represented about 50% of all the cash available in the Detachment for the Commandos were not allowed to carry more than \$20 apiece into Vietnam at the time. The next problem was to get someone into Saigon. The Commandos were restricted to their compound except for flying, for at that time their presence in Vietnam was known but to a very few. In every organization there is at least one BTO (Big Time Operator). In this case it was a young single fighter pilot from NYC who went by the nickname of Limpy.

Civilian clothes were scrounged from here and there and Limpy was headed towards the big city and turned loose. He was given about three days to gather what he could, hopefully a few bags of candy for each of 100 or so kids. The next day Limpy was back in camp with no money, no candy, and no explanation. He was summoned before the Det. commander and his story was not reassuring.

Upon arrival in Saigon, Limpy thought that he could best survey the lay of the land by visiting a local bar. Not surprisingly, the first person he met was a young "Lady of the Evening" euphemistically referred to in Vietnam as a "B Girl." After Limpy told her about his mission, she volunteered a better idea. Inasmuch as Limpy knew absolutely nothing about Saigon, why not just give her the \$500 and she would do the shopping for him. She allowed that she would meet him back at the same bar in a week's time. After a few more beers, Limpy saw the wisdom of her suggestion, so he agreed.

One could only image the consternation back at tent city. The money was gone and they had no way of raising more. But there was another more serious problem. The word had gone out to the local children about this upcoming event and every day groups of these very young people would line up along the path between tent city and the flight line and quietly stare at the airmen as they moved back and forth. The pensive stare from the deep black eyes of a 5-10 year old waif would melt the heart of the most grizzly old jungle fighter. The children thought they were going to have a party. The Commandos knew that they were not. Although the day to day activity of counter-insurgencies continued, the war took a back seat to the more pressing problem of solving the children's Christmas party dilemma. There was little choice. Dispatch Limpy back into Saigon with instructions to either bring back some goodies or to head straight for China.

About 10:00 the next morning, the scheduled day of the party, a large VNAF truck approached tent city followed by scores of young kids screaming and yelling. Sitting in the front seat was Limpy all decked out in a Santa suit. The back of the truck was full of toys, candy, cakes, and even a large Christmas tree. The party was a huge success. However, it was evident at a glance that there was a lot more than \$500 worth of loot in that truck. Again Limpy was called upon for an explanation, but this time he experienced a friendlier environment.



Our USAF band for the Christmas party. Standing Left to right tentatively identified by Bob Gleason and Paul Schueller:

John Maheau, Paul Donner, John Patee, (unk sitting) Dick Tegee (back to the camera), John Conde and Limpy as Santa Claus.

His story was this. When he arrived back at the appointed time and place, there sat the B-girls. She took Limpy around back and showed him the truck full of goodies. She had even arranged for an armed military guard to protect the contents during the previous few days. She then handed Limpy \$200 that she had left over. (The Commandos later turned the \$200 over to a group of French Nuns who ran an orphanage nearby.) It was obvious that there was more to the story than this and Limpy pressed her for a further explanation.

It seemed that our "Lady" was sincerely touched by this gesture of the Americans towards the Vietnamese children. She therefore enlisted the aid of several of her "co-workers" and they decided to make some non-business calls of their "clients", many of whom were wealthy Saigon businessmen. They suggested that the client may like to make a donation to a worthy cause, "the VNAF children party." If a client demurred, the ladies then implied that perhaps they should ask the man's wife for a donation. That usually did it.

The word of this party got around and on Christmas day the President of Vietnam sent to the Commando compound the National Children Choir from the Saigon Cathedral who put on a memorable Christmas program. (Sadly, this was the same Cathedral in which President Diem and his brother were assassinated two years later.)

Months later, when the Commandos were released from their base restrictions, Limpy and others tried to locate and thank their "Mary Magdalene of Saigon", as she was now referred to by some, but she

seemed to have completely disappeared. Perhaps she experienced a spiritual transformation from this event and pursued a different vocation.

It's hard to sort out in this event how the virtue of Christian charity became intertwined with a little moral turpitude, however, at that time the experience felt great. Thirty-five years later the poignancy of that moment still lingers in one's memory. It still feels great. Except for the war, 1961 wasn't such a bad year.

Col Robert Gleason, who wrote this for my web site, was sent from Vietnam to command the 1st Air Commando Group Det 3 (later 605 ACS) at Howard AFB, Canal Zone, Panama and was my boss from April 1963 to 1965. He supported his troops all the time, was an honest, fair, and firm commander. He was the finest bosses I had in the Air Force. I remember him very fondly in the opportunities he would give you with enough rope to either hang yourself or be innovative and excel. We worked for him 10 hours plus a day, seven days a week to build the AF counterinsurgency effort in Latin America and achieved many things under his leadership. His achievements in civic action, nation building, and military counterinsurgency training helped stop the spread of Castroism & Communism. He even brought the Dominican Republic Army & AF Commander together in a golf game. He found out during the game that the AF commander had a machine gun in his golf bag because he didn't trust the Army general. The game ended peacefully and both generals had a better appreciation of each other. There are dozens of stories such as this in Air Commandos' experiences in Latin America from the Panama uprising in Jan 64 and our contributions for stopping it peacefully to General Barrientos, President of Bolivia, giving the finger to newspaper reporters while taking off in one of our U-10s.

Bob Gleason died 5 November, 2014 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.



Burton C. Berrettini

January 10, 2016

Lt/Col. Eugene Rossel

Dear Col. Rossel:

Enclosed are a few pictures that you might be able to use for the Christmas, 1961, party organized for the children living at Blen Hoa.

Picture #1 is a long shot of the area where the outdoor portion of the party was held.

Picture #2 was taken from the opposite side of the truck from where your copy of the photo was taken. You can clearly see Dick Tegge with the guitar; John Pattee, and the "bass" player whose name I do not recall. Capt. Robert L. Block is the person seated.

Pictures #3, 4, & 5 represent the entertainers that President Diem sent to the base to entertain the troops that day.

Picture #6 was the ARVN troops that lived across the road from my tent. We became quite friendly. On this day they gave me a new red beret that was their unit hat as a Christmas present - I am in civilian clothes with the beret on my head. I do not know if any of them were Catholic as there were several Vietnamese of Catholic faith on the base.

Picture #6A shows a number of Vietnamese children that lived on the base and participated in the Christmas party. The boy with the arrow pointing down to his head is named Viet. He was a great kid and I sort of adopted him as a little brother.

Picture #7 is a picture of Viet's family. I got to know them when I was invited to their residence a few times - usually to share beer with the father. The father had attended Supply Tech School in the states and spoke English quite well. He was a T/Sgt in the Vietnamese Air Force and was worked at their supply depot. We corresponded for at least ten years until Viet was around 15 - 16 years of age. The cost of living became so severe in the late sixties that his wife had to find a job to help support the family. During a move, I lost all of their letters, and I am embarrassed to say that I no longer recall the family name. I have always wondered what happened to the family after the war ended. You indicated that you have close ties to the Vietnamese community there. Would it be an imposition for you to let people in that area see the picture of the family at the long shot that one of them made it to California?

Picture #8 is one of the Catholic Church that was on the base, in case you had not seen it when you were there. Col. Gleason located an American priest that ran an orphanage in Saigon and he arranged for the priest to drive out to the base on Sundays on his motorcycle to say Mass.

I hope that the photos and the information are of some help to you.

Best regards,



Burt Berrettini