

Christmas in the Dungeons of North Vietnam

By Ted Ballard, 13th TFS, Korat AB, Thailand, F-105D Pilot

Christmas, 1966

On December 24th, 1966, I was living in a small twelve feet by twelve feet cell. My roommate was Navy Ensign George McSwain. We had no contact with other American POWs. For seven weeks George had been undergoing a torture that was called “holding up the wall”—standing facing the wall with his arms straight over his head. Periodically the guards would come in and beat him up. The Vietnamese were torturing George in an attempt to get me to sign a war crimes confession. I will not go into any details, but earlier they had tortured me for the same thing and failed.

I had spent two months in a cast, from my left ankle to my chest, and was now using crutches to hobble around the room.

As evening approached, a guard came and took George to be interviewed by some Vietnamese officers. While he was gone I suddenly felt the urge to walk without the crutches. I carried them with me but did not use them and made it all the way around the room. I had given myself a Christmas present and waited impatiently for George to come back so I could share it with him.

When George returned he had a few pieces of sugar candy and a cigarette for each of us. This was a pleasant surprise since I never thought the Vietnamese would recognize Christmas. George said the quiz room was full of oranges and bananas and we would receive some later. We never did.

Later some Christmas music was played over the camp radio. A POW sang two or three songs. I wondered who he was but never did find out. It was a sad Christmas Eve for me. As we went to bed, George was silent and despondent. We did not talk as we normally did. I could only imagine his thoughts. Mine were of my family and Christmases past.

The gong did not clang as usual Christmas morning. However, a guard came by and told George to get “on the wall.” About three hours later he was taken to quiz and the officer (whom we called Dum-dum) told him that the Camp Commander had forgiven him of his “crimes” and he must obey the camp regulations. We were both jubilant at this news.

George’s long ordeal was over. In a way we felt it was a victory for us since I did not have to write a confession or condemn the United States government. Several times I came close to calling a halt to the torture and writing the statement, but George was a tough man and he took it as he said he could.

The Vietnamese gave us a good Christmas dinner—a piece of meat, lots of rice, and, for the first time, cabbage soup.

Christmas, 1967

The summer and fall of 1967 was a bad time for the POWs. Many men were tortured for propaganda purposes, and harassment by the guards was continuous.

There were about thirty men in our building, three to each room. My cellmates were Captain Bob Sandvick and Captain Tom Pyle.

On Christmas Eve we were taken to view a tree the Vietnamese had decorated. We were given some candy and extra cigarettes to take back to our rooms. Later in the evening we heard a guard opening the hatches to each of the cells. When he came to our cell he asked, “Protestant or Catholic?” We told him we were Protestants and he gave us each a small bag which contained an orange, several cookies, and small pieces of candy. This was our first “Gift from the Priest.” We found out later that the Catholics got a tangerine instead of an orange. (Only the Lord knows why!) One POW who was living by himself told the guard he was neither Protestant nor Catholic. The guard closed the hatch without giving him anything! Next Christmas he decided to be a Protestant!

Some Christmas music was played over the camp radio. We also had to listen to a tape recording by a Vietnamese Catholic Priest. He allowed that we should pray to God for forgiveness of our crimes against the Vietnamese people.

Bob, Tom, and I reminisced about our families and other Christmases. It was a quiet evening for us. Our prayers were for those POWs who were still suffering from wounds.

Christmas Day we had a good dinner of meat, vegetables, and rice. In quantity it was about the size of an average American meal, but about six times our normal ration.

The senior ranking officer of our building initiated a “Home for Christmas” prayer. Each day at noon a signal was passed to all rooms. We would then recite the Lord’s Prayer.

Christmas, 1968

In the spring of 1968, I was moved to another camp. Living conditions were somewhat improved. There were nine of us in a twenty-one by twenty foot room. Even though harassment and treatment by the guards was about the same, it was great to have more Americans to talk to. Peace negotiations had begun in Paris, but by the time Christmas came around our high hopes for an early settlement had vanished.

We had continued our daily “Home for Christmas” prayer. One day one of the men said, “What will we do if we don’t make it home for Christmas?” Someone answered, “We will continue to pray for next Christmas.”

As the season grew nearer the men began writing down the words for holiday songs. We used toilet paper, pens made from strips of bamboo, and ink from a mixture of cigarette ashes and water. Of course we kept these carefully hidden from the Vietnamese.

One of the men received a package from home. He shared everything he had with the rest of us. What a wonderful treat! Actual goodies from home!

Again we received a “gift from the Priest.”

I shall never forget that Christmas Eve. A group of men quietly singing such carols as “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” and “Silent Night.”

Before retiring, Jim Hivner said, “Everybody who believes in Santa Claus, hang a sock on your mosquito net. Remember, those who believe will receive!”

I did not hang up a sock because I needed to wear them to try to keep warm. We each had two thin blankets but I had to use one of mine as cushion for my bad hip.

In the quiet of the night, as I had done the two previous Christmas Eves, I mentally shopped for, bought, and wrapped gifts for Ruth and Kevin. How are they? Are they well? Please, God, let them live normal and happy lives, and know that my thoughts are with them. May God bless and keep them, as well as the other members of the great Ballard family.

When I awakened the next morning I found a Christmas card inside my net. The other men had one in their stockings. Jim Hivner had made them without any of us knowing about it!

Christmas, 1969

The first ten months of 1969 were the worst for the POWs. An attempt to escape had failed and the Vietnamese had retaliated with extreme brutality.

In late October, however, a marked improvement in our living conditions came about. We did not know the reason, but the death of Ho Chi Minh may have had something to do with it. I believe now that it was the outstanding support of the American people and the pressure they put upon the North Vietnamese government that brought about the changes.

In December we were allowed to write our first letters home. I had about 800 million things to say to Ruth and questions to ask, but of course this was impossible in a six-line letter.

Several of us received packages from home, which we shared. In mine was a set of thermal underwear for which I was most grateful. One of my cellmates, Jim Sehorn, had given me one of his blankets. Finally, I could at least stay warm during those long, sleepless, miserable nights.

We made Christmas cards for the men in the other buildings. These were “air-mailed” by tying a rock to the paper and throwing them from our courtyard to theirs.

For a Christmas tree, we decorated a small swiss-type broom with strips of cloth and paper with various designs. Mike McGrath was quite a good artist and enjoyed doing things with his hands. He used one of his black pajama tops as a background and drew a tree on it. From paper and cloth he made stars and other ornaments and attached them to the tree. Small packages with each of our names were also attached. This was kept hidden during the day but was hung on the wall in the evenings for our enjoyment.

We exchanged gifts that Christmas, both real and imaginary. I gave away gift certificates and treated everyone to a dinner at the Fireside Inn in Las Vegas. One man, who had lost most of his hair, was given a wooden comb. I was given ear plugs and a nose clip so I would not be disturbed at night by nearby neighbors!

Christmas Eve the guards came around and gave us the “gift from the priest,” also cookies and cigarettes. We were in a good mood and talked and quietly sang carols til fairly late.

Before retiring we each tied a stocking to our nets. I had saved some peanut butter candy from my package Ruth had sent and planned to put some in each man’s stocking while they were asleep. I lay awake for about an hour and was just about ready to get up when I heard a noise and looked up. A POW was putting something in my stocking. He moved quickly from net to net and then sneaked back under his own. Ten minutes later another man got up and did the same thing. It took almost two hours for all eight of us to play Santa Claus.

Early Christmas morning I was awakened by a loud shout from Jim Sehorn: “Merry Christmas, everybody! Get up!. He did it! Santa Claus came! Get up! Get up!” What a sight – Jim running from net to net pulling everybody out of bed. Our stockings were full of candy, gifts, and greeting cards.

Later that day the guards came in and removed Mike’s shirt with the decorations on it. He was taken to Quiz and the officers told him they were impressed with his art and were going to take it to the museum. Mike told them, “No, you are not.” He jerked it off the table and tore it up!

Christmas, 1970

In November, 1970, there was an unsuccessful attempt by the United States to rescue some POWs from a camp at Son Tay. Within the next few days all of the POWs were moved to downtown Hanoi to a large complex of jails named Hoalo Prison. We called it the Hanoi Hilton. Finally, after so many years, we were all in the same camp, with 25 to 56 men per cell. We became better organized militarily, academically, and religiously.

That Christmas season was a fairly good one for us. Many men had received packages from home and were allowed to keep the items in their cells. However, a few days before Christmas, the guards removed everything from the cells except for what they had given us.

In October I had received my first letter from home, after more than four years as a prisoner. Included in the letter was a picture of Ruth and Kevin. I prized that picture more than anything in the world and I cannot describe my feelings when the guard took it away.

We began again to scrounge materials for academic purposes, etc. We drew names for gifts. Jim Sehorn gave me a wand and a pendulum to use with my course in hypnotism. I gave him the use of my services for a whole week to hold his legs while he did sit-ups and other exercises.

Christmas Eve the men put on an outstanding play. It was the POW version of Charles Dickens’ “Christmas Carol.” Scrooge was played by Dave Ford with Jerry Venanzi directing.

I thoroughly enjoyed the Christmas carols sung by a 15-man choir. The singing was disrupted once when a Vietnamese attempted to take pictures through the barred windows.

Again we received a “gift from the priest.”

That night was a sad one for me. I was reminiscing over past Christmases when I had a strong feeling that my Mother had died. (She passed away in August 1969, but I was not notified until our release.)

Christmas morning I was again awakened by Jim Sehorn – with the same enthusiasm and excitement. About this time a most fascinating event occurred – big Tom McNish (six feet, two inches tall) was running up and down the long room with a large bag slung over his shoulder. Tom was dressed in white long-handled underwear and continued his prancing until everyone was up. Then he set down his bag, opened it, and out jumped Santa Claus! Rod Knutson had on a red suit, black “boots”, stocking cap, and a white beard and mustache! I never found out where or how they scrounged all that material. Rod then proceeded to give out hilariously funny imaginary gifts to everyone.

We had an exceptionally good meal Christmas Day, and everyone was becoming optimistic about going home soon.

Christmas, 1971

Our optimism suffered a setback in early 1971 due to the torturing of many individuals and especially the senior ranking officers. This was in retaliation for our attempts to conduct religious services and to gain improvements in living conditions. The United States had resumed the bombing of North Vietnam.

Ten of us had been removed to another large cell along with thirty four other POWs, all considered to be “die-hards” or trouble makers by the Vietnamese.

Christmas, 1971, was about the same as the year before. The choir sang carols which I thoroughly enjoyed. Six of us non-singers put on a skit imitating the choir.

Ed Davis sang a lovely song, one I had never heard before, having to do with Mary and her unborn child, Jesus.

I’ll never forget Gobel James and his beautiful rendition of “O Holy Night.”

One man entertained us with his version of “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.”

Tom McNish and Rod Knutson did their Santa Claus number again. Rod gave me some silver oak leaves indicating my promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. Ruth had written me that it was Autumn in Carolina and the silver oak leaves were falling!

Dwight Sullivan presented me with a small poker table which he had made from bread and sticks. It even had ash trays. I kept the table for almost a year until the guards finally found it and took it away. I gave my friend Leroy Stutz an imaginary book, “How to Play Winning Poker” and allowed him to “pin” me at his discretion once per week for a whole month.

Christmas, 1972

The bombing of North Vietnam continued into 1972, and many targets near our camp were being attacked. In May over 200 of us were moved to a camp within a few miles of China, in mountainous terrain. Our food and living conditions greatly improved. We were permitted more time outside, given canned meat and various types of vegetable soup to eat with the ever-present rice. Periodically the Vietnamese would go to a nearby village and kill a buffalo and cook it for us. We conducted weekly bridge and chess tournaments.

I spent one week in solitary confinement due to a minor disagreement with the Vietnamese officers. During this time my thoughts were mostly with my wife and son. Kevin is now thirteen years old. Graduating from high school soon. Hard to believe. I had missed so much of his growing up. One of these days he will come to me and ask for an automobile.

Most of us were given letters and packages from home that Christmas. There was a picture of Ruth and Kevin on a motorcycle. A black dog lay nearby. I could imagine the companionship that the dog provided for Kevin. I mentally composed a letter to “Blackie.” I was both thankful for him and envious of him. He knew more about my son than I did – his habits, stomping grounds, and hiding places.

One of the men heard from the guards that the United States was bombing targets in Hanoi with big bombers night and day. We were jubilant at this news and felt that the attacks would continue until the Vietnamese agreed to release all prisoners.

Christmas Eve, 1972, was a quiet one for us. The choir sang some carols and that was about it. Our thoughts and prayers were about the future.

In January 1973, we were taken back to the “Hanoi Hilton” and were told that the war was over and we would all be going home soon. What would it be like? How have things changed after six and one-half years of isolation from the real world?

I was among the group of prisoners that was released on March 4, 1973. I did not look back at the camp. I said a prayer that went something like this:

Dear God,

We thank you for taking care of us for such a long time. We now ask that you give us the courage to face the future and to accept the changes that have taken place.

Ted Ballard
Deacon, Spartanburg First Baptist Church
Spartanburg, SC