

Christmas 1966

By Michael W. Rodriguez

Christmas, 1966. The operation is called Sierra, south of An Hoa, I Corps, Republic of South Vietnam. Grunts move softly through the jungle and the tree lines, weapons at the ready. They carry no machine guns, no rocket launchers. Most are armed with M-14s and shotguns. They wear soft covers instead of helmets; they do not wear flak jackets.

The rain has been steady and dreary, and has been so for many days and many nights. Everything rots and molds and mildews, rotting toes and the flesh that bears the weight of bullet belts and water bottles. Their chow is cold C-rations and brackish water from canteens.

Four-deuce mortars up on the hill throw an occasional illumination round up into the night sky, doing, most of these Marines agree, more harm than good. The half-light cast by these illumination rounds creates weird shadows, playing tricks of imaginary gooks moving against them through the trees.

Cloud cover is so low that medevacs can only land with difficulty, causing concern among the Grunts. It's one thing to get hurt out here; it's another thing entirely if whoever's hurt can't get out. This, more than anything else, causes morale to plummet.

Don't mind throwing hands, they say; just don't wanna get f'd up doing it. There it is... The rain stops. The clouds part. Most of the Marines do not recognize the phenomenon for what it is: Their misery is so complete that the rain has become part of them, part of their psyche. They are soaked to the bone, chilled to their very souls.

They reach the crest of a small hill and pause. The squad leader frets, afraid to move his people over the top, afraid the moon will expose his people-- *The moon!*

The squad leader turns and signals his people to go to ground. The squad obeys without question, facing outboard. They wonder at what the squad leader has seen, but they know he will tell them, soon enough. The squad leader, a young man of 19, backs up, faces his team leaders. The moon, he whispers. They do not understand the squad leader's words, and then they do. The moon! The rain has stopped!

Team leaders pass the word behind them. The moon! Young faces turn upward, not wanting to believe; afraid to believe. They see stars in the heavens above them. Bright, shiny, million-year-old stars shine down at them; just for them. Their jungle utilities are soaking wet, drenched beyond redemption. They feel as if their blood has frozen in their veins. Most of them are so cold, they believe they can never again be warm.

They stare up at the stars and feel, impossibly, the warmth of those stars above them begin to dry their clothing, dry their bones, warm their souls.

What the f?, one of them wonders.

God's face, says another. God's face. Merry Christmas, man. Oh, yeah, agrees the first one. Oh, yeah, he says again, believing again...

Renewed, recharged, relieved, the squad resumes its patrol of the Arizona Territory.