

OPINION

Christmas in Vietnam

By James G. Lubetkin

HOLIDAY season in a war zone: 1968. I was at a base camp, one of half a million American men and women stationed in Vietnam. Christmas in a war zone is bittersweet. Spirits lift, feelings of optimism and friendship are welcomed and embraced; but at the same time there's the constant realization of being in a combat zone, and with it an ineffable, terrible loneliness.

We were separated from those we loved and detached from the daily events in American life that made 1968 one of the most tumultuous years in recent United States history. We were at war.

Like the majority of Americans in Vietnam, I was involved in combat support operations. I'd arrived in March 1968, six weeks after the major Tet offensive. And, while Vietnam was the focus of news, much that was outside played — and preyed — upon our emotions.

Soon after arriving, I heard a broadcast of President Lyndon Johnson's surprising declaration, "I will not accept the nomination of my party as your president." Did this mean, somehow, peace was nearer at hand?

In April, I learned with shock, sadness, and pain of Martin Luther King's assassination, and felt frustration at the slow beginnings of the Paris peace talks in May — which would take almost seven years. And I felt enormous shock — again — when Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in June. That summer, I read about the political conventions in Miami and Chicago, of Yuppies and hippies, and of more numbing violence.

Hope was renewed in the fall when President Johnson declared a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam, but that hope was replaced by disappointment when Richard Nixon, not Hubert Humphrey, was elected president. And then it was Christmas. Bob Hope, Ann-Margret, and Rosey Grier came to our base to entertain us. Thousands attended, but what I remember most were the surrounding hills ringed with guards, weapons at the ready, for an attack that never came.

On Christmas Eve the people with whom I worked got together and set up an artificial tree with tinsel, orna-

ments, and paper cutouts. We sang carols, exchanged inexpensive gifts. And our first sergeant managed to come up with trays overflowing with cold cuts, salads, fresh fruit, bread and rolls, and cake.

Christmas Day itself was quiet. Wherever possible throughout Vietnam, it was a day of rest. Worship services were held, and the mess halls served a dinner from half a world away: turkey, corn-bread stuffing, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, and apple pie. The Red Cross passed out gift packages put together by volunteers back in the States.

For those few days at least it was a time of peace.

Many years have passed. I often think back. But the holiday image I carry is not of a sunbaked Army base, visiting VIPs, or mess-hall tables in a combat zone incongruously laden with food. Nor is it the image of lonely servicemen, or a sad people whose land was being systematically destroyed. It is, instead, an image from late Christmas Eve. On that night, when one more religious than I might have sought a star to lead the way, on that night I sat outside my bunker and looked up toward the moon.

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It was the era of our earliest Apollo spaceflights; the moon landing would not come until the following summer. But I knew from news reports that three men were silently, peacefully circling the moon — the first men ever to travel so far into space. I knew that three days later, those same men would splash down in the Pacific.

And I was overwhelmed by the realization that it was easier to send those three men to the moon and get them back safely than it was for me to get home — and for my fellow servicemen to get home, for the war to end, and for people somehow to live at peace.

If, almost 20 years later, a frustration remains, it is this: I don't see that things have changed much.

Even after this month's summit in Washington, I continue to ask: Have we learned the lessons of our past? Is there an end to the violence we do upon ourselves?

At a time of peace, at this season of peace, these remain sobering thoughts.

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Strangers on a train in Germany

By Burton Caine

FRANKFURT, GERMANY, is closed down on Christmas, and I took the opportunity to visit Heidelberg, an hour away by rail. I walked through the train looking for a window seat where, guidebooks in hand, I could follow all the storied towns along the way.

My eyes fell upon a young man wearing a black skullcap. An Orthodox Jew, I thought. Despite the pallid face of a *yeshiva bocher*, and the yarmulke clasped to his hair in traditional style, there was something troubling about the identification.

"Funny, you don't look Jewish." The punch line from a joke about Chinese Hebrews tickled my mind. The face looked German and the hair in careful, casual wisps gently falling over the forehead suggested mod or punk rock.

But it was worth a try. I sat down facing the lad, who now looked as if he were in his early 20s. I don't know what made me so bold, but I started up immediately, and in Hebrew, "Ata Yehudi?" ("Are you a Jew?")

"Kehm, ve-ata?" ("Yes, and you?") We established contact immediately. And a good thing, too, because he was getting off at Darmstadt, the first stop. I

felt an urgent need to extract information. After visits to Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald, I had to know what another Jew was doing in this land drenched with the blood of 6 million Jews.

"That's a serious question," the young man sighed deeply. "When I finish at the university in two years, I will have to decide whether I can continue to live in this country."

He was born in Germany and had lived

there all his life except for two years of study in Israel. He was living in West Berlin and working for a degree in sociology.

Yes, he acknowledged, opportunities for intense study in Bible, Talmud, and Hebrew are meager in West Berlin — none at the university. But he manages, he smiled, pointing to a sacred text he was carrying.

I needed to know more, and time was almost up. I felt inept and frustrated, unable to ask the right question.

"Isn't Darmstadt where the famous 15th-century manuscript of the Haggadah comes from?" I asked, hoping that the

question would somehow find the mark.

"Yes," he said, "and I believe that they keep it under glass in the rare book section of the Landesbibliothek. But, of course, the museum is closed today on account of Christmas."

I took that as confirmation that nothing remained of the illustrious Jewish community that lived in the town for 500 years. Why ask particulars as to how the Nazis methodically hunted down and ex-

terminated Jews even in the smallest of hamlets under their control?

We spoke intensely; we had a lot to cover in a short time. His parents, too, were born in Germany and spent the war years in Berlin.

I was preparing to hear another tale of how they were not recognized as Jews because they didn't look Jewish. That had been the story of the man in Warsaw who showed me around the ghetto on my recent trip to Poland.

Looking at the boy facing me on the train, I could believe that of his parents. Or were they hidden by some righteous gentile who was subsequently honored

for bravery by Yad Va-shem, the institution in Jerusalem devoted to the Holocaust? But he volunteered nothing, letting me dangle with the empty excitement of an overheated imagination.

The train was slowing down now and time was running out. Had I missed every clue? Calm down, I whispered to myself; not every Jew in Germany has a saga. He bent down to put his books into his bag, and the black skullcap now confronted me as a blatant proclamation of his orthodoxy. Why that suggested to me the key question, I cannot imagine, but I blurted it out.

"How do your parents react to your piety?"

"Badly," he said with a wan smile as he buttoned his coat. "They are very hostile." He spared me the final question. The train stopped; we had reached Darmstadt. He turned to go and paused only to add, "They were Nazis and are bitter anti-Semites. I converted to Judaism," which he repeated in English as if he was sure of the Hebrew word.

"They never forgave me. I am going home to visit them on Christmas."

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