

Silent Night--1952

[As an ex-GI undergraduate student at Iowa State College in the 1950s, one of the electives I selected was a class in public speaking. Among the assignments for speeches to be presented in the class was one that had to be written out and read verbatim. Rummaging through some old archives from those days, I recently found a yellowed copy of that speech. It was typed on onion skins, double-spaced and all in caps. Here it is—verbatim:]

It was Christmas Eve, 1952. The North Korean hills were covered with a fresh blanket of glistening white snow that cheerfully reflected a soft glow of light from the thin crescent in the sky. The only break in the silence was the faint rumble of artillery that betrayed the existence of a war that seemed far away.

Nestled in these hills, forty miles from combat, was the 31st United States Infantry. They were lucky. After six months on the line, the regiment had been moved back for a rest. They had to go back up in two days, but they would spend Christmas in reserve.

The company bivouac area was located on a gentle slope at the foot of a mountain ridge. Here the vast expanse of snow was speckled with tents. Slight wisps of smoke gently disappearing into the crisp, quite air made it seem exactly like a peaceful little village, snugly situated in the foothills.

Inside the tents, men were celebrating Christmas Eve, each in his own way. Some were no doubt writing letters home, trying their best not to betray in their words the terrible loneliness they felt. Others were talking of Christmases past, grasping some small bit of home, reminiscing over the things they used to do. Some just lay in silence staring dreamily at a picture of a wife or sweetheart five thousand miles—an eternity—away.

Over in the corner of the tent might be a scrubby little fir tree selected after much debate from a war-torn Korean hill and felled with a carbine bayonet. It would probably be cheerfully decorated with bright colored Christmas cards from home, with popcorn patiently strung by some GI fighting boredom, or with any brightly-colored piece of foil from a bar of soap or cigarette pack. No doubt the top-most branch would boast a star cut from a C-ration carton and covered with silver foil from a candy bar.

Outside, the deafening silence of the motionless night was still disturbed only by the gentle grumble that served as a reminder that, forty miles away, men were being killed.

Then, suddenly, the silence was interrupted by another foreign sound. Indeed, it sounded like an organ playing. Impossible! This was Korea. There was a war going on. How could there be organ music here? But there it was again...and then...the sound of men's voices...singing...

“God rest ye merry gentlemen. May nothing you dismay...”

Pencils poised, men stopped writing on their letters to the folks at home. The soft laughter of reminiscing soldiers was replaced by awed silence as all sat in amazement listening to this unbelievable sound...

“...Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day...”

This was not imagination. Everyone heard it. But no one spoke. Carolers. Christmas carolers in the desolate, far-flung hills of North Korea—on Christmas Eve.

Now the singing seemed nearer. The reedy and slightly out-of-tune, but extremely welcome, sound of the organ could be heard very distinctly, and the husky sound of men's voices singing in unison...

Oh come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant..."

Now, slowly grinding its way up the pair of tracks in the snow that marked the only road, came a truck—a GI truck full of soldiers. At least they appeared to be soldiers, for they were so bundled up against the bitter December weather that you could barely see their faces. But neither the extreme cold nor the bumpy ride in the lurching truck seemed to dampen their spirits as they happily sang on...

"...Oh come let us adore him. Oh come let us adore him..."

The Eskimo-like carolers were reading words and music by flashlight from a late edition of the overseas newspaper, Stars and Stripes. The organ was the chaplain's portable model set up in the back of the truck. The chaplain's assistant had a very difficult time keeping his seat as he merrily pumped away at the little instrument.

The truck stopped and, after a moment of complete silence, the carolers began to sing...

"Silent night. Holy night. All is calm. All is bright..."

Men stepped out of their tents and stood in the snow, oblivious of the bitter cold, and listened in enraptured silence. Although the hymn was sung in quiet reverence, it still drowned out completely the sounds of war in the distance. Forgotten were the battles so recently fought. Forgotten was the anticipation of battles yet to come. This was Christmas Eve... "for unto us was born this day in the city of David, a savior, which is Christ the Lord." And this night the Korean hills echoed with the proclamation of this glorious event...

"...Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace."

As the truck started up and made its way into the darkness, men silently slipped back into their tents and quietly resumed their activities. Everything seemed a little brighter now. Korea wasn't quite such a miserable place. The war didn't seem quite such a waste of time and lives. Each was a little bit more satisfied with his place in life.

While in the distance could be heard the voices of the God-sent carolers in the GI truck...

"Gloria in excelsis Deo..."

Glory to God in the highest.

[Four decades later, a version of this story was included in *Friendly Fire*, a book documenting events from the final year of the Korean War.]

Richard E. Ecker