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"I'll Be Home for Christmas"

S. Ray Granade
Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

“I’LL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS”

by: Ray Granade
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Perhaps it was growing up in a town made by railroad and highway rather than river that unfitted me to appreciate fog for what it is. The piney woods of my youth in South Alabama were rarely mist-shrouded, and that simple fact may have rendered to fog the mantle of the exotic. In my youth, fog was the province of England (especially London) or the Pacific Northwest. It was a sensibility fed, no doubt, by my taste in reading and love of Arthur Conan Doyle and Jack London. Although I haunted the Gulf Coast from Panama City to Mobile, my first memorable encounter with fog did not occur until a high school football game just over the Florida line, the second in a European meadow while I was a rising college junior, and the third during my second year in graduate school while driving through extreme southwestern Georgia toward Tallahassee. I mention all this to indicate a possible reason for the evocative effect that weather phenomenon has on me, and why its appearance on a gray day in Huntsville set me to recalling Christmases far from home and the connection between the season and geography.

All during my growing up, I intermittently heard my father’s recitation of what I came to think of as “his Christmas story.” His early World War II experience had been on transport duty, a chaplain aboard the “H.F. Alexander” as it ferried young men to battlefields. One of his three sea voyages encompassed the 1943 Christmas season, and the ship’s loudspeakers seemed particularly fond of a hot new Decca recording by Bing

Crosby of a new song entitled “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” There they were, Daddy always said, on the Atlantic Ocean. They all knew that they wouldn’t be home for Christmas, and they all knew of the very real possibility that they wouldn’t be home again alive at all. Life’s uncertainty was particularly close to them, and the song’s associations made my father’s reaction pretty common. He just didn’t like it at all.

My own war was Vietnam. My own “military Christmas” was not as traumatic, for I was in the Alabama National Guard and figured I would be home for Christmas. As it turned out, Lyndon Johnson had frozen pre-induction physicals, which delayed my entry until 1968, and created a backlog of inductees that delayed my basic training. The Warrant Officer who ran our local armory told me not to bother returning to graduate school, because I’d be leaving within 120 days. Despite the uncertainty, I ignored his advice. About a year later, I was starting the fall quarter at Florida State when The Letter arrived. I talked to the financial aid people and delayed my fellowship for a year, then withdrew from classes and moved my wife home before going to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.

The song from my father’s war was still popular, though it did not enjoy the endless air time in Fort Jackson that it had aboard the “H.F. Alexander.” We were out all day and some nights anyway rather than being cooped up in a floating pen as Christmas neared. Still, the title kept running through my head as the time approached. Uncertainty was the game’s name for us as well, for they told us nothing about Christmas plans until the last minute. The Army had taken great care to get me to basic training, flying me from Montgomery, Alabama to Columbia, South Carolina. They took care of

us at Christmas as well, hiring buses to transport us along various bus routes toward home—though we didn't know that until time to leave. As soon as we knew the date we'd be released on Christmas leave, folks flew to the telephones trying to make airline reservations. Many of my fellow trainees were stuck with airline tickets they couldn't use; if I'd had a credit card, I probably would have been too.

My personal case was even more uncertain, for I developed a bad sinus infection which turned into an upper respiratory one. My cough worsened, my fever spiked, and from sick call I went to what they called "the URI ward" in the infirmary. Less than a week remained before Departure Day. Not only did I not know how I would get home, I didn't know whether I'd get out in time. As the person with the lowest fever, I could cross the yard in my pajamas, flimsy robe, and slippers to empty the ward's trash into the central bin. Though well enough brave the frigid air twice daily, I was too sick to be released. The ward remained cold (the doctor actually wore a jacket over his white coat when he made rounds), but we had no blankets. They said that the ward's coolness was designed to retard infection and contagion; none of us believed them.

By the third day, I was feeling better. I was also scheming to make sure that they released me in time to go home. The ward was a dull place—sterile-looking with its white-painted wooden walls (typical World War II-vintage frame construction), white beds, white sheets, and lightly-colored cotton pajamas, and it offered no radio or television. We could read, write, or just lie in bed (but not with our robes on). Those of us well enough (read "me") could also do chores and scheme.

Fever had gotten me into this ward, and only the lack of it could free me. Since my bed was about half-way down the ward, since the nurses followed an inviolate practice of starting at the end nearest them whenever they performed their nefarious deeds, and since the nurses also followed an inviolate schedule, I had all the makings of a grand scheme to bust out in time for Christmas.

While we had no blankets, we had ice-water, which doctors and nurses urged us to drink liberally. Pitchers and cups sat beside the beds. Although I hated the cups, which were discarded into ward trash cans that I then had to empty, my heart had a soft spot for my own. It was central to my plot. They had cautioned us not to drink any water within a half-hour before they were to take our temperatures. Since we always knew when they would be coming, and especially since I knew about how long it took them to work their way from the head of the ward to my bed, I knew what I had to do. In this case, timing, not location or presentation, was everything.

The nurses never revealed our temperatures, but they charted them before leaving our beds. I figured by stealth to judge effectiveness over the course of a day or two. The trouble was that I hadn't many days in which to perfect my technique. I first drank some cold water, letting it linger in my mouth, about a half-hour before they made rounds. After a day, I'd worked down to drinking water when they started rounds. Unfortunately, I still hadn't registered a normal reading when the next-to-last day started.

At that point, I decided that cold water was insufficient, and that I would have to take more drastic

action. Time to experiment had run out. I switched from cold water to ice.

The first two times I tried using ice, the results were about the same as when I'd used water. My temperature still registered above normal. Then I took a mouthful of ice about the time the nurses started rounds, and held it as long as I could. One swallow and all the evidence was gone, though that swallow made me wish greatly for a blanket. More quickly than I had calculated, a nurse reached my bed. I dutifully took the thermometer under my tongue and anxiously awaited the outcome.

She checked my pulse, then casually took the thermometer. She looked at it, looked carefully at me (while I tried to look innocent and unconcerned simultaneously), then asked the fateful words: "Have you had anything to drink recently?"

I couldn't tell the truth and deny that I'd had anything to drink. It was obvious that I'd badly miscalculated and that the thermometer told her that my temperature was way subnormal. Since she'd just been holding my wrist to check my pulse, she knew it wasn't as low as it must have registered. If I told the truth, I'd be in big trouble, and the ice story might even come out. So I considered myself a prisoner of war in the battle to escape their clutches and lied.

"Yes ma'am," I alibied, "I think I may have had something about the time you started rounds." I tried to be as polite but as vague as possible, prompted by a nice mixture of self-interest and guilt. She paused, and I could see that she was considering punishing me. I consoled myself with the thought that it would probably be just punishment for my sins, but the moment passed and she admonished "I'll be back to take it again in a few minutes. Don't drink anything in the meantime!" In my

sweetest drawl I allowed as how I wouldn't while thanking my lucky stars that she carried only oral thermometers.

The evening before the last possible day for me to leave the ward and go home, I finally broached the question with a nurse: would I get to go home for Christmas? She noncommittally deferred to the doctor. Very early the next morning, a different nurse said that he'd release me when he made rounds. Breakfast came and went without his appearing. He arrived at a time that seemed calculated to leave me in suspense as long as possible. I watched him confer with the nurses as avidly as a starving man watches food being prepared. My joy when he signed what I took to be my release was depressed somewhat when the nurse approached with a syringe and told me to drop my pajama bottoms and bend over the bed. Using what felt like a blunt needle, she stabbed me, pushed the plunger, then sent me on my way.

I dressed and returned to the company area as quickly as possible. I had to pack and prepare for the inspection which preceded our release for home. First on the agenda was a weapons inspection, where our M-16s would be checked for cleanliness prior to being oiled and stored for the holidays. For that inspection, the weapon had to be oil-free.

The Army had its particular way of cleaning rifles. That way involved solvent, of which we were to use much and which required its own cleanup, and a great deal of time, of which I had little. While a trusted comrade guarded the latrine doorway, I stripped myself and the sling from my rifle and stepped into the shower. I knew I could clean the metal-and-plastic weapon quickly with very hot water, then dry it off; I also knew that our

training cadre frowned on that practice, and that I'd better not get caught. They told us that misuse of government property was punishable by stockade time, and I hated the thought of breaking free of the infirmary only to miss Christmas by landing there. After five tense minutes in the shower, every speck of oil was gone and the rifle was spotless. Field-stripping and drying readied it for inspection. Our Drill Sergeant's Hispanic assistant checked it over meticulously, suspiciously asked how I'd gotten it so clean, then grunted that I could oil and put it away after I fudged a response by saying something about Q-tips. Unlike my response to the nurse, that wasn't a lie. I'd used several to dry it.

Within the next few minutes, I dressed for travel in the required dress greens, took only what I'd need to make it home and back plus a few Christmas presents I'd acquired, and hurried out to be transported. Bruce Palmer, whose home was at Fort Deposit just up the road from Evergreen and with whom I'd gone up and trained, and I scrambled into a deuce-and-a-half, and I relaxed for the first time since entering the infirmary. We rode to a huge compound, where there were what looked like hundreds of buses, fell out of the trucks and formed up. Finally, in roll-call order, we were directed to our particular bus by number.

Our appearance at the compound was our first intimation that we would be bused home, though some of my fellow trainees claimed that they'd known it all along. They gave us our orders as they called us from formation —along with threats of dire consequences if we lost our copy. We only knew of the threats from hearing them before our names were called. Once we heard our bus number, only one thing had our attention.

On the way out of the compound, I discovered that our bus had worn brakes that squealed each time the driver applied them. As one of the late arrivals on our bus, I wound up sitting directly over the right rear wheels. Not only did I have little leg room, but I also endured the full effect of both the sound and the vibration. In addition, my injection locus was getting really sore, and I had a long trip before me to remain seated, bumping along on the bus seat and listening to the brakes squeal and vibrate.

There was no opportunity to let anyone at home know more than they already did—that this was Departure Day, the day we were supposed to be home. Somewhere in western South Carolina or eastern Georgia I managed to get to a telephone. I told Bruce that someone would meet us in Montgomery, and that we'd give him a ride to Fort Deposit. We didn't know when we might get to Montgomery, but we knew that it was our destination. This I told Ronnie, who said that they'd drive up from Evergreen and wait at to my grandparents' house at 25 East South Street in Montgomery. That would put them only five blocks from the bus station, and I promised further updates when possible.

I managed to call during one of our stops and let them know that we I should be coming into the Montgomery bus terminal about 2 AM, and that we'd really like it if someone could pick us up. Needless to say, Ronnie wasn't thrilled about being at that place at that time of day, and pressed for something more specific. It was the best I could do, I said, and I might or might not get the chance to call again. Our bus didn't stop on our command.

The bus rolled in just about on time, and nothing made me happier than to look out the window and see family! The rest of the night/morning was a blur. I know that we headed south, and I know that we dropped Bruce in Fort Deposit, but that is almost an etched scene rather than a real memory. I still had some fever, and I'll gladly lay the haze to my body's continued battle with infection. Fortunately our family physician, Dr. Yeargan, looked me over the next day and prescribed something that made me feel that whenever I talked, dust came out of my mouth. Whatever it was, it was good stuff, though, and the sinus infection succumbed.

After the trials and tribulations of separation and basic training, being at home with loved ones was heavenly. I didn't realize how heavenly until a conversation with my mother, who asked whether I recognized that I spent a lot of time walking around the house, picking up and examining things, then putting them down and moving on to others. I looked at everything, she noted, not just Christmas ornaments.