

# Birthdays

By Forrest Brandt

We stood with our sleds in front of us, seven boys in thick winter jackets, wool caps, scratchy scarves, and wet brown cotton gloves. The sky was proceeding to go from gray to black. The streetlights would begin to wink on in the next half hour. We took off one at a time, black rubber boots holding us steady on the packed snow that covered Malcome Drive, carrying our sleds in one hand for six or seven steps, pulling them up to our chests as we leaned forward and dove on top. Whoops and hollers escaped from our throats as we rode down the hill, steering toward the slickest spots, or away from the patches where the ice had been scraped from the blacktop.

The street flattened out just before Craig Drive entered on the right and so we'd break hard to the left and cut the ride short, preferring the faster run from the top.

My dad was waiting. "Come on, dinner's ready and everybody 's waiting on you."

I waved good bye to my friends and entered by the side door, the one that opened into the kitchen. The uncles and aunts were sipping beer, my grandparents held out their arms for hugs, while Mom put the bowl of peas on the table, "Serve yourselves," she said and turned back to the oven for the main course.

I have no memory of the meal, or if this was the birthday in which my birthday pie – always lemon meringue – showed up with a blue meringue – a grandmother's concession to her grandson's favorite color, but I do remember the grocery bag filled with model airplane kits Uncle Ray handed me. He must have emptied the stock at the local hobby shop. I wanted to run to the basement and start putting them together, but there was an unwritten house rule against that and so I sat and dealt with my anxiety until all the company was gone and it was time for me to get ready for bed.

I can't remember if I was in the eighth grade and turning 14, or in the seventh and turning 13. What I do remember is the snow, the sleds, and the gang – Greg and Gary, Phil, Wally, Jerry and Arnold and the bag of airplane kits. The images are so easy to see, even through the mists of decades. It is my strongest birthday memory.

Birthdays came and went. I remember getting my driver's license on my 16th thanks to driver's ed at high school. I remember my mom managing to surprise me on my 18th by throwing a pizza party for Ed and Sibyl and Ethel, my high school and first-year-of-college girlfriend. I remember my apartment mate, Ed Dierker taking me to the Blue Dube (Blue Danube) on High

Street for my first legal drink. We had to wait out the ten minutes between the time on the bar's clock and the real 12 o'clock before the bartender would serve me. He made up for it by buying my second legal drink.

There's a void between 21 and 26, but 26 comes into focus with ease.. I was a most unhappy 1st Lieutenant working in First Infantry Division headquarters, Lai Khe, South Vietnam. I'd been a couple of weeks without mail, not surprising since I wasn't writing much back to the states. February marked my 5th month in Nam, meaning I still had seven more to endure. My boss, Major Chick, a man who had rescued me from a bummer of an assignment with the First Signal Brigade in Long Binh and had given me a pretty free rein over a weekly radio show we put together for AFVN, was about to turn command of the office over to a lieutenant colonel I distrusted. These elements collided with a slow day in the office and the next thing I knew I was in the midst of a serious pity party.

I let the saga of poor me stories work their magic through lunch. I came back to find two letters – one from my parents and one from Uncle Ray, not exactly the people I wanted to hear from. I tore open the envelope from my parents – a hope-you-are-safe-hope-you-are-well – note in my mom's hand and a cheesy Hallmark message, "To a son on his birthday. I deep-sixed the card and envelope, grabbed Uncle Ray's envelope and my cap and headed out of the office. I walked along kicking the fine red dust of the basecamp, deciding to take a tour of the PX and see if there was anything good in stock – the Nikon, Cannon and Pentax cameras, and Pioneer, Sony, Kenwood and Panasonic stereo equipment never made to Lai Khe. Those most-sought-after items were picked off in Saigon and Long Binh along with Budweiser and Miller beer, Marlboros and Winston cigarettes. The troops in Lai Khe made do with Pabst Blue Ribbon and Park Lanes – the precursors to "generic."

Sure enough, the PX was empty of anything my wallet was burning to buy. I walked around letting the toxicity build and then ambled out to the gap in the perimeter wire where Highway 13 – Thunder Road – entered and exited the base. I considered going through the wire, walking outside the prison the basecamp had become in my mind. It was beyond stupid, but the notion that I would be free for a short space of time was compelling. I looked around, no one in sight, no guards posted that I could see, and then I decided to open Uncle Ray's card.

Uncle Ray survived Christmas chaos in the Ardennes, crossed the Rhine in a rubber boat only to be greeted by a German soldier who couldn't wait to surrender. "He had a Schmeizer machine pistol around his neck. He could have shot that rubber boat out from under us and we'd have all been swept downstream," he had once told me. Later his unit, the 99th Infantry Division, would be involved in opening two Nazi concentration camps and he would witness the horrors firsthand.

Now he remembered my birthday. “I can’t imagine you’re having a good time on this day. Maybe this will cheer you up.” Inside the card was a fifty-dollar bill, a greenback, forbidden currency in Vietnam where it would have fetched up to \$150 in Military Payment Certificates, MPC, the currency we were required to use in country. I reached for my wallet and quickly stuffed the bill into the secret compartment that lined it. It was now well hidden from my small stash of MPC bills.

I don’t know why the card and the bill turned my psyche around, but it did. I turned around from the perimeter and began to walk back to the office. Tomorrow Willy and Wayne, the two men who worked closest with me, and I would be on our way to Di An, the division’s rear base and from there we’d go to Long Binh and then down to Saigon to put the show together. We’d be busy, free from the by-the-regs lifestyle that permeated Lai Khe. My head was up, my back straight, and I walked with a lift in my step. “Happy Birthday,” I told myself.