

BRINGING DAD AND THE UNCLES HOME

By Forrest Brandt

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Christmas Eve 1951, I received a treasured gift, a Lionel, 6220 Diesel engine in Santa Fe markings. It soon found its place under the Christmas tree and has been there for many of the Christmases since.

In my eight-year-old mind the train had one mission, bring Dad and the uncles back from World War II, round and round it would go and I would peer into the windows of the passenger cars and see the faces of the GI's, happy to be homeward bound, happy that the war was over.

I'm now just short of my 76th birthday and my 6220 is still pulling cars full of soldiers, their duffle bags stacked neatly in the baggage car, their hearts full of Christmas anticipation.

In the first coach sits Uncle Cliff who drove a half-track with the 75th Infantry Division, and Uncle Ray, who crossed the Rhine in a rubber dingy to begin building a Bailey bridge across the rain-swollen Rhine with the 99th Infantry Division engineers.

Uncle Bobby traveled in style with Patton's van from Normandy, St. Lo, Falaise, Metz, Bastogne, into Aachen, through Germany and down into Austria, all while riding with the 59th Armored Artillery. Bobby is joking with Uncle-to-be, Bill Kozmar, the crazy, irreverent, Croatian. He fought with the Deadeyes of the 96th Infantry Division in the Philippines, before being wounded in Okinawa.

Dad joins in with Bill and his brothers. Last one drafted. he had the easy ticket – a brief tour in the Aleutians as a spotter for a Coast Artillery Battalion – then a year in Casablanca as an MP, dealing with drunks and AWOLs. He would be the last one picked up at Union Station on Ludlow Avenue in downtown Dayton, arriving home in April of '46.

In the second coach is my brother-in-law and Korean War tin-can sailor, Ken Rex. His ship, the Herbert J. Thompson, spent 1953 dueling with shore batteries along the North Korean coast.

I'm in this car too, riding home with my Vietnam buddies: Willy Johansen, Wayne Yeager, Beauchamp Carr, Steve Zurrow, Dominic Sondy, Kevin Redden, all from the First Infantry Division in Lai Khe. There's a gang next to us who worked at USARV – IO and another group from AFVN, guys Willy, Wayne and I worked with on a weekly basis. All of us determined to get home and "get back to normal."

There's a group of "kids" in the final car. Men and women who served during Desert Storm, in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the Balkans and deep in Africa and other places we seldom hear about, if at all. All of them now share the desire to be welcomed home.

So, I look into the windows as my faithful 6220 rolls by and I acknowledge all these veterans. I know the trip isn't as easy as it seems, that war leaves shadows across our lives and memories we'd just as soon forget, but as sure as my train will travel on, I know there's a "Welcome Home" at the end of the journey.