

A CHRISTMAS PIG

by

Doug Neralich

“I can tell you exactly what’s going on at home, Doc,” said Don Beardsley, his face taking on the angelic look of a small child. “The ding of the timer on the stove just sounded, and my Mom’s sweet voice just announced: ‘Cookies are done.’ Of course, she’s using her favorite calico potholders to handle the cookie sheets, while the long, white lace curtains in our kitchen window blow slowly in the breeze behind her.” He closed his eyes. “The Christmas cookies have just come out of the oven, and she’s using a spatula to transfer them to cooling racks that cover every inch of our kitchen table. I’m picking the one with the most chocolate chips. There’s nothing like the aroma. ‘Watch out, they’re hot’ she says, but I take a big bite anyway, savoring the soft, warm, gooey taste. The coarseness of the baked dough and the bittersweet flavor of the chocolate chips mixing with the sugary taste of cookie -- Mmm.”

BOOM! The not-too-distant crack of artillery fire snapped us back to reality.

Don’s eyes flew open.

“Outgoing,” I said quickly.

“Damn, right,” Don exploded, the expression on his face instantly changing from his pleasant daydream to the fierce anger of a soldier. “Where the hell are my cookies? If anyone messes with my damn chocolate chip cookies I’ll waste them for sure!” he growled.

“Calm down. Don’t sweat it,” I reassured. “Your Christmas cookies will get here.”

“It can’t be Christmas without my mom’s cookies,” he declared while waving a fist in the air. “Nobody but nobody makes better chocolate chip cookies than my Mom.” Don and I had been serving together in Vietnam for five months and regarded each other as brothers. Outwardly, he seemed to calm down, but I could tell that inside he was still fuming over why his promised Christmas package of treasured goodies from home was several days late.

“Jesus, Perez and the Wild Bunch next door are playing that damn Spic music again,” Don half snarled. “I’ll let them hear some real music.” He turned his Johnny Cash recording as loud as it could go.

I have great respect for Country and Western music, but Don played it constantly and a man can take *I Walk the Line* only so much. I ducked outside into the evening air. I wasn’t interested in eavesdropping, but it was impossible not to hear what was going on in Perez’s hootch next door. All eight men living in that hootch were Hispanic and they referred to their living quarters as Spic Heaven. We all called them the Wild Bunch because they were lighthearted, easygoing, usually loud in most things they did, and always doing crazy stuff. Once they all shaved their heads after Perez was disciplined because, by Army standards, his hair was too long. Perez was their ringleader and it was clear by listening to their conversation that he was holding court. “What about you, Rivera?” I heard Perez ask.

“My wife and I grew up together,” Rivera answered, “and last Christmas we got married right after my draft notice came. This is the first time in our lives that we won’t be together on Christmas Day.”

“My Aunt Alba and Uncle Jovel have a place right on the beach near San Juan, added Luis Linares, “and on Christmas day right after church, all the relatives come. We eat, dance, and sing. The little kids get presents and everything. In the afternoon my uncle cooks a pig, man—a whole pig. I wish I were going to be there. That roast pig is the best.”

“Hey! Let’s get some beer and shit, and we can roast a pig for Christmas,” Perez blurted out.

“Yeah! Why not!!” the others quickly agreed.

“We can get Luis to play his guitar,” Perez continued, “and have music and sing, and make a feast, a party, just like home!”

This sounded like a great idea to me, and I smiled in admiration and respect. They could easily do this. Many of the local Vietnamese farmers in the Mekong River Delta raised pigs. We saw pigs all the time in the villages along the road we were building. Collectively, I was sure they had enough money to buy a pig, plus food, beer, and everything else they needed for a Christmas celebration.

“I’ll kill the pig,” I heard Rivera volunteer. “I’ve done that many times with my uncle on his farm.”

The plan had potential and promise, but impromptu plans can run into trouble over the details.

“Hey, I heard you can get sick from eating bad pork,” Nicky Perlas chimed in. “We don’t know what the Gooks been feeding these pigs. How can we tell if the pig is okay? I mean, this place ain’t like back home, and we don’t want to get sick from eating bad meat.”

“Hey! We should go next door to ask the Doc about this. Maybe he knows,” Perez yelled while heading for the door.

They knew I was not a real doctor. But they also knew in civilian life I had been a teacher, and I was the senior medical corpsman in the battalion. They rushed next door to see me.

“Doc! Hey, Doc,” Perez shouted as he saw me standing outside. His face was electric with excitement. “We want to get a pig and roast him for Christmas. You know, over an open fire like we do at home. We’re going to try to buy one from one of the Gook farmers, and we need to know how you can tell if a pig is healthy enough to cook and eat. Can you tell us what to look for?”

I am sure I looked a little puzzled as the questions raced through my mind. *How do you know if a pig is safe to eat? How can you tell? How would you give a pig a physical exam? What questions would you ask if you took a pig’s medical history? Did he have a happy piglet hood? Did he have the usual piglet diseases?*

After a few seconds of thought, I shrugged and answered: “Damn. I really don’t know.”

“You’re a teacher and a Doc and you don’t know that?” Rivera’s face was filled with disbelief.

I stiffened. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard statements like that, but I responded politely. “People assume that teachers know everything and have encyclopedic minds with all of the known facts in the universe neatly arranged in our heads. I wasn’t raised on a farm, but I do know that pork can carry worms that cause trichinosis. What you guys need is a veterinarian. Let’s ask the Battalion Surgeon about it tomorrow. I’ll help you any way I can, but I don’t know the answer to your question.”

“Thanks, Doc,” said Perez as he turned to catch the group of men who were drifting back to their hootch, still jabbering about the pig.

Army regulations did not allow for animals to be kept in the battalion area, and the Army was intolerant when it came to bending or breaking regulations. Perez and the bunch organized a covert operation that the CIA would have envied. They begged permission from various sergeants, officers, and the Battalion Commander to buy a pig and keep it in the company area for a few days before Christmas.

I took them to see the Battalion Surgeon and through him they discovered there was an Army veterinarian in Saigon. They pressured and connived until they gained access to restricted communications equipment and contacted him. He was very cooperative, and,

although the veterinarian wouldn't travel to our base camp, he gave them all the relevant facts they needed concerning healthy pigs. One of the most important indicators of a pig's health turned out to be its temperature. If the pig had a temperature within certain limits, it would be okay to slaughter, cook, and eat.

In addition to risking our lives every day in a combat zone, we worked twelve hours or more every day, seven days a week either at road and bridge building or activities to support it. Some nights there was the added burden of guard duty, and dealing with fatigue and sleep deprivation was endemic. Any break from that routine we could get was worth its weight in gold, and rumors, circulating in the battalion about not working on Christmas Day, had reached epic proportions. Just before morning formation for roll call, Boss "*The Bookie*" Mitchell was doing a booming business taking bets about how much time the battalion would have off for Christmas. Boss would organize a betting pool over just about anything. He had made a small fortune during the World Series. "Who wants part of this action?" he asked. "Any takers? Two-to-one we get half a day off on Christmas Eve and all day on Christmas."

I heard a number of men taking that bet.

"Hey, Doc. I'm going to come see you later. We need a favor," Perez half whispered, just before the First Sergeant called everyone into formation.

Soon after we were assembled in formation and called to attention the Company Commander addressed us. "Men!" he rumbled. "You've been working hard. We are so pleased with the progress the battalion has made that we are going to work a half day on Christmas Eve and have off all day on Christmas."

All around me the men were cheering and whooping it up.

"All right a day and a half," I said to Don.

"Damn Right!" he replied, a big grin breaking across his face.

"Come on. Pay up," growled Boss, collecting on his bets after the formation was dismissed.

I ran to conduct sick call.

It was late that afternoon, when I looked up from the small laceration I was suturing to see Don's beaming face as he stood in the doorway of the Aid Station.

"They're here! God damn it! They're here!" he shouted. In his hands he held a cardboard box, and I knew immediately that it contained Momma Beardsley's chocolate chip cookies.

"My Mom even packed them in popcorn so they wouldn't break," he continued. "This other package is for you along with these three letters. With all the mail you get, Doc, it's a wonder there's space for anyone else's mail."

I carefully finished suturing my patient, and quickly devoured the news in the three letters from my wife. The mail was like that. It was either feast or famine. Since they arrived in bunches, my wife and I numbered our letters so we would always know which one to read first, second, third and so forth. Then, I popped open the package. The assortment of cheeses and crackers from my Uncle Milton and Aunt Sylvia I found inside made the smile on my face even broader.

I looked over Don's shoulder and saw Perez, Rivera, and Nicky pull up in front of the Aid Station in a small truck. They were really chewing the fat in Spanish as they walked inside.

"It's getting close to Christmas. What's new with the pig?" I asked.

Nicky, not wanting to pig foot around with their problem, blurted it out. "It's this way. We got a pig in the truck, Doc. As you know, that veterinarian up in Saigon said we could cook and eat him if he has the right temperature. Can you take his temperature for us?"

Everyone in the Aid Station fell silent. I didn't know whether to laugh or get angry. These men were my friends. They faced the same dangers, ate the same food, and were trying to

survive their tours of duty just like me. Those were some heavy bonds. I gulped hard. “I said I’d help you any way I can, and a promise is a promise!” I replied, as I grabbed some surgical gloves, gauze, and a rectal thermometer, and sauntered outside. There, tied in the back of their truck was a large grunting animal with pinkish bristly skin and big black splotches.

“He’s a great pig, eh, Doc?” asked Nicky.

“Yeah. Just like Porky Pig in the cartoons,” I answered, as I picked up the curly little tail.

I wasn’t hog wild about what needed to be done. I stood in the company street—son, husband, father, teacher—in front of God, Ho Chi Minh, and Lord knows who else, and took a Vietnamese pig’s temperature. I always had good rapport with my patients, but I was unsure about my sty-side manner. *How does one establish a social or working relationship with a pig? What do you talk about? How much do you like the feel of a football? Hog futures?* I had a sudden vision of waving football players looking into a TV camera and saying, “Hi, Mom!”

“If my mom could only see me now,” I chuckled, as I stared at the wrong end of the barnyard beast. The pig was good-natured and did not seem to mind what I was doing.

After a few moments, I read the thermometer and turned to Perez. “It looks like you are going to have roast pig for Christmas dinner,” I announced amidst cheers.

It was 0530 hours a few days later on Christmas morning. As usual, my internal alarm clock went off and I was instantly wide-awake. “Merry Christmas,” I whispered to the small picture of my wife, Donna, tacked on the wall next to my bunk. She looked beautiful in her white wedding gown with the veil pushed back on her dark hair. She never grew tired of studying the bouquet of delicate white and yellow daisies held in her hand. After a short while, I could look no more. She and the flowers were not reality. They were a world away. “It’s a beautiful morning to be in Vietnam,” I jokingly droned, as I got up to check the rifles in the weapons cabinet. I glanced outside and listened. No artillery or small arms fire. No helicopter blades insulting the air. All I could hear was the gentle snoring of some of my hootch mates.

“Merry Christmas, Sarge!” I yelled to the mess sergeant on my way to open the Aid Station. A mental image of Jimmy Stewart running through the streets of Bedford Falls in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* suddenly flashed through my mind. After an hour no patients had arrived for sick call, and my thoughts turned to the pig. “*I wonder how Wilbur is doing this morning?*” I had named the pig Wilbur after the pig in the story *Charlotte’s Web*, and had been feeding and watering him for the last two days. I secretly hoped that Wilbur wouldn’t have to be killed. I closed the Aid Station and rounded the corner of a hootch only to see Perez, Nicky, and Rivera already standing over Wilbur’s lifeless body. There was blood on Rivera’s pants, but no trace of crimson on the knife.

“Jesus! You did it already,” I half stammered.

“Yeah, Doc. You gotta be fast with the knife,” Rivera replied. They had dug a hole in the ground for the entrails, and my own insides felt emptier than a spent M16 round as I hurried away.

The party started in the late afternoon, and, because I had helped the Wild Bunch, I was honored with an invitation. The aroma of the roasting pig and the music drew in the entire company. In the spirit of Christmas each new arrival would be invited to stay. I watched as these new invitees would disappear and return with prized foods they had received from home. It turned into a spirited affair with Spanish songs and drinking, and joking and drinking, that lasted into the night. Men left to relieve their friends on guard duty so they too could enjoy the Christmas pig and the festivities.

“Merry Christmas! Some party. Eh, Doc?” Perez was all smiles. “Did you have any of the pig, Doc? He is delicious.”

“No, not yet,” I replied. “Maybe I’ll have some in a few minutes.” I did not have the heart to eat Wilbur. *I hope you’re in hog heaven, Wilbur*, I thought to myself.

At the end of the evening on the makeshift table that Perez and the Bunch had made for the party, among the remnants of local pineapples and melons, home-baked brownies, fruit breads, and fudge, were the wrappers from my cheeses. Sitting right next to them was an empty plate we got from the mess hall that had held all of Don’s prized chocolate chip cookies.

Nicky strummed his guitar and started to sing Christmas carols. There was a moment of peace and hope in the Nam as the air filled with the voices of young men far from home. We sang *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*, *Jingle Bells* and finally *Silent Night*.

I watched and listened with a sense of awe and a longing for home, as Don, Nicky, Rivera, and fifty or more men stood and sang as friends and brothers. With my eyes turned upward toward the black Vietnamese sky, I softly murmured, “God bless these men, Father, every one of them.”

Many people look forward to having time off. Sometimes it can be for rest and relaxation and other times for rehabilitation or recuperation.

- Why did the soldiers look forward to having some time off ?
- Why is it important for all of us to have time off?
- How is your time off similar to that of the soldiers in the story?

Dealing with the death, grief and mourning is always difficult.

- Why was Doc so upset when Wilbur was killed?
- How have you handled similar events in your life?

The way the author described the “Wild Bunch” they sounded like a very interesting group of young men.

- How did the “Wild Bunch” get their name?
- Why did the “Wild Bunch” want Doc to take Wilbur’s temperature?
- Why did the “Wild Bunch” want to roast a pig?
- What group of family members or friends would you describe as similar to the “Wild Bunch?”

Most people regard teachers as being intelligent people who know a great deal.

- In the next to the last paragraph on Page 2, why was Doc annoyed by something one of the men said?
- How would you classify the majority of teachers you have had during your years in school?
- Why would you want/ not want “Doc” to be your teacher?

Many people make promises. Sometimes those commitments are kept and sometimes they are forgotten.

- Why did Doc keep his word to the Wild Bunch?
- Why is keeping your word and not breaking promises you have made important to you?