

A Soldier Talks

Five letters and a Christmas memory - Leon Sack

After 46 years, Leon Sack received a letter that reminded him of a special Christmas gift from long ago. In 1966, 11-year-old Barbara Hood (Duffy) received an assignment from her sixth grade teacher, Charlotte Hogan. Her class was asked to write a letter to an unknown soldier stationed in Vietnam.

When Master Sergeant Leon Sack went to the post office to pick up mail for his crew, the attendant told him about a group of letters received from school children back in the States and asked if he was interested in taking some of them.

Sack took seven, one for himself and each member of his crew. Back at the barracks, he distributed the letters and for a time the men were transported away from the battle zone by these unexpected letters from home. Sack later wrote to Barbara, "In a combat environment, two of the biggest enemies of any soldier are loneliness and fear. As we sat and read the letters, for a short time, these two enemies disappeared."

Sack and his comrades were members of the First Combat Evaluation Group and stationed in Dong Ha the northernmost outpost in South Vietnam only six miles from the demilitarized zone and six miles from the Gulf of Tonkin. His job was to direct bombers to targets in North Vietnam and evaluate the success of bombing runs.

The First Combat Evaluation Group had the distinction of having the highest number of casualties per capita of any ground based Air Force Unit in Vietnam. "The fact is we were constantly under siege," said Sack, "Always in peril. It was pretty nerve wracking."



Christmas was a particularly vulnerable time for the soldiers.

Sack remembers, "Christmas was bad because I couldn't be home with the wife and kids. Christmas dinner was whatever we could scrounge. One year they called a truce on Christmas day and we were all playing pinochle at noon, when all hell broke loose."

The children's letters were a ray of sunshine in a frightening existence. They were shared among Sack and his friends and faithfully answered. "When we sat and read the letters and it was like we were kids again. For a couple of hours we really forgot where we were at. It is my happiest memory of Vietnam," Sack said. Sack told Barbara about his life and his own family with six daughters.

He went on to serve three tours of duty in Southeast Asia., two in Vietnam and one in Thailand. He was touched by the children's letters but, over time, they became a distant memory and he didn't save Barbara's missive, a fact he would later regret.

In January 2012, he got the surprise of a lifetime when he received an envelope containing his original letter of reply to Barbara including the original envelope with free postage. It also contained a letter of reply from Barbara.

Barbara was now a grown woman with a career and a family of her own.

She came across Sack's letter in a box of mementos and decided to return the 1966 letter to her soldier. Barbara sent it off to an address she found on the internet, but the envelope was returned as undeliverable. Then she remembered Sack's wife's name was Ouida and looked for an address for Ouida Sack in the area around Apalachicola. That's how she located the Sack's Eastpoint home.

Barbara wrote to Sack, "Throughout the years, I have often wondered what became of those brave souls who received our letters. Then very recently, I came across that letter I had carefully packed away decades ago. It is my hope that I am returning it to its author. I hope the years have been kind to you and yours. Mostly I wanted to let you know that your efforts so far away and long ago did not go unnoticed by a schoolgirl who grew up with a better appreciation for life."

"It really sent me back," said Sack. "It kind of got to me a little bit."

Sack wrote back to Barbara thanking her.

"When I received your letter, I had no idea what to expect," Sack wrote. "After reading its content, I was overwhelmed, amazed, humbled and pleased. For the second time in 46 years, I have received a letter from you that has completely brightened my day and confirmed my belief that there are still wonderful people in the world."

Barbara replied to Sack's second letter that, in her life only twice had she been "happily devastated into tears." The first time was when she danced at her son's wedding and the second was receiving Sack's letter in 2012.

Barbara related the story of one of her classmates, Debbie James, who had also written to an unknown soldier and asked him to send her something from Vietnam. On opening the reply to her letter, dirt poured from the envelope.

"Dirt was apparently the only thing readily available," wrote Barbara. "She scooped it up and saved it as if it were gold."

Sack said he hopes to meet Barbara someday, but for now, simply knowing she exists, brightens his world.

