

FORT CARSON SNOWMAN
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I did not go home for Christmas in 1968. This was during the year I spent at Fort Carson. Fort Carson is where they sent returnees from Vietnam, mostly draftees having about six months left. Also those like myself lucky enough to be injured early and sent home. I did not go home for Christmas because I had just come back from leave. My best army buddy was killed late in November. I learned this when his mother called my father who called my CO. I had only met Mac's mother once, just for a few minutes at the Oakland airport before we began our 17-hour flight across the Pacific, but I'd recently spent much of a week driving north each day from San Jose to Mac's house in Concord. There I would spend the day sitting with his mother, trying to console her with talk and stories, looking at her family pictures and, finally, at the funeral, standing in infantry blues at the head of the coffin as if a living, surrogate son. Recently back from that leave in early December, maybe I did not mind spending time alone.

With so many soldiers home on Christmas leave, there remained only skeleton crews manning the fort and holding it together, so there was little real work to do. Of course, this was still the Army so there was make-work during the day. And somebody had to pull guard duty or be on KP. So I hid out in my arms room, cleaning guns, or otherwise preparing for whatever inspection there was sure to be after Christmas. But evenings were free to read or watched TV. Maybe there was something on the news about President-Elect Nixon's secret plan for getting out of Vietnam, or maybe Goldie Hawn would pop out of a corn field on Hee-Haw. This winter was also my first prolonged experience with snow.

One evening, fresh Colorado snow lay between the

barracks. Most everybody being somewhere elsewhere, few remained to trample the snow. I decided to build a snowman. It was not to be a fancy snowman. No corn cob pipe. No hat. No carrot nose. And it was not to be a large snowman as the snow I had to work with was not very deep. But I managed to roll up in the traditional way three balls of dry Colorado fluff and set them on top of each other. That night, I read or watched TV and went to bed as usual. Next morning, as usual, I went out the door for the much smaller reveille formation. Instantly, I saw vandals had knocked over my snowman.

So of course I repaired it. I ranged farther afield that day and gathered more handfuls of the fresh and sparse snow, and with that and the scavanged corpse, I built a new one, somewhat larger. My snowman remained safe during the light of day and even through the long winter evening. But the next morning, same story. My snowman lay toppled.

A third time I set to repairing my snowman. I abandoned any notion of maintaining a true snowman shape. It was to be a simple pillar this time, easier to pile up, easier to reinforce with sprinkles of water to freeze in the cold night. Next morning, my snow pillar lay not only toppled, but trampled.

Now, I am dedicated. All my spare time goes to tending my snow pillar. I fill a variety of small containers, mostly empty coffee cans painted red. In Army jargon, these are called cigarette butt cans. I filled the butt cans with cold tap water and set them outside for further cooling. Throughout the day and during evening program breaks and commercials, I ran outside to add slushy dabs of snow and dribbles of ice water to the growing stalagmite. This was a slow process, a learning process for a California boy. Ice needs time to cool down below the freezing point, else the new water melts the old and all just runs off onto the ground. So my pillar was never destined to be huge. It was never

more than about chest or neck high. But any fresh coat of lightly fallen snow easily concealed its durable nature.

I had established my ice making operation in the company day room. Including the arms and supply rooms, the CO's and clerk's offices, this was all one long low gray wooden building, and this is where the TV was located. My sleeping barracks with the ice pillar to one side, lay a few dozen steps across the open company area used for reveilles and formations, all that standing in rows and columns. Sometime during the late-evening news, I saw movement through the blinds of the day room window. In the dark, but lit by incandescent bulbs and windows and bright snow, and across a thin layer of new fluff, a rotund staff sergeant ran at full arm-pumping charge. The instant he was to deliver his combat boot to my snowman, the beefy sergeant slipped, kicked wildly at the sky, then landed flat on his back, an unintentional snow angel. Somehow, he did not seem to have hurt himself. The sergeant picked himself up and limped away into the dark. My snow pillar stood proud.

But I added no more dabs and dribbles to my snowman that night. The sergeant's five stripes easily intimidated my three, and I was more than a little afraid he might have injured himself.

But there was little need for that worry. Next morning, first thing, I checked outside. My Fort Carson snowman lay dispersed, in scattered chunks and pieces, one long guilty 2x4 laid across the icy rubble.