Christmas Eve Reflections

It’s hard to believe that another Christmas is upon us. Christmas is a special time of year, a time of peace, love and sharing. Christmas isn’t a day off for many in our communities; the number of people that have to work to keep things going might surprise you. Police officers, fire fighters, nurses and doctors, just to name a few, work over the holidays to keep everyone safe and sound. I guess I see these folks in a special light because my first Christmas off was in 2002. That was the first Christmas in 27 years that I did not have to go out and feed calves, milk the cows, or clean the barns.

Our livestock owning farmers are out this morning and will be again tomorrow morning to keep this nation’s robust food chain in gear. They do so with no fanfare and little appreciation so I ask you to join me in a brief moment of remembrance and thanksgiving for the people on the front lines of agriculture.

Farmers are very much akin to our military. They sacrifice a great deal to help drive a cause that is greater than any one individual. There are benefits to be sure. Some of my most vivid memories of Christmas Eves past includes driving around the dry cow lot (a dairy farm’s maternity ward) looking over the fields for newborn Christmas calves. One night is particular stands out. I cannot recall what year it was but the night was crisp and cold and driving around the fields a silvery snow flurry set in to set the mood perfectly. I had my own personal 40 acre snow globe….magical.

All this history is one of the reasons I feel very strongly about taking time during the Christmas season to productively use my time in service to others. When you have been as blessed as I have been in the past 59 Christmases, it’s hard to sit back and not do something even on Christmas Day. This season will be a little different because of my right foot fracture.

I usually like to ring the bell for the Salvation Army and VFW Post #4667 Red Kettle Campaign but my driving is limited. I want everyone to know that while we may be MIA, there will be VFW members and volunteers out today donating their time to help others on this last day of the campaign.

I would like to take a few moments to remember one special friend and VFW member, Jack Wheeler. You may not have ever met my dear friend Jack, but if you did you certainly cannot forget him. Jack was a gentle, kind spirit who loved children and had a great message about our power of Nation’s ability to feed ourselves. Years ago, I wrote an article about Jack for our Virginia State Dairyman’s magazine. Please consider the sharing of Jack’s story as my present to you.

Growing up in the Smyth County town of Chilhowie, Jack was a member of what Tom Brokaw calls "The Greatest Generation." Like many of his day, Jack is a veteran of World War II and he went through some dark, serious times as part of his service as a tanker in Mark Clark's Armored Division.

It was as a member of that invading army in Italy that Jack’s most horrible memories came to be. “You spent as much time out of the tank as you possibly could. They were real death traps,” Jack spoke of the relatively light Sherman tanks in which he served. Shells and fragments that penetrated the light armor would ricochet inside the turret ripping the crew to shreds. “In 1944, I spent a lot of time in foxholes, days and weeks at a time. Most of that time I was at least knee deep in water. I went days without dry clothes. I couldn’t change my socks—everything I had was soaked. I had terrible sores on my feet, but we just couldn’t do any better.”

Adding to Jack’s misery was the death of his longtime friend and first cousin, Charles R. “Buddy” Hankla, also of Chilhowie. Buddy and Jack had enlisted together and served together until Buddy’s death. Jack’s voice cracked with emotion as he recalled Buddy’s death. “Buddy was shot and died in my arms. One of the hardest things I did in the war was burying my cousin.”

One of the members of Jack’s crew was a school bus driver from Osmond, Nebraska named Friel. Shortly after burying Buddy, Friel and Jack were pinned down in their foxhole for four straight days. They spent those four days with little water, less rest, and NO food. “We had nothing, not even a C ration. Those were hard times; we were so hungry we didn’t know if we could make it. A lot of the fellas made promises in those foxholes, but I have to say proudly that Friel and I have kept our promise for over 57 years. We pledged to each other that if we were delivered from that battle that we would never complain about what we had to eat for the rest of our lives.”

“You can ask my wife Lula, over the years I have had the pleasure to enjoy good health and three square meals a day. Some of those meals I liked more than others. Some just weren’t that tasty, but I ate every meal like it was the best thing I had ever had. They were all good to me. I kept my promise. I remembered to be thankful. I ate anything my wife fixed and was truly thankful to have it.”

I think about Jack and his story whenever I am cold or feel down. No matter how bad things are, someone is having a worse day. It’s hard to feel sorry for yourself if you think about Jack and all the other soldiers who suffered under some pretty tough circumstances. Life is what you make it and we are fortunate to live in a country where we have the ability to cut our own furrow.

Jack and Lula aren’t with us anymore, but they live on in my heart. If you are looking for something to do this Christmas or next, perhaps you might consider giving your time….time as a volunteer or just being a friend. The greatest gift is the gift of friendship, sharing your time and talents with others…especially if they are having a bad day. Have a very Merry Christmas friends!

Upcoming Events

Jan 10, 2023 January VQA Sale

Jan 16 VQA Steer Take Up

Jan 18 VQA Heifer Take Up

Jan 24 VFGC Winter Conference, Wytheville

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at (276) 783-5175/TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.

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