

WINTER QUARTERS

by Bishop Jerry L. Ogles, Nov 11, 2003

A gentle breeze stirred the golden leaves of a tall Maple tree and softly caressed the cheek of the old man. Old Charlie slowly aroused from a light slumber to find a red poppy in his hand where some kind soul had placed it while he was dozing. A faded Afghan covered his lap and feet on which the barely discernible imprint of da Vinci's Last Supper could be discovered.

Old Charlie enjoyed sitting out on the lawn of the nursing home in his wheelchair where he could smell the grass and natural fragrances of God's good earth. He loved to soak up the warmth of the sun on slightly brisk, clear days.



Charlie was an old soldier - there are no former soldiers, just soldiers who grow older and older. Charlie had experienced all the terror of the Great World War Two, having arrived on the Ardennes Forest Line with the Ninth US Army just as the major breakout attempt was staged by a mad dictator and his very deadly armor. Snow covered the grounds of the Ardennes that day in December, 1944, when the lines of the Allied powers were thrown back as German Tigers breached the defenses. Charlie remembers those days of horror and misery. He remembers each of his comrades and their names who shared that experience. Though his memory is fading, he can recite every significant detail of the German offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge. The old man feels guilty somehow that he seems to be the only one left who remembers that great Battle and the reason he helped fight it. As a matter of fact, Charlie feels like a straggler. It seems all his familiar comrades who shared in his wartime experiences have been reassigned and shipped out. Only Charlie remains. He feels like a straggler; in a way, Charlie is just that. He has outlived his value to a society which has forgotten how to be grateful. The character and courage of his generation is passé to our current politically-correct mind-set.

Charlie sometimes relives his military experience in episodes of vivid dreams which come to him as angels on soft snow. He remembers his friend Roy Soloff from New Jersey who spent his post war years restoring sight to the blind. Roy transferred out earlier this year.....

The Old Man wonders about Roy and what he is doing this very moment. Roy understood, but Roy is not here anymore to share the hard fought battles of a long ago dream. Through the mist of Time, Charlie can see all their smiling faces. Funny how we remember our friends always smiling.

More and more, Charlie feels moments of deep sorrow. He doesn't know why he feels this way, but he cannot help it. His eyes dim with the mist of tears. But no one is there to ask, "Charlie, why are you crying?" Everyone else is so very, very busy.

The pride and joy of Charlie's present life are his two sons and five daughters but it seems that, though they try ever so hard, they never are able to get the free time to come and visit their old father. If Molly Darling was here, she would comfort him. She would know just the right words to make him know that all was well with the world and with Charlie - only, his Darling Molly is not here. She has gone on and left Charlie. Charlie remembers that old Song: 'Do You Love Me Molly Darling.' That was the theme song adopted by him and Molly during their courting days. And he remembers the days of his youth when the world was green with life and promise, and when he met Molly Collins. That was a kind of love that never dies. He was the only man Molly ever knew and cared to know. Charlie still possessed the heart of Molly wherever she was.

When the war came, Charlie went. He left his dear Molly and two small children. Molly remained his steadfast supporter across those thousands of miles of blue waters.

The Old Man recalled the military sounds of armor and jeeps, of Ruffles and Flourishes, commands shouted during company drill, the crisp and certain notes of the bugle sounding across the Parade Ground. He recalled the crisp starch of newly laundered khakis and the laboriously achieved sparkle of spit shined shoes. Those were days when the air itself was pristine and clean. But now, the drums are muffled and the bugle no longer sounds. Where did it all go? For many years after the war, there were Veterans Day Parades - and Charlie was always invited.

But those days have gone glimmering. No one seems to remember or care about what Charlie did in those days more than half a century ago or even remember the names of the Battles fought to make certain our Freedoms of today.

The late afternoon air took on a bit a chill as Charlie slumbered again. As he closed his eyes, all the color and drama of the years again played in his mind's eye. Somewhere, very far away, Charlie heard the bugle again and the muffled beat of the drum. The old familiar sounds grew louder and more persistent. What was the call? Ah, yes, it was Taps. And once again, Charlie found himself on the banks of the river as his unit was preparing to make the Roer River crossing, but this time, Charlie is crossing alone. Where are all the others? Charlie descends into the murky waters of the River and feels very weak and almost unable to carry on. When he feels he can go no further, the waters seem more shallow and calm under his boots. His feet are light and easy. His breath comes naturally and unlabored, and now Charlie sees all his old comrades coming to meet him at the River's far bank. Roy, Joe, Needham, Pallone and all the others. Even Molly is there. How was she ever able to arrange it! The Jordan Waters part in God's time.

The bugle continued to play its crisp notes, but Charlie had been mistaken - the call was not Taps, it was Reveille!

"My Sword, I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my Courage and Skill, to him that can get it. My Marks and Scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought His Battles who now will be my Rewarder. When the day that he must go hence, was come, many accompanied him to the river side, into which, as he went, he said, Death where is thy sting? And as he went down deeper, he said, Grave, where is thy Victory? So he passed over, and the Trumpets sounded for him on the other side." *John Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress*

God bless all our Veterans today and forever.