



# HOPE ON CHRISTMAS Twenty Years Ago

By Monroe S. Miller

My Christmas Day in 1969 dawned bright and clear. And hot. I will remember those things as long as I'm alive, along with the memory of what was easily my most sad Christmas.

I was alone that day and over 10,000 miles from home. And I was in a combat zone. I was lonesome for my folks and my sisters and my brother. I was lonesome for Wisconsin. Most of all, I was ill with loneliness for my wife and my new daughter — a daughter born while I was stationed at Long Binh, Vietnam. I hadn't even seen her. The words to describe the misery I was feeling that Christmas season aren't in my vocabulary.

Yet it was Christmas. My whole life I've loved the holiday with all of my being, the guy who starts listening to Christmas albums and does Christmas shopping **before** Thanksgiving. Those feelings are sincere, and despite my misery of that season in 1969, I wanted to make the best of it.

Our Army post had some good fortune that Christmas, good fortune that was going to help me make it through the day. Bob Hope was coming to camp! Like every American GI going back to 1941 who received the news that Hope was coming to see him, I was filled to the brim with excitement and anticipation of seeing him.

All of us stationed at Long Binh waited for Hope's schedule. His first stop was Lai Khe to our north, headquarters of the First Infantry Division. From there his troupe went to Cu Chi, a Vietnamese town near the Cambodian border 20 miles northwest of Saigon and nearly straight west of Long Binh. The 25th Infantry Division was stationed at Cu Chi. Everybody in our Military Police Unit was reading the *Pacific Stars & Stripes* each day to keep up-to-date on Hope's show. From there the gang went back to their base in Bangkok before heading to the DMZ and Camp Eagle to entertain the 101st Airborne Division.

Hope's show always went on, despite some terrible weather at times,

usually very heavy tropical rain and high winds. And the GIs were always there. The weather didn't matter. From Camp Eagle, Hope traveled south to Freedom Hill at Da Nang and gave 20,000 Marines a Christmas they'd never forget.

We were next, and I could hardly wait. Since I was in an MP outfit, we'd been given the assignment of security for the Hope show. Long Binh had an amphitheater that the engineers had built when the post was carved out of the Asian countryside. It had a rudimentary outdoor stage, a flat area resembling a playing field in front of the stage which had benches covering it, and steep, sloping seating on three sides. It looked like a small horseshoe-shaped football stadium.

After the Da Nang show, Hope was back to Thailand for a performance before the Thai royalty and the two other shows for American servicemen stationed in Thailand. Then it was to his final show of the Christmas season of 1969 in Vietnam — Long Binh. We were ready. Finally he was coming to see us.

The GIs were gathered early. There wasn't anything as sophisticated as tickets — the Bob Hope Christmas Show was for any GI of any rank who could steal away to watch. The outdoor amphitheater filled fast. MPs were actually working to keep a rowdy bunch of soldiers under control. Those who couldn't get a seat climbed powerline poles, sat on the roofs of the few permanent buildings around and even congregated in the area to hear what they maybe couldn't see.

As soon as I heard and saw two big Army Chinook choppers moving in fast, I knew the show was going on for sure. The helicopters hold about 40 people each, so you knew we were going to have some real professional entertainment.

What a show! Mr. Hope brought along Neil Armstrong, the world's first man on the moon. Boy, were we proud of that guy. Bob's sex symbol of the

tour was Romy Schneider and his singer was Connie Stevens, one of my favorites of that era. The Goldfingers were with him — a dozen gorgeous dancing girls in very brief outfits! Les Brown and his "Band of Renown" provided the music. Teresa Graves from the Rowan and Martin Laugh-in TV show was there. Suzanne Charney, a popular singer-dancer of the time, and Miss World, Eva Reuber-Starej, added a lot of scenery to the show.

They drove the American boys there that hot afternoon absolutely wild with joy and happiness, me among them. Hope was his usual witty self, propped up with his golf club. It was unforgettable to us.

Hope wrote years later that the Long Binh performance was one he wouldn't soon forget, either. Just before he wrapped the show up with his "Thanks For The Memory", the OIC (Officer In Charge) came to him and asked, "How long will it take you fellows to get your stuff loaded and to move out?" Bob remembers the cool detachment of the question.

"What's your hurry?" he asked.

"Well," the commander replied, "there's a fire fight coming in here. It's only a couple of miles away and moving in fast."

That did it for Hope and his troubadours. They were loaded onto the Chinooks and out of there in 15 minutes. Damn the VC and NVA — they even spoiled the end of our Christmas show.

I felt good on the ride back to our hooch. I was still lonely and still sad, but at least with a feeling that someone from home cared about all of us. "Bless Bob Hope forever," I thought.

Reality returned quickly the next day — back to the work of soldiering. But I got a belated present a couple of days after the show. In the dead of the night I was awakened with a "Get up, Miller, get up."

I cannot repeat my response, but it was not polite. "Get up, you idiot," Sergeant Worozonik said. "You're going home!"

I was wide awake instantly and out of the rack in one bound.

"You've been assigned two prisoners from the Long Binh stockade and have to deliver them for their life prison sentences to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. From Kansas you can fly home and see your family for a few days."

Escorting prisoners from a combat zone back through Japan and Travis AFB, through several public airports and finally to Leavenworth, all without a weapon, is a long story in itself. The main thing was that I was going home. Right after Christmas. I was going to see my sweetheart and my new baby girl.

Well, needless to say, it was one of those things in your life that you can never forget — loneliness to joy with just the utterance of a few lines. "You are going home."

But there is more. I got home in time to see the Bob Hope Christmas Show on television. In those days, this program was a collection of clips from each of his stops entertaining troops overseas. And yes, there was Long Binh, where I had been only a few days

ago. The show captured all the joy this great man had given to so many of us.

I've thought about Bob Hope hundreds of times since that Christmas 20 years ago, usually trying to figure out why he meant so much to guys like myself in those circumstances.

The most obvious is that he brought laughter to men who needed to laugh, but just couldn't. His sense of humor always brought roars — he picked on the famous, on the conditions of the times, on the attitudes of the day.

His energy was boundless and infective. If you heard, "Hope is coming on Saturday," Hope was there. You could count on him. There were a lot of people at that time in America who couldn't be counted on to support the Americans in Asia.

For GIs of my time, a time of anti-war protests and abandonment, Bob Hope was reassurance that we were right in accepting the call to our country's service. Few others said it like he did. We believed him. He brought new strength and unity to those outfits he entertained at Christmas.

And I guess I felt special kinship with

him because of the ever present golf club. He was one of us who loved golf for lots of different reasons. His monologues always had some references to golf. I loved him for that.

I have seen Bob Hope a number of times since that Christmas 20 years ago. He's been to Madison for homecoming at the University. I've watched him play golf with Arnold Palmer at the Bay Hill Classic in Orlando a couple of times. And I was thrilled when the GCSAA presented him with the Old Tom Morris Award and more thrilled yet when he came to accept it in person. Bob Hope is simply a great American.

My story wouldn't be complete if I didn't tell you that the little girl whom I got to see on my surprise trip home is a grown woman now. In fact, Cheryl and I are melancholy this Christmas because Amy isn't home. She's spending her entire year as a University of Wisconsin student in Europe, studying at the University of Provence-Aix in the south of France. I really miss her.

Just like I did that Christmas, 20 years ago.

## *From one professional to another...*

