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**When
the Sun
Comes Up
In the Desert**

309-A

**Series: Fictional Stories:
A Christmas Story**

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When the Sun Comes Up in the Desert

The intensity of the blistering heat made life almost unbearable. Like a reflective mirror, the desert floor caught the sun's normally friendly rays and sent them careening into the atmosphere magnified into a blazing inferno.

The wind, rather than bringing the sweet relief it was expected to provide, only caught up swirls of blinding sand in its fist and threw them with fierceness against the faces of all who dared to look up into its wrath. From east to west, sand was all you could see. Just outside the make-shift village of khaki tents were lines of tanks, roughly disguised by camouflaged netting. Young men, many of whom looked more like they belonged at a high school prom than a war, walked nervously about.

The word was out that a deadline was nearing. Either a truce would be signed or all-out hostilities were imminent. These youngsters, many of whom were less than 25 years old, never envisioned this scenario when they visited the enlistment office at Falls Creek, Wisconsin or Cold Canyon, Texas. Somehow they had sensed that the roughest it would get would be missing a meal now and then for special duty assignments. They never dreamed they would be suddenly snatched up without warning, leaving their families in shock. Now, here they were, a colony of displaced persons, trying to become a family unit of sorts in a place where there was no place to turn but to one another, and where the people around you, for the most part, had nothing in common with you.

The 1291st Battalion had been sent over, seemingly overnight. Their mission was strike readiness and reconnaissance. They were to gauge what the enemy was doing and be sure our troops could respond quickly.

Up at the top of that mound of sand on the left you'll find a tent filled with typical guys. Ray Angleton, a fighter pilot from a little town in Kansas, had been preparing to spend the holidays with his cousin in Washington when his commander called. He was given three days to pack and be at the air base for shipment

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overseas. No arguments. No excuses. Just be there. Ray was a typical free-wheeling “tough” guy with a Midwestern twang and a kind of crudeness that you found either laughable or repulsive, depending on your background. His response when he received his orders was not printable, at least not in this story.

Ray had joined the military to try to give his life some meaning. He had drifted from job to job and relationship to relationship, but nothing seemed to work for him. The ads in the recruiting office made sense to him: “Free education. Free training. See the world.” The posters that said “See the world,” however, had palm-lined beaches and snow-capped mountains on them. He hadn’t recalled seeing one that showed grubby tents virtually buried in a sea of sand in Saudi Arabia. But here he was.

Sandy Ferguson was in the bunk next to Ray. He was a quiet, unassuming, somewhat introverted lad with sand colored hair and blue eyes that seemed so distant they looked as though they were looking beyond you into a world you were not a part of. Sandy had become engaged just two weeks before his orders came. The last thing he expected to do was spend Christmas 5,000 miles away from home and away from Esther, his bride-to-be. While Ray was trying to make the most of the circumstances, Sandy was obviously fuming with bitterness that his whole life, which was finally taking on meaning, had been interrupted by a war he didn’t quite understand.

Al Sanchez was in bunk #3. He was a somewhat macho but decent kind of guy who liked to talk about his moral conquests on the one hand and boast of his religious interests on the other. He had Christian statues standing beside pictures of several girls, each of whom thought they were his one and only. He was too hard to read to know on the surface how he felt about being transported so far from home so quickly, but you suspected that he was painting himself to be a war hero in his letters home although frightened out of his wits inside.

Last, but not least, was Bob Berns. “Born Again Bob” his buddies laughingly called him. “Religious Robert” was another not-so-fond title scrawled over his bunk by some of his not-so-religious friends. Bob seemed to have the idea that he was in Saudi Arabia by divine decree. He saw the war as his personal mission of evangelism and the people around him as his particular mission field. The problem was these guys weren’t interested in being evangelized,

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and they found his Bible reading and his “Praise the Lord” kind of lingo either too convicting or too potentially hypocritical to be comfortable about.

Bob had a little packet of Bible verses he carried with him, and when idleness set in and the troops turned to gambling and telling “war stories,” Bob often retreated into a corner and began repeating those verses over and over to himself. He tried to be unobtrusive about it, but the difference in his interests spoke so loudly no one could mistake it.

These four were typical portraits of the admixture of humanity that had suddenly been thrown together into canvas houses under a scalding sun and expected to be melded together into a team. Somehow, you hoped for the kind of witticism and commitment you saw on M*A*S*H* on television, but the magnetism and interaction seemed sadly lacking, at least so far. One reason, perhaps, was that none of them expected to be there long enough to develop any meaningful relationships. Though some of the guys had been together for a long time, the four in tent 132 were thrown together like loose ingredients in a melting pot, with the hope that somehow there would be at least enough camaraderie to keep them from tearing each other apart.

Both Ray and Bob were combat ready. Bob had been activated during the Grenada invasion and Ray had flown into Panama when Noriega was removed, but neither had seen any real action, nor did they have any desire to.

Every day started out pretty much the same. Reveille came about 6:00 am, and for the next 45 minutes or so, a motley crew of disgruntled, almost incoherent GI’s stumbled towards makeshift showers, shoving one another aside to get to tiny metal mirrors which dangled from the side of the tent, providing the only visual of themselves that allowed them to shave with more or less accuracy.

How water could be that cold when the temperatures stayed that hot nobody knew. Usually the obscenity that trailed from the shower tent was consistent, even though the voices changed. Bob Berns was the one exception. You could hear him half way across the desert singing, “There shall be showers of blessing, precious revival again” the whole time he was standing under that trickle of what had come to be a valuable commodity known as water.

“Born Again Bob’s at it again,” you could hear Ray mutter. “Showers of blessing, my foot. The only blessing we’ll get over here

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is if he stuffs that Bible in his mouth and shuts up about all that confounded “salvation” stuff. If he wants to get baptized again, he ought to wait till he gets home. While he’s here he ought to cuss while he showers, like everybody else.” Just why Bob’s musical invasion into the heavenlies so infuriated Ray was unknown. That it did was common knowledge.

Breakfast was next on the daily agenda, although only those of stout heart and insensitive stomachs seemed to find it of much interest. What Jeff and Cleo, the breakfast cooks, did to an egg stood as a lasting insult to the chicken. Al and Ray usually went through the line just so they could complain; then they would throw the stuff into the sand to see if it would cause any kind of chemical dislocation of the atoms the way they perceived it did in their stomachs.

By 8:30 the men were at their respective posts, Ray and Al in maintenance, Sandy in the computer room, Bob lined up for his daily reconnaissance flight over enemy lines. Ray’s place in the maintenance pit was made more livable by the addition of his high-powered Sony Boombox that played rock music at decibels that must have been heard all the way to Israel. Occasionally he would switch it to radio, but about all he could get was “Baghdad Betty,” the Iraqi version of Tokyo Rose, who told in a breathy kind of voice that most of the guys’ wives were back in the States partying with ex-boyfriends while they were giving their lives for apparently nothing. Ray and the guys would chuckle and pretend to make fun of her tirade, but in the quiet hours you knew at least a little of it was sinking in.

While waiting for his flight, Bob would usually pull out his sand-battered Scripture pack and start reviewing his verses again. The guys in his flight crew were more understanding than his tent-mates, but still no sign of spiritual interest was forthcoming. Most of them figured that if they so much as asked, “What are you reading, Bob?” they would be front-row participants in an old time camp meeting with no place to go but heaven or hell. Rather than face that prospect, they just ignored Born Again Bob’s intense interest in things spiritual and treated him more like a bit of heavenly fire insurance that might be good to have around in case they got fired on by Iraqi airplanes. When bullets are flying, they surmised, a little religion never hurt anybody.

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It is now the second week of December. Cards and gifts are arriving from home. Fake greenery sprayed with white flocking is being arranged inside sweltering tents to make it look like Christmas in Colorado. Camera crews from home town television stations bring an air of nostalgia to the group but also add an air of commercial trivia as soldiers are lined up in front of mini-cams and asked to tell their families they love them in a way that can be played back on Channel 4 at 10 o'clock Sunday night when there's no news anyway. Slick looking young news reporters, trying for their first big story, stammer through written notes as they ask inane questions like "How does it feel to be so far from home at Christmas?" or "How do you feel about the President's latest comment?"

Ray, with his usual devil-may-care attitude, had applied to be interviewed so he could stand in front of the camera and say "Hi, Mom, I hope you'll be out of jail soon. I love you even if you did kill him. Love, Ray." Fortunately, his number never came up.

What did come up every morning was the sun. Like a potent enemy bent on destruction, it rose from its bed of sand with a kind of arrogant aggressiveness each day and sent scorching signals of fatigue and weariness to all who dared to breathe. In tent 132 they had a game they played entitled, "When the sun comes up in the desert." Every day a new person would be "it". As they arose, someone would say, "When the sun comes up in the desert..." and then the person who was "it" had to come up with a totally new thought to end the sentence. Sandy added one day, "When the sun comes up in the desert, it rains in Seattle." This, of course, was true. The sun always came up in the desert, and it always rained in Seattle. Give Sandy 10 points. Al's best contribution was "When the sun comes up in the desert, we'll inflict bodily pain. We'll forget the blasted bombs, and drop our *eggs* on Hussein." (He was referring to the poor state of the breakfast cuisine, of course.) Ray's favorite line was, "When the sun comes up in the desert, my heart heads back to home, and the sand in my eyes can never disguise, that I sure hate bein' alone." He even made up a song of sorts, recorded it on his trusty Sony and sold it for \$3 a throw to other guys who had no more musical taste than he did.

Bob, of course, ruined it all for the rest of them. He would break out into song, singing, "When the sun comes up in the desert, The Son is coming soon." Then he would move into a chorus of "Jesus is coming again" which had so little real meaning to the rest of his

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unwilling flock that they almost gave up the whole game. Of course there were some other unprintable choruses to their “Sun Comes Up” single, but we’ll have to leave those to your imagination.

The calendar’s pages were dropping as quickly as morale as it became desperately apparent that none of them would be home for Christmas. Memories of Christmases past began to dominate the conversation, and groups would sit around and wonder what the family would do on Christmas day without them there. The guys who had children at home soon got a far away look in their eyes, and before long, the glint of a tear was evident in the eyes of the most hardened warrior.

As Christmas drew nearer, the mood became even more solemn than before. Cards and gifts from home brought a bit of sunlight to the darkened atmosphere, but those remembrances stirred up memories that seem to offset the joy of the moment. Plans for a big Christmas dinner and entertainment from home added a festive note for some, but listening to a rock band in a desert amphitheater with 5,000 other GI’s was no substitute for a turkey dinner around the table with Mom and Dad or the wife and kids.

In tent 132, our fearless foursome of unlikely roommates spent more time than usual playing their “When the sun comes up in the desert” game, trying, if possible, to tie it into Christmas. Ray’s latest was, “When the sun comes up in the desert, and Santa comes to town, he’ll need camels instead of reindeer if he wants to get around.” For some reason, he thought that was a stroke of genius that might allow him to sell another \$3 cassette, but his buddies soon convinced him that if the Hit Parade was still in vogue, his ditty wouldn’t be on it. Born Again Bob, of course, couldn’t let the mood of the hour prevent him from another evangelistic stab into the carnal atmosphere that surrounded the whole operation. His song was, “When the sun comes in the desert, to the sound of Christmas hymns, we’re reminded that Jesus came, to die for all our sins.”

Needless to say, that one didn’t win a “Grammy” award. The word sin was the one word that most of the guys found most offensive. To Ray, sin was something God intended man to enjoy. To Sandy, life was unfair, and sin was like a catch-22. You couldn’t help it, but when you did it, God was out to get you for it. Al saw sin as something the church had invoked on man to keep him practicing religious activities which, if done in sufficient quantities, would offset all but the most heinous of crimes and gave you a shot at heaven.

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Such was the religious temperature of the congregation that met in tent 132. Bob, of course, was the exception. To him, sin was the natural result of man's rebellion to God and had been atoned for by what Jesus did on the Cross. "If you guys would just give your hearts to Christ, your sins would be forgiven" he'd plead earnestly. Since they saw no need, they heard him not. Nevertheless, with a zeal akin to a football fanatic, he would just smile and say, "Someday you'll see. Someday you'll see." With that, he'd break into another one of his hymns, and amidst the groans of his buddies, would walk off into the desert as though it were his own personal chapel.

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It was now December 21st, and most of the units had been handed lightened schedules to make Christmas a bit more "normal." Bob's group, however, had been placed on alert as some strange forewarning had drifted down through security about possible air strikes while the units were on Christmas break.

Bob seemed much more subdued than usual and spent a great deal of time writing in his personal diary, a small notebook he wrote in daily, arousing more than a little curiosity about its contents. Meanwhile, the "When the sun comes up" routine had now spread to some of the other tents, and Ray was trying to capitalize on it by selling lists of his tent-mates' lines for ten cents a copy. Most of Born Again Bob's were omitted, being considered a bit too spiritual in nature, even for Christmas.

Ray had coined a few new ones of his own by now. His latest, which he was sure would make the charts back home, was "When the sun comes up in the desert and the desert coyote cries, I dream of buying a Big Mac, with a medium Coke and fries." It did have a certain ring about it, but you have to admit that the journalistic content had limited value. Al's latest stab at poetic greatness was not much better. He wrote, "When the sun comes up in the desert, and the nightfall loses its blessing, all I ever dream about is a plate full of turkey and dressing."

Bob's latest jingle still had a decided evangelistic message, but it had a somewhat eerie undertone. He wrote, "When the sun comes up in the desert, and casts its glow once again, only Jesus knows if I'll be here or if I'll be with Him." It seemed that Born Again Bob could take the joy out of their frivolity quicker than an air raid siren. They tried to just ignore him, but something about this latest two liner disturbed the rest of the guys and set them on edge.

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They almost decided to practice their foray into the song-writing profession when their zealous friend was not around so that their hilarity wasn't dampened by his "messages with meaning."

Rumors of impending peace moves were giving way to hushed stories of a possible enemy attack at Christmas time, and the morale in the trenches was not at an all-time high. Christmas cards and gifts from home seemed to be adding an air of frustration to an already lonely environment. Chapel services were even gaining in attendance, partly because of Christmas and partly because the reality of what might be about to happen was beginning to take its toll. Even Born Again Bob's hymn-singing shower routine had ceased to be a source of humor, and more often than not you could hear guys ask, "I wonder how one guy could be so happy so much of the time?"

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Bob's joking tent-mates were beginning to ask a question or two about how a God of love could allow war and how did he know heaven was real. Hardly theological inquiries of a serious nature, but nonetheless, quite a breakthrough for guys who, up until now, thought the new birth came on payday and salvation meant not having KP duty.

If nothing else was happening, Bob's consistent emphasis on spiritual things was beginning to have an impact on their thought processes. They didn't like it, but they couldn't avoid it. The crowning touch was when Ray (of all people) asked Bob if he would read the Christmas story for them on Christmas Eve and lead a prayer in their tent for peace. At first Bob thought they were teasing, but he soon realized that the chance he had been waiting for was about to arrive at last. He was going to be able to share his faith with his buddies one time in a serious vein, and the story of Christ's coming to earth would be the backdrop.

On the 23rd most of the regular activities came to a halt, and with that came a little relaxing of the tensions that seemed to be building through the holiday season. It was almost as if a make-believe holiday world had been superimposed on a potential war-zone, and at least for a day or two, reality gave way to candy canes, wrapping paper, Christmas carols, and the wonder of what a combination of sand and army cooks could do to ruin a perfectly good turkey.

It was late in the afternoon of the 24th, and all four of the

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guys in tent 132 were off duty and in their bunks. The Christmas ornaments that hung from the scrawny tree that was tied to one end of the tent would have looked pathetic anywhere else, but in this instance, there was an air of reality about them that gave them rich significance. Christmas cards received from the States, many from people they had never heard of, were propped between the branches, and on the sandy floor beneath were a handful of unopened gifts sent by loved ones at home. Even in a far away desert, it is somehow deemed wrong to open Christmas gifts before Christmas morning. The guys had each bought the other three tentmates a token gift, too, so that everyone was sure to have something to open that morning.

Ray, a little more subdued than usual, started humming a Christmas carol, and soon the other three chimed in. The Morman Tabernacle Choir it wasn't, but there was a kind of spiritual harmony at that moment that had not been present up until now. Before long they were singing, "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright" with a kind of warmth that was not at all common to this band of uncommonly different men.

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing" followed, and before long, they were singing every Christmas carol they had ever heard of. What they did to "O Holy Night" was enough to cause every choir director who ever lived to resign their profession, but there was a kind of sincerity that made up for the rather discordant sounds they produced.

After about a half hour of singing, Al decided the musical profession had been insulted long enough, and he said, "Let's do 'when the sun comes up' again. I'll begin. When the sun comes up in the desert and releases its fiery flame, the God of heaven on Christmas day will vindicate His name." There was total silence. Bob almost fell out of his bunk. Sandy, who seldom entered into the "sun comes up" game, chimed in, "When the sun comes up in the desert, to the sound of the soldier's shout, we'll find out that Christmas is what life is all about." Bob knew by now, that he would be better off to be quiet, so he added nothing. Ray finally ended the silence. "When the sun comes up in the desert, and it's time our presents to give, that babe in the manger will turn out to be the only reason to live."

Silence again. Finally, Bob, so quietly you could barely hear him, said, "When the sun comes up in the desert, and Christmas is in the air, everyone in this room will know that God still answers

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prayer.” For some reason, Bob’s ditty was like an “Amen” to the rest of the group, and total silence settled in again. One by one they turned over and closed their eyes, and on that somewhat spiritual note, began to nap until suppertime.

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About 4:30 the silence was interrupted by a siren that sounded with such intensity that all four men leaped from their bunks in unison, and you could almost see the camels hide their heads in the sand to flee the horrendous noise. Over the public address system, a somewhat garbled voice could be understood only too well. “Alert! Alert! All pilots from 1291st report to your planes immediately. Repeat. All pilots from 1291st report to your planes immediately. This is not, I repeat, this is not a practice drill.” It was as though someone had instantly unplugged the Christmas lights of their hearts and removed the strains of Christmas music that had captured them and rescued them from the realities of war. In less than an instant, they were transported back into the real world, and the shiny tinsel and plastic ornaments no longer mattered.

Ray and Al rushed over to put their arms around Bob, who was throwing on his flight gear as fast he could. “Hey, guy, don’t be late for the turkey,” Al whispered. “We won’t eat without you.” Sandy looked down but addressed Bob nonetheless. “We’ll wait for your devotional till you get back. Don’t think any of us can find the Christmas story, let alone read it.” Bob smiled faintly. He had a look of peace about him but was much more quiet than usual. As each of the guys gave him a bear hug, he felt more a part of the group than at anytime since he’d been there. Darting out the tent opening, he heard Ray call him back. “Bob, your Scripture packet. Don’t leave home without it.” That got a smile from Bob as he raced back, retrieved his moth-eaten memory verses, and then ran as fast as he could toward the area where hidden beneath all the camouflage was an arsenal of airpower that the President hoped would be more than a match for anything the Middle-East had to offer.

Christmas Eve, needless to say, was painfully quiet. The troops that remained behind saw no cause for celebration with their buddies flying over Baghdad in the dark of night. An announced Christmas Eve prayer service garnered a far larger crowd than was expected, and a totally unprepared Chaplain stood in disbelief as

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the troops kept crowding into the Chapel tent until it was totally packed and some 50 guys were standing outside, just listening.

Nervously, the Chaplain fumbled for his Bible, and found the Christmas story. “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And, lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.” (Luke 2:8,9)

It was at that exact moment that a thundering sound rocked the heavens, and the sound of gunfire in the distance immediately dismissed the service and sent the entire base scurrying for cover. “I can relate to those shepherds,” Al whispered to Ray, “I, too, am sore afraid.” Ray couldn’t talk. Not only was his life in danger, he suddenly realized that the bullets he heard flying were aimed at American airplanes, and those planes were manned by Born Again Bob and his buddies. The sound of gunfire lasted only a few minutes. Then, suddenly, it was quiet again. Too quiet. The guys could hear their own hearts beating. They had never been near real combat before; they never wanted to be again.

Quickly, they hurried back to their tent and began to reflect on the evening’s events. Before long they heard the sweetest sound they had heard in days: the hum of airplane engines; and before long, one by one, they began to land. Soon the scorecard was in: 56 American planes left; 56 planes returned. 18 Iraqi planes shot down. Minimum American casualties. That was the report over the loudspeaker.

One by one, the guys in tent 132 drifted off to sleep, quietly thanking God that “none of our planes have been shot down, and that we can celebrate Christmas after all.”

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When the sun came up in the desert the next morning, there was an uncanny kind of calm. Although it was Christmas morning, there seemed almost no one scurrying about. The guys in 132 were awakened by a messenger who came to tell Ray that he was needed in maintenance for about an hour to do routine checks on the planes that had been out the night before. He slipped out quietly because he didn’t want to wake up Bob, who must have come in extremely late; no one had seen him or heard him. But at a glance, Ray realized that Bob must have left for the morning wrap-up of the mission because his bed was already neatly made and he was

nowhere to be found.

When Ray got to his maintenance post, he surveyed the damages and realized these guys had been in quite a skirmish the night before. Two of the planes had severe engine damage and were fortunate to have made it home. Still another had a wing almost broken in two but had still managed to land safely. Then he came to “Old Betsy,” plane #1523, Bob’s trusty winged wonder. This one was the miracle plane. Here it was, comfortably back on the sandy runway, with half the fuselage blown off. “Don’t see how they even survived that one,” Ray muttered to Steve, his co-worker. “Bob must have quite a story to tell.” Steve looked away, and for a moment nothing was said. Finally he responded, “You haven’t heard? Bob won’t be telling any stories, Ray. He didn’t make it back alive. His plane made it in, but he was one of the fatalities. Got nearly blown to bits. His co-pilot brought it back with a bad wound himself. Bob was killed almost instantly.”

Ray fell to his knees by the airplane and began to weep. “Why him, God? Why him? He was the only good guy around. Why didn’t you take one of us heathens? Why?” Racing back to the tent, he fell on his bed and began sobbing so loudly the others could hardly make out what he was crying about. Soon, however, the reality of it hit home to all three. Born Again Bob wasn’t coming back.

Al was angry at God and at the whole war. In an uncontrollable rage, he picked up his pillow and threw it to the ground. Suddenly he realized there was something under the pillow. It was a note. He opened it and read it. Here’s what it said:

Dear Al,

When the sun comes up in the desert this Christmas, I may not be there to share it with you. We never know when God may call us home. Somehow, I have a premonition that my time to see my Jesus may be soon.

Al, I’m ready. One day about five years ago, I came to realize that all my religion was not going to atone for sin. And a friend of mine explained how Jesus came to earth that Christmas just so there could be an Easter. He came so He could die, so Al Sanchez could live. So Ray Angleton could live. So Sandy Ferguson could live. And so I asked Him to come into my heart and be my personal Savior. I didn’t know what to expect; I only knew I needed something I didn’t have.

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I know you guys get tired of my infernal singing and all, but Al, I just can't help it. Jesus lives in me. And He keeps on singing inside me all day long. If He did call me home last night, I'm singing like I've never sung before. And if my being called home were to get you guys' attention, Wow! What a bargain. I get to see Jesus, and you get to meet him all the same day. Christmas day, at that.

My prayer, Al, is that if any of you might come to know Him by way of my going home, that I would much rather die than live. That's the gospel in a nutshell. One man dying so others might live. By the way, there's a present for each of you under the tree. I love you guys. But God loves you even more.

In Jesus' Name,

Bob

All three of the men had similar notes under their pillows. Sensing danger, Bob was more concerned with their salvation than with his own safety. Suddenly, some things began to make sense. Ray had shaken his fist at God and cried, "Why him?" The answer was clear. "Bob was ready." Al had screamed at God "What good can come of this?" He had his answer. It got the attention of three guys Bob had been trying to reach for three months. Now God was talking. And they were listening. Attached to each of the notes was a little booklet, "How to Find Peace with God". In it there were step by step instructions on how to give your life to Christ. It was Ray who first began to put it all together. Bob's last jingle went:

When the sun comes up in the desert
And casts its glow once again,
Only Jesus knows
If I'll be here or if I'll be with Him.

One by one, the guys opened the boxes under the tree from Bob. Each received a brand new leather Bible with their names engraved on them. He had ordered them special from the States weeks ago. Inside of each of them was a Scripture verse. It was John 18:14, "It was expedient that one man should die for the people." That one man was Jesus Christ. But it seemed to the gang in tent 132 that it had also been expedient that one man should die so that three others might know that the price had been paid.

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The memorial service for Bob Berns was a never to be forgotten

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experience. The whole base got together and sang Christmas carols, and one by one, different guys got up and shared what just watching his life had meant to them. Then two of the guys who were with him in the plane when he died shared how he shouted as he was shot, “Praise God, I’m gonna see my Jesus soon.” And how, as he took his final breaths, he began to pray by name for each of the men on the plane and for each of the men in his tent.

Finally, three guys stood up in front of that flag-draped wooden casket, one at a time, and began to share what it was like to be born again on Christmas day. Each one told how he had wrestled with the reality of what Born Again Bob had been saying all this time, and how they had rationalized that in the face of death he would be no different than anyone else. Then one by one they told how they had knelt by their bunks that Christmas morning and given their hearts to Christ.

“This guy isn’t dead!” Ray Angleton said through his tears, “He’s alive in each of our lives because it was his life that showed us God’s life, and now that life is ours. Bob made up a little song the day he died. It went like this: “When the sun comes up in the desert, and Christmas is in the air; everyone in this room will know that God still answers prayer.” With his head down, Ray concluded, “Oh, dear God, how true that is.” Tears began to flow on face after face in the crowd of GI’s that Christmas afternoon. Yes, it was Christmas. And never had there been a Christmas like this one.

One by one, Ray and Al and Sandy took their little “Peace with God” booklets, and went over them with all the soldiers who expressed an interest. How many men gave their hearts to Christ that afternoon? Only God knows. God—and probably Bob Berns. I believe Bob’s up there in heaven singing Christmas carols along with the rest of the guys. And I believe he’s got a smile on his face as wide as eternity.

Oh, I forgot to tell you how that memorial service ended. Three unlikely candidates for “musical group of the year” stood up and sang a benediction. Yes, the music was pretty bad. But I’ll bet a few angels cried, along with a few hundred weeping soldiers on a sand-swept countryside in Saudi Arabia. It went like this:

When the sun came up in the desert
This magnificent Christmas morn
Our hearts were literally torn in two
Because Born Again Bob was gone.

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Gone were the hymns, gone were the smiles
Gone were those verses he read.
Gone was the hope that shone on his face —
Born Again Bob was dead.

But Born Again Bob didn't die in vain
Because through his death we see,
Christmas is really Christmas today
Because Jesus was born in me!

So the sun came up with a message today —
“God took away all our sin.”
Since the sun came up in the desert today
We three have been born again.

Oh, dear friends, it's Christmas time.
What a day for your new life to start!
When the sun comes up tomorrow,
May the Son be Lord in your heart.

For the three surviving men in tent 132, “Operation Desert Storm” became “Operation Sun-up”. One man had died, but he had not died in vain. His life had touched three other lives, who in turn would touch others. You can bet there were many more verses to “When the sun comes up in the desert.” In fact, every time another soldier said “yes” to Christ, another Christmas carol was formed on the lips of a trio of newborn believers.

For now, some wars have come and gone, but the real war, the battle for the souls of men, continues and even intensifies in these last days. In every corner of the globe and on every street corner in the world there are people whose very lives hang in the balance. When the sun comes up in the desert tomorrow, thousands of men and women around the world will have faced, in one way or another, the choice these soldiers faced — whether to live their own lives and die in their sins or give their lives to Christ and be born again.

Will someone have to die to get their attention?

No, Beloved, somebody already has!

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(04.22.15)