

THE LETTER

By Donna R. Jensen

Dinner over, Dad and I sat together reading in the living room. From time to time we interrupted each other to share some new thought or bit of humor. R-R-R-Ring. I laid my book on the arm of my chair and rose to answer the phone.

“Sammy? Where are you?... Mexico? So, what’s happening...?” I laughed as he told me the only work he could find was floating on a barrel scraping barnacles off a boat.

“Isn’t that a little dangerous for someone who can’t swim?... All kidding aside, how are you?... Homesick, huh?... Well! Come home then!”

Dad interrupted... “Is that your brother?”

“Yes.”

“Let me talk to him.” Dad came to the phone.

“Hello, Sammy, this is Dad... Yes, I miss you too, son. You remember I was only fifteen when I ran away and joined the Marines. Once I was in, I thought it was the biggest mistake I’d ever made. I’d have given anything for my Dad to have bailed me out, but it turned out to be the greatest experience of my life. You’ve planned this trip around the world for years...couldn’t wait for your eighteenth birthday to get your passport. Son, don’t come home until you finish what you started out to do!”

Sammy continued on, Six-foot-five, a good looking, pleasant young man, chosen the friendliest of two thousand in his high school, he thought that seeing the world would be a good foundation for further education. None of the parents of his friends would allow them to go along so Sammy set out alone. The football team had escorted him to the edge of town. Backpack in place with a sign that read, “MEXICO”, he waived good-bye to his buddies and walked off into the night.

Sammy was gone a whole year. What a time he had! It was his plan to work his way from continent to continent on freighters. Once in a while, he was given free passage and stayed in sickbay. The roughest ride he had on land was on top of a mail bus crossing Afghanistan. The only place he stayed for any length of time was Bangkok, Thailand. For fifty-two days he struggled to find a way to leave. He joked that he might have to apply for citizenship.

At last, he got a ticket to Hong Kong from Thailand International Airlines in return for using his pictures and story for advertising.

From Hong Kong he went by boat to Yokohama where he got free passage on a Greek freighter to Canada. He hitchhiked the rest of the way home, having visited thirty-two countries and traveled 40,000 miles.

Back home, Sammy got a job and enrolled in some college classes. Vietnam was in the news a lot. Sammy had grown close to many people while in the Far East and the reports he heard from there troubled him deeply. After a lot of soul-searching he enlisted in the Marine Corps and asked for duty in Vietnam.

Basic training went along smoothly until it came to swimming. Sammy had never been able to swim. That was the one thing that would keep him in the states. Most of his off-duty hours were spent in the pool. His buddies began to call him "prune". To pass the swimming test he must jump from twenty-five feet into the pool, fully clothed, with a pack on his back and a rifle in his hands, swim to the other side and get out.

In desperation he asked his instructor, "If I jump from thirty-five feet and manage somehow to get out of the pool will you pass me?"

"You'd be willing to do that?" the sergeant asked.

"Yes, sir! This is very important to me."

"You're on!" he replied.

Don't ask me how he did it, but he did. Nothing stood in his way now. Soon he was aboard ship headed for Vietnam.

Once in Vietnam, Sammy wrote home frequently. He didn't mention the horrors of war. When his closest friend was killed on Thanksgiving Day, he said it caused him to sit down and think about all that he had to be grateful for. With that letter, he enclosed another labeled, TO BE OPENED IF THEY SEND ME HOME WITH A FLAG.

March 9th, my birthday, when I entered the dental office where I worked, I received the word. Sammy was dead. Point man on night reconnaissance, he had detonated a mine. Due to the warning he yelled to those behind him, three men's lives were saved. Posthumously, he was awarded a Bronze Star.

Monday morning, I withdrew his letter from my safe deposit box and sat down to read it.

...Today is Thanksgiving and I'm going to write you a kind of "Just in case" letter because it seems like a good day for it.

Last night, and most of today, I've been thinking about all I have to be thankful for. Seems like the Lord and I understand each other pretty well and that is such a feeling of comfort. I feel sort of like a well-tuned in radio receiving the right program loud and clear.

If things don't work out as we had hoped and planned, let's be grateful for all the good things we've had together. Okay?

When my time comes, I think I'll take it as contentedly as an old man who has had the best the world has had to offer.

I'd like to be very close to you to be a comfort to you all, but not so close that I'd bring you any sadness. A nice hill with lots of trees in Pennsylvania would do just fine for a resting place...

Sammy

Sammy's letter was published in newspapers across the country and around the world. Mail flooded in as hearts were touched by Sammy's life and death.

The minister who gave Sammy's eulogy closed by saying, "Our boys on the battle-front know what they are dying for. Let us make sure we know what we are living for."

Post Script: Sammy was laid to rest on a hill in Pennsylvania.