

THE AIR LETTERS: A KOREAN CHRISTMAS
(adapted and transcribed from audio tapes of Capt'n Claxton Ray)

"Tonight is the twenty-seventh day of November, nineteen hundred and fifty-two and we're still stuck here talking to this omnipresent audience. Tonight however, we have some of the other men of this here company that we all hope can, if they can get over their stage fright, talk to you again or for the first time if they were not here last night. I have present here, six of my noncoms, which we refer to as the brains, and at 1315 hours every day we have this very same crew with the exception of one or two, in the orderly room for our daily conference.

At a particular conference, the minute the 'old man', referring to myself of course, got through with his orders or statements or desires and said 'does anyone have anything to say?' ' You never heard such a babble of voices anywhere. Everybody had a complaint. Everybody was bitching' about something'. They've got something they want changed, something that should be different, can the 'old man' get 'em this, can he get 'em that, they're always out of somethin', how 'bout goin' on another scrounging mission... So tonight when I made this introduction I expected an eager bunch to be glad to express themselves and their views for the record. It's been thirty minutes since I started and I can't even get the s.o.b's to open their damn mouths! We're gonna have to do something to rejuvenate it. As far as I am concerned, boys, bring out some more of that whisky, this crowd is getting sick."

The Captain finally stopped talking and laid down the microphone on the table. The few visiting soldiers sat bewildered on the hard Korean ground. One of the noncoms slowly stood up.

"Well folks, we got our first volunteer," boomed the Captain. You see, in any company in the army, we have a member that is really important, our Company Clerk. We find him however, coming in the other day claiming he had seen a bear in the Motor-Pool! Here in Korea, which is about as impossible as if he had sprouted wings and flown stateside. Anyway, Pennington here has been our Company Clerk in AnYang and has done a job that we are particularly proud of. Now, since he is the first individual within this group tonight who is going home by Christmas, he has volunteered to say a few words. I now give you Pennington the bear! The Captain sat beside his Seagrams Five Star whisky as Pennington slowly made his way to the stage for his ordeal at the front of the mess hall tent.

“As Captain Ray just mentioned, I'm one of the more peculiar types in the Company. Nobody else seems to have seen that bear but me, but what I get a kick out of was the guy who went along with me to hunt for the thing when I reported it! The first thing I'm going to do when I do get home, whether it is before or after Christmas, is sit at my mother's table and eat all of her food. Most of which is better than what I've swallowed her at AnYang or Yong Dong Po!”

"Here, here!" came the majority reply mixed with sincere applause. "One thing I shore do miss over here is standing on the street corner and watching a beautiful busty blond walkin' down the street. I don't care for the looks of those moosey-mae's here except for the one the Colonel's got, but that is another story in itself. Right now, I think I've 'bout said enough but I would like to add that I don't think my time over here has been a complete waste because I've come to a place I would never have been if I had not joined the army. I've had a lot of experiences I would never have had and besides that, I think we're here for a worthwhile cause and I wouldn't want to see anything happen to destroy that cause. I return you now to our Captain.”

It did for a moment, seem a bit odd to see fifteen or twenty men in clean uniforms sitting in a khaki tent under a few bleak and bare light bulbs talking to each other as if the whole world were listening. The cold winter air was trying to penetrate through the canvas while a small pot-bellied stove in the center tried its best to keep it out.

"I thank you, suh." The Captain said in his southern drawl as he took to the floor, pausing for a brief moment to let the sound of a passing truck go by. The first time I ever started talking into one of these damn microphones I couldn't say a damn thing and for those of you that know me from before, know that whenever I run out of words, something is wrong! Now this next man is a blond and you here can see that I have a dark complexion but have a mustache that is simply abhorred. Here we have this next fellow who is blond, young and attractive, with these scoshi little mustaches that most of the women here in Korea are particularly fond of. I give you lucky people Mr. Bright, whom I'm sure will be more entertaining tonight.”

"I kinda appreciate the Cap'n mentionin' my little bit of growth," he said, taking the mike from Captain Acker. "I've been sorta proud of it, since it has taken me such a long time to grow it. I might add that it hasn't won any prizes yet! I really miss my family although my stay in Korea could have been worse than it is.

"Well I guess the further up the ranks you go the less you have to say," blurted the Captain.

"I ain't finished yet! I was about to say that most of us want to go home and you might say that I'm in the same boat as Pennington. We came over in the same ship and we are supposed to rotate at the same time but I don't have a great appreciation for those boys that call out the assignments for home because he got one and I didn't, which means that I won't be going back for two or three months after him. When I get back, I'm gonna make up for lost time. I shore do miss them blonds too, so look out USA! Well I don't think my time over here has been wasted either. I know we'll win this damn war whether I'm here or not and if I'm not here some other joker will be. We will win if the people back home in the states helps by not forgetting that we are over here fighting for them. Thank you."

"I hope that you people listening tonight can visualize what is goin' on . . . a bewildered look began to appear on the men as they sat listening to the Captain speak, " . . . it might be years from the time we make this recording' till the time you people in the States hear it"

"Hey, wha. ..

"Let me finish and then I'll explain." The cacophony settled down a little bit as he continued. "To those of you who are listening now, I hope that you realize what their effort is Korea has caused these men. What the results are is that we all hope and pray that they have all been worthwhile for all the hardships and suffering we have been through. It's really a shame that you people out there can't see what is going on. None of you could possibly, regardless of what you have read or heard, understand the suffering of these people. To give you an example; if in the USA it became a law that every man would be forced to bring his family to Korea for six months, to live as these people do and then return to the states, realizing that the first time he violated any law, he would be sent to Korea for life, the USA would be a utopia and none of us would do anything to make us be forced to return to this place because I can assure you that there is no place more like Hell than this Korean war."

Each man took his place at the microphone to tell his own story, knowing now that this tape would follow the first man home for Christmas and be copied and sent to each and every mans family and loved one as a surprise Korean Christmas present from their men overseas. And just think, it would never have happened if the Captain hadn't scrounged the recorder from Headquarters! I wonder if they still miss it?