

'69 — A CHRISTMAS TO REMEMBER

January this year I started my 60th trip around our solar system. Coincidentally, this December will mark my 60th snow-less Christmas. The memories of all these Christmases meld into a blur, with just the odd remembrance jumping to the fore from the recess of mind, usually as a result of receiving a significant gift. However, the Christmas of which I have the most vivid recollection is the one of '69, at Nhui Dat.

All units were back at the base and I guess making some attempt to make the time a special occasion. In this spirit, a midnight Christmas Mass had been arranged for at the Luscombe Bowl. The stage was to be the altar — all were welcome, no matter what foot you started marching with (for those who can remember, Roman Catholics were deemed 'left footers' and all others 'right footers'. This custom could have been started by the RCs in an attempt to convince all the other denominations that they were marching out of step to the beat of God's drum. Who knows — who cares!).

So, at midnight I, a few mates, and hundreds of others from all over 'The Dat' headed towards the Luscombe Bowl. Many carried a weapon in one hand and a folding chair in the other. Others who were more enterprising had substituted their weapon with a couple of cans of choice — mainly greens, yellows and whites but definitely no goffers (for the uninitiated, these were the colours of the various brands of beer and goffers were soft drinks). These characters also provided their very own 'church key'; not the type that is the symbol of the pope — The Keys of St Peter — but the ones you hung around your neck on a piece of string and when used made their own keyhole to the harmonic sound of phut...ssssssssss.

I don't know the name of the priest who said the Mass, but if ever a padre deserved to be decorated for performing his duties under arduous conditions, he was the one. Maybe the sight of the altar wine was just too much of a temptation for some of the pretty-well inebriated diggers, because some made their way up the stairs and onto the stage. Once up there, of course, they started performing for their mates, who were cheering them on from the bowl. Then the padre made a tactical blunder. He directed that those wanting to take communion were to come up one side of the stage, receive communion and exit via the other side. What a shambles! What a sight! There were drunken diggers all over the stage and all around the altar, some very serious in their befuddled intent and others just following the crowd. But it was all good hearted and there was no malice to be found anywhere — the Spirit of Christmas in all its forms was in ample supply. I wonder if the next morning the padre lay in his cot and wondered had he been dreaming or did that really happen. Padre, if you are still around — it was no dream.