" The Night Before Christmas "

T'WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS, HE LIVED ALL ALONE, IN A ONE BEDROOM HOUSE MADE OF PLASTER AND STONE. I HAD COME DOWN THE CHIMNEY WITH PRESENTS TO GIVE, AND TO SEE JUST WHO IN THIS HOME DID LIVE.

LOOKED ALL ABOUT, A STRANGE SIGHT I DID SEE, NO TINSEL, NO PRESENTS, NOT EVEN A TREE. NO STOCKING BY MANTLE, JUST BOOTS FILLED WITH SAND, ON THE WALL HUNG PICTURES OF FAR DISTANT LANDS.

WITH MEDALS AND BADGES, AWARDS OF ALL KINDS, A SOBER THOUGHT CAME THROUGH MY MIND. FOR THIS HOUSE WAS DIFFERENT, IT WAS DARK AND DREARY, I FOUND THE HOME OF A SOLDIER, ONCE I COULD SEE CLEARLY.

THE SOLDIER LAY SLEEPING, SILENT, ALONE, CURLED UP ON THE FLOOR IN THIS ONE BEDROOM HOME. THE FACE WAS SO GENTLE, THE ROOM IN SUCH DISORDER, NOT HOW I PICTURED A UNITED STATES SOLDIER.

WAS THIS THE HERO OF WHOM I'D JUST READ? CURLED UP ON A PONCHO, THE FLOOR FOR A BED? I REALIZED THE FAMILIES THAT I SAW THIS NIGHT, OWED THEIR LIVES TO THESE SOLDIERS WHO WERE WILLING TO FIGHT.

SOON ROUND THE WORLD, THE CHILDREN WOULD PLAY, AND GROWNUPS WOULD CELEBRATE A BRIGHT CHRISTMAS DAY. THEY ALL ENJOYED FREEDOM EACH MONTH OF THE YEAR, BECAUSE OF THE SOLDIERS, LIKE THE ONE LYING HERE.

I COULDN'T HELP WONDER HOW MANY LAY ALONE, ON A COLD CHRISTMAS EVE IN A LAND FAR FROM HOME. THE VERY THOUGHT BROUGHT A TEAR TO MY EYE, I DROPPED TO MY KNEES AND STARTED TO CRY.

THE SOLDIER AWAKENED AND I HEARD A ROUGH VOICE, "SANTA DON'T CRY, THIS LIFE IS MY CHOICE; I FIGHT FOR FREEDOM, I DON'T ASK FOR MORE, MY LIFE IS MY GOD, MY COUNTRY, MY CORPS."

THE SOLDIER ROLLED OVER AND DRIFTED TO SLEEP, I COULDN'T CONTROL IT, I CONTINUED TO WEEP. I KEPT WATCH FOR HOURS, SO SILENT AND STILL AND WE BOTH SHIVERED FROM THE COLD NIGHT'S CHILL.

I DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE ON THAT COLD, DARK, NIGHT, THIS GUARDIAN OF HONOR SO WILLING TO FIGHT. THEN THE SOLDIER ROLLED OVER, WITH A VOICE SOFT AND PURE, WHISPERED, "CARRY ON SANTA, IT'S CHRISTMAS DAY, ALL IS SECURE."

ONE LOOK AT MY WATCH, AND I KNEW HE WAS RIGHT, MERRY CHRISTMAS MY FRIEND, AND TO ALL A GOOD NIGHT.