Dear Folks . . .

Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of an
Infantryman's Personal, Unedited Letters
Sent Home from Vietnam

Steve Horner

About the Cover

The vivid yellow and red of the cover represent the Vietnamese flag.

The emblem of the 4th Infantry Division, known as the 4th ID or “Ivy” division, which is a reference to the four green leaves, or to the division’s Roman numeral designation of IV. The division’s motto is “steadfast and loyal.”

The Combat Infantry Badge (C.I.B.) is awarded to those who fought against enemy combatants in active-ground combat for a minimum of 30 consecutive days.

The Purple Heart is a badge of merit awarded to those killed or wounded in the field by enemy combatants.

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by

Steve Horner

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mom and dad who treasured my letters enough to save them; they were always two of my biggest fans. They both passed on in their 90s in the early years of this century. I miss them every day.

I'm also dedicating this book to all those who bravely and diligently served U.S. interests in Vietnam and, of course, their friends and families who loved and supported them and, in many cases, still miss them dearly today.

Infantryman Steve Horner playing the badass

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Dear Folks...

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I, with whatever sky's above me, and a God-given heart for up and doing, and trying not to sound too full of myself, was born November 12th, 1947, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and then baptized a few weeks later into the Catholic Church as Stephen Joseph Horner on December 7th. At 11 pounds, 3 ounces, I held the record for being the heaviest baby ever born at Miller Hospital until it was razed in the '60s to make room for a freeway. The high temp on the day of my birth was to reach 26 degrees with a low of 14 above. The dust from World War II was still settling around the world, and in Chicago that very same day, the first black man to play major-league baseball, Jackie Robinson, was being presented with the inaugural Major League Rookie of the Year Award.

I was the fourth-born of six boys to Gordon (Jack) and Celenire Horner. There was John (Buck), the oldest, then George, Phil, me, Tom, and Dick (Richard). My folks chose to name their sons from the Litany of the Saints so that each of us had our own patron saint to look up to, and to serve as our guardian throughout life.

This rare, backyard family photo was taken 3½ years before my induction. Back row standing L to R: Tom, Dick, John (Buck), Phil, Jack (my dad); front row L to R: George, Cel (my mom, whom we could usually get laughing at one of our silly jokes), me (trying not to laugh).

Mom and Dad were both raised in Fargo, North Dakota, and married in 1936. By the time I came along, Dad was already a prominent radio personality in the Twin Cities as the sports director for KSTP. On the day I was baptized, Dad was told by the station owner that later in the day he was to host the first-ever television program produced in Minnesota. After a couple more years the family moved from St. Paul across the Mississippi to Minneapolis where Tom and Dick were born and from where I was to be inducted into this man's army.

While Dad stayed busy with his sports broadcasting, Mom stayed busy with us boys, volunteered as a religion teacher for the Catholic kids at the local public school (we Horner boys all attended private elementary and high schools), plus got involved with a variety of other volunteer stints as well as manage the two family-owned convenience stores (we called them dairy stores and, wouldn't you know it, both stores were named Horner's Corner), complete with grills and soda fountains, that we owned in the '60s. The stores gave each of us young men

invaluable, firsthand experience with dealing with the public, stock work, and operating old-fashioned, mechanical cash registers. We always made time for playing sports, had a variety of jobs outside the stores, drove fast cars, and usually had a bunch of girlfriends along the way.

My hot little '66 Pontiac looking good on the shores of Lake Harriet about a block from home

When 1967 rolled around I was almost two years out of high school, not interested in attending college, and feeling like I was in a rut. Need I say, bored? Besides, I had racked up at least half a dozen careless-driving citations, most from drag racing, which was making the insurance for my hot little ’66 Pontiac too expensive to drive. I vividly remember the rainy spring day riding with my parents in their car, explaining all these things to them and saying I needed to find an adventure.

Man, did I score.

Like most of the guys I knew back then, I didn't know much about what the war in Vietnam was purportedly about. In hindsight, I didn't know much about the world around me, much less the history of Vietnam. I knew little about the French involvement in Vietnam, I had only heard of Ho Chi Minh, had read briefly about the Enlightenment, had never heard of Ayn Rand, and could only have told you a sentence or two about Lenin, Marx, Trotsky, Stalin, or Hitler. Hell, I was 68 years old when I finally took the time to investigate why the sky is blue. But isn't that how most of us go through life: wearing blinders? Then when war breaks out somewhere we look and sound stupid by asking "Wha-happened?" Meanwhile, a whole lot of people are being killed. That kind of uninvolvement happens right in many of our own homes.

Being that my father was quite an intelligent man, I expected to initiate a meaningful conversation when I asked him what he had thought of Adolf Hitler while war clouds were gathering in Europe in the late '30s. He said, "I never thought much about him at all other than I thought he was a jerk. We didn't think we would get involved in the war. As a matter of fact I was more concerned about the game I was preparing to broadcast on Saturday than what was going on in Europe." I was really surprised to learn my dad hadn't been more involved in the war conversation, something that was to impact him and his family greatly.

I do know that my generation was told that the war in Vietnam was a war against communism, and I had been taught to believe, and I still do, that the goal of a communist regime is to maintain a stranglehold on its citizens with a doctrine of "My way or the highway." And with the Marxist-Leninist, non-compromising form of communism that the North Vietnamese had adopted, the motto became "My way or your grave." That means that the bulk of the proceeds of the lower and middle class, who usually don't have a clue as to what's happening to them, goes to the State. And the State doesn't much care if the proceeds come from drugs,

prostitution, or any other industry of ill repute, just as long as the money keeps rolling in so it can best serve those at the top. If the flow of money stops, the worker goes missing in action.

In the late 1950s President Eisenhower, fearful that the communists would take over the former French colony of Vietnam causing a communist "domino" effect across the countries of Southeast Asia, increased the number of U.S. military advisers to the Saigon government from 323 to 685. Eisenhower's successor, President Kennedy, deepened the American commitment by raising the U.S. forces to 23,000 and shipping much equipment to South Vietnam. Still, the communists, chiefly local Viet Cong, who were supported by disciplined cadres from North Vietnam, continued to gain strength.

After the Kennedy assassination in November 1963, Vice President Lyndon Johnson inherited the problem of Vietnam, but while campaigning for re-election in 1964 promised that he would "not send American boys nearly half way around the world to Southeast Asia to do what Southeast Asian boys should be doing." However, in August 1964, all that changed when the U.S. Navy reported an attack on two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese PT boats. That began a chain of events that, in early 1965, unleashed Operation Rolling Thunder, a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam.

President Johnson made many attempts to initiate peace talks with Hanoi in 1966-67, but the North Vietnamese refused to talk unless the United States first halted its bombing unconditionally. The U.S., in turn, would not agree to stop the bombing until North Vietnam curtailed military operations in the South. And so the fighting continued.

By the time I was shipped off to Vietnam in November 1967 to begin my one-year tour of duty, America was reaching the height of the war in terms of numbers of U.S. casualties. The total had reached some 20,000 killed in action (K.I.A.). I had already known two of them with

whom I had graduated from high school, and another who was the only brother of my brother George's wife, Harriet. The number of U.S. in-country troops was inching toward half a million of which less than ten percent were infantry, and our average age was 22. By the time I got back home from Vietnam in November 1968 the number of K.I.A.s had nearly doubled, so, consequently, I had acquired the dubious distinction of knowing many more men who had died in Vietnam. The total number of Americans killed in Vietnam by war's end in 1975 was 58,220.

Then, almost immediately, North and South Vietnam became reunited and controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party, which then, a few years later, seized control of Laos and Kampuchea, formerly Cambodia. All of which is exactly what the United States allegedly wanted to prevent going way back to the 1950s.

I knew early on that I had no intention of spending three years in the military, the standard enlistment hitch, but I was getting restless waiting for the inevitable draft to come knocking. So, I visited an enlistment office and was told of an existing program whereby I could sign up for the 2-year draft and have my name moved up the induction list; it moved up in a hurry. In less than two weeks I received my "Greetings" letter containing my orders to be sworn in and then report to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 101st Airborne Division, on June 12th, 1967, to begin eight weeks of basic training.

On the evening of my departure, my sweetheart, Mary Jo, drove me to the airport for my 7:30 p.m. chartered flight from the former Wold Chamberlain military field into the unknown. The adventure had now begun, as this was the first time I'd ever been on an airplane.

Normally, a G.I. gets a 30-day pass right after basic training, but with Vietnam in full swing we were shipped directly on to Advanced Infantry Training (A.I.T.) at Fort McClellan, Alabama. After two months of A.I.T., my leave began October 13th. And, having already been

assigned my M.O.S.(Military Occupational Skill) of 11B (infantry), I had been ordered to be in Fort Lewis, Washington, November 11th for processing and shipping off to Vietnam on the 14th, two days after turning twenty years old. Happy Birthday.

Fresh recruit Steve standing next to Drill Sergeant Prescott. Face it, did anyone not look nerdy during basic training?

The east coast of Vietnam first came into sight after our plane broke through the high cloud canopy in late afternoon. Long dark shadows ran across lush vegetation covering the mountainsides, creating a pall of mystery. After all, I was born and raised in the Midwest where oftentimes the tallest thing on the horizon is a silo. Mountains were new to me. Besides, they looked kind of scary; what was lurking up there? I was soon to find out as my big adventure was

starting to shift into high gear with lots of surprises around every corner. And, apparently, I was ready for it, or so I thought.

Greetings Vietnam Vet...

Before you get into reading my letters, there are a few thoughts I'd like to share with you, and you know they're from the bottom of my heart because of the bonds created between us from our common experience in Nam.

The idea for this book had been swirling around in my head for years, but then, finally, in the summer of 2017, I decided to write it after reading newspaper stories recollecting The Summer of Love, remembering my 1967 induction, and realizing it had actually been fifty years ago. A few months later I made the first move by retrieving my military box from the outside shed and started rummaging through it. Early on I figured that if I wrote the book I'd call it something like "Reflections of Days Gone By," but then, after reading half a dozen or so of my letters, I noticed most of them began with "Dear Folks."

The box stayed in a corner of my living room until one day, which, ironically, turned out to be Groundhog Day (think Bill Murray and recurring events), I sat down on the edge of my living-room coffee table and began reading the letters with the idea of sorting them out by month.

About an hour later I found myself with my head hung down, buried in the palms of my hands. The emotional fatigue of all the flashbacks had me locked and frozen in thought. All those war memories that had been caged in dormancy had been released.

After getting to my feet I still hadn't fully realized what was happening. I had planned to enjoy a beer before starting supper, but not now; slight headache, exhausted, wondering if I was coming down with the flu or a nasty cold.

I drank a tall glass of water and rode my bicycle to the park to try and shake it out with exercise, but my body ached and I couldn't find the energy, then a light went on. It occurred to me that these could all be psychosomatic symptoms brought on by the war memories. Almost immediately I started feeling better; knowing was half the battle.

I got home and took a long, hot, relaxing bath and by the time I stepped out of the tub, I was back to my old self, ready to get into a cold beer and a hearty supper. And why am I telling you all this? So that you won't step on the same booby trap, and if you do you'll be able to find the peace and strength of knowing what's happening and that the meltdown is short-lived. And that the pill-popping regimen of the VA isn't always necessarily the most effective and productive solution.

You should also know that if you were expecting blood and guts like you see in the war movies, you won't see much of that in my letters unless you're able to read between the lines. My letters are mostly positive and upbeat so as not to worry the troops back home. But the fact is, my accumulative time in the field was probably no more than three months out of my 12-month tour of duty.

You could say I lucked out by contracting malaria six weeks after arriving in-country. Being sick in a hospital with a 106-degree temp wasn't fun, but at least I was a hell of a lot safer from being shot or blown up. And taking mortar fragments to the neck, which busted my collarbone while putting a couple of good-sized holes in my leg, sure as hell could have been

deadly; it turned out to be what we all called the “million-dollar wound”: serious enough to get me out of the field for a while, but not serious enough to screw up the rest of my life.

I look back on those days and feel like my time in Vietnam was a cake walk compared to lots of other guys who hardly ever got a break from the field except for an occasional rotation to the rear for a few days and the week-long R&R. Those are the guys who had it tough; those are the guys movies are made about. Some of them were gung-ho lifers, but most were common draftees. They’re the ones who spent day after day, week after week working hard, bone weary from little or no sleep, humping unfamiliar turf through jungles and mountains hauling weapons, ammo, and heavy packs into the next firefight where they never knew if they would live or die while watching friends get wasted.

Every day those guys fought a continuous battle with heat, cold, mosquitoes, and having to trudge through rivers, streams, and rice paddies leaving boots and socks soaked for days at a time. Every day they endured lousy food, dirt, grime, fear, anger, and frustration. And while the days were long, some nights were even longer with guard duty, sleeping on the ground in the rain, setting up all-night ambushes, and taking on enemy sniper fire from foxholes while longing to be back home with loved ones.

And then there were the point men, the gutsy guys who volunteered to lead lines of us soldiers through unfamiliar ground not knowing what's around the next bend or bush. My special shout-out is for one of our point men known as Bodacius, a happy-go-lucky black man from New Orleans who took a sniper bullet to the head while we were making our way up and down hills through densely-wooded jungle. He was still breathing when I reached him, but then he died.

These are all the men whom I admire, and I don't mean by labeling them with the phony conscience-cleansing type of label like "hero" so often tossed about these days by people who, probably, in another era would have referred to all of us as "baby killers" because they, too, would have been indoctrinated into hating the war so they would have ended up hating us, too.

I'm talking about guys who served longer and harder with distinguished valor and performance in the line of duty. In my book that's a true-grit soldier while most of the rest of us were just doing the jobs we hired on for as "lowly grunts," a term my brother, Tom, used recently to describe us infantrymen a few years after his failed bid for governor of Minnesota.

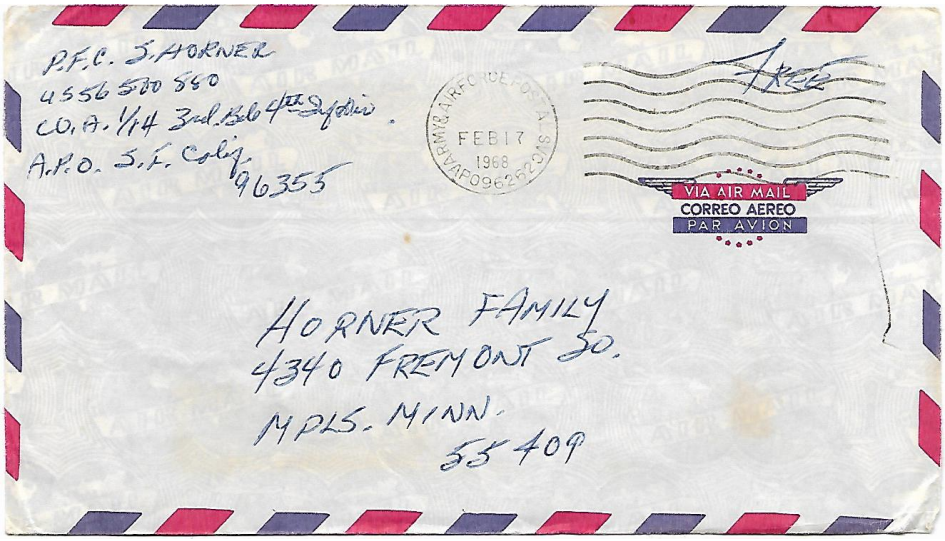
Wait a minute! Is that me sounding a little snarky toward a "loving" brother who sidestepped military service with a college deferment, yet shows us infantrymen little or no respect? Oh well, in my opinion, sometimes the reader can relate to the author getting personal and, at times, might even applaud it.

Finally, dear vet, you and I both know of the unspoken ugliness which occurred in Vietnam as it has in all wars since time began. For some reason, some soldiers are more susceptible to the weariness of war than others causing them to act out with revenge and frustration. You might call it being totally flipped out that takes a soldier out of his normal character to commit rape, cold-blooded murder, and enemy-body mutilation along with other horrific acts.

It's this regrettable past behavior that causes many of today's Vietnam vets the most grief, anxiety, and remorse because the awful act was so much out of their normal character. Is this you? Want my advice? Remember that your conscience is God's presence, and then wipe the slate of your conscience clean with a prayer by getting close to God and asking Jesus for forgiveness with your true contrition, because after all these years, that's all you can do . . . it's all water under the bridge. And you'll be happily surprised with the results because Jesus is all

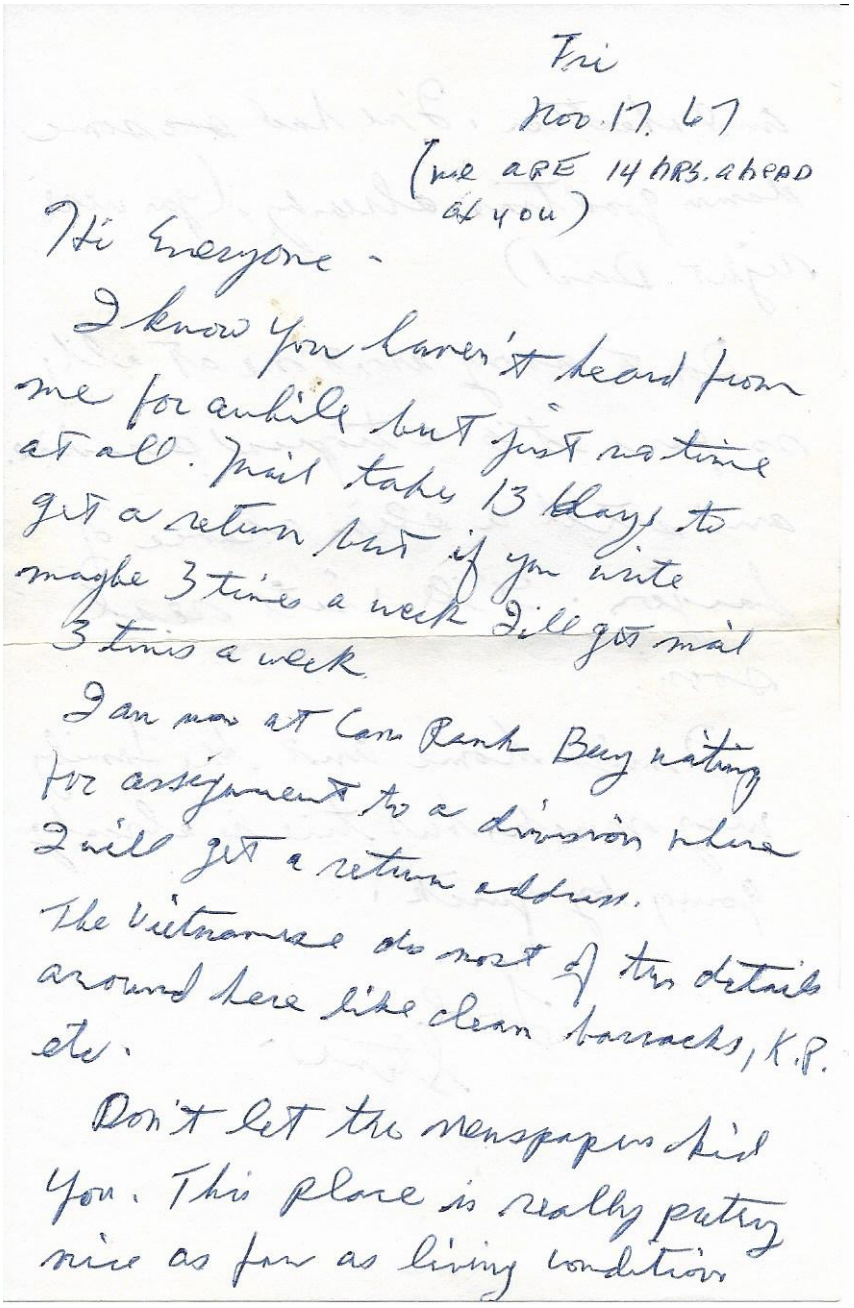
about forgiveness. Give it a try, pal. You'll find it's a lot more effective medicine than the VA's steady flow of pills which only serves to mute your inner voice of God.

Finally, as you read my personal letters keep in mind that Vietnam was America's final overseas campaign where handwritten letters, with occasional support by short-wave radio, was a soldier's only connection to home.



This envelope shows how my letters were typically mailed and received. Note the "Free" postage. Wow, that saved us about ten cents a letter.

Steve's Letters from November and December 1967



Fri
Nov. 17. 67
(we ARE 14 HRS. AHEAD
of you)

Hi Everyone -

I know you haven't heard from me for awhile but just no time at all. Mail takes 13 days to get a return but if you write maybe 3 times a week I'll get mail 3 times a week.

I am now at Camp Pendleton Boy waiting for assignment to a division where I will get a return address.

The Vietnamese do most of the details around here like clean barracks, K.P. etc.

Don't let the newspapers kid you. This place is really pretty nice as far as living conditions

and weather. I've had ~~soo~~some damn good times already. (you were right Dad)

Don't worry about me at all, so far it's a tropical paradise. and still a slim chance of lawyers. I'll write real soon.

I miss home and the family very much, but time is already going by quick.

Love
Steve.

Nov.
Wed. ~~Oct~~ 22,

Hi Everyone!

Well, everything has gone pretty good so far. I still don't have a return address, but I will have in a couple of days.

Cam Ranh Bay is really nice. Beautiful white sand all around and the South China Sea rolling in on the south end. While we were waiting for assignments they would put us on detail to keep our time occupied.

I guess you've read where all the action has taken place lately, Dak To, well I got sent to the fourth division in ~~Pl~~ Pleiku which has a unit in Dak To. Right now I'm at Pleiku waiting to be assigned to a unit. Tomorrow we start a two-day refresher course on the M-16 and patrols. Our perimeter is real tight here but all night we can ~~hear~~ hear artillery fighting from our perimeter.

No matter what you hear about what's going on, don't ever be worried about me because I know I can take care of my self.

I can hardly wait to get the tape recorder to hear everybody again. Be sure to load

up a couple reels. O.K.

Bien Hoa is a city of about 75 to 100,000 and you can never imagine filth and dirt like this town. It's a real dump. I'll show you pictures of it soon.

Today I had K.P. and we worked with a bunch of Vietnamese men and women and they are the nicest little characters you could ever imagine. For their size they work like dogs and are real easy to get along with them we had a lot of fun.

Jankowski and all the other fellas got shipped one day ahead of me but I've already made a lot of new friends.

I'm sorry I haven't written but I've had no time, it will be easier with the tape recorder.

Say hi to Harriet Gene & Kath for me and also Phil and Barb if you talk to them. If there is any trouble at home and you need to get in touch with me, go to the nearest Red Cross and tell them.

All in all things are going pretty good and of course I miss you all a lot.

The funniest thing happened yesterday in the finance building. I started talking to

them and they asked me if I could type etc. etc. and I said if it keeps me away from the field, I can do about anything. So they sent me to a 1st Lt. to talk about the whole thing. He said great, and right now he's trying to get my M. O. S. changed to a clerk. As it stands now, it's tough to change that M. O. S. but it has been done before and he told me they are really hunting for clerks. So keep hoping.

I'll write soon.

Love,
Steve.

P.S. Happy Thanksgiving —

4th REPLACEMENT DETACHMENT
4th INFANTRY DIVISION
PLEIKU, VIETNAM

THANKSGIVING MESSAGE

FAR FROM THE THANKSGIVING OF CHILDHOOD, WE FIND OURSELVES THIS DAY NOT AT THE FAMILY TABLE ENJOYING THE TURKEY, COMPANIONSHIP, AND THOUGHTS OF YESTERYEAR; BUT AT A NEW TABLE, WITH OTHER FRIENDS AND DIFFERENT THOUGHTS. THE MORE MATURE THANKSGIVING THAT THIS YEAR HAS BROUGHT US HAS FOUND US IN A PLACE WE HAD NOT EXPECTED, FACING AN EXACTING CHALLENGE ... WE HAVE FOUND OURSELVES IN A WORLD THAT DOES NOT MEASURE UP TO OUR CHILDHOOD STANDARDS ... A WORLD IN WHICH A BASIC IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT REQUIRES OF US MANY SACRIFICES AND STRENUOUS ENDEAVORS. CAN WE NOT FIND, HOWEVER, IN THIS SITUATION THE REAL MEANING OF THANKSGIVING? THE REALITY OF A HARD WON AND HARD KEPT PEACE FOR OURSELVES, OUR FAMILIES, AND OUR NATION. CAN WE NOT THANK GOD THIS DAY WITH A TRUE REALIZATION OF THE VALUE OF OUR SEVERAL BLESSINGS? HAVE WE NOT LEARNED TO BE TRULY THANKFUL?

COMMANDING

THANKSGIVING DAY MENU

Shrimp Cocktail Crackers

Roast Turkey with Bread Dressing

Giblet Gravy

Cranberry Sauce Mashed Potatoes

Glazed Sweet Potatoes Buttered Peas

Assorted Relish Tray

Butter Flake Rolls Butter

Fruit Cake

Mincemeat Pie or Pumpkin Pie with Whipped Cream

Assorted Fresh Fruit

Assorted Nuts Assorted Candy

Tea Coffee Milk

OVER