

DALE RITTERBUSCH

Ice Bowl

*... the American people will no longer
tolerate the Vietnamese caring less about
winning than we do.*

—U.S. Embassy official, reported 12/31/67

Frostbite is for losers

—Vince Lombardi

After the officers course at Ft. Benning,
a stint as training officer
running various rifle ranges,
then a chemical warfare course
at McClellan, just outside
Anniston, Alabama where
the orientation officer says
no one should be after dark—
Don't even stray off the main highway
he says, *It's not a good place to be,*
I get orders, a unit waiting
to be deployed to Viet Nam,

also not a good place to be,
December '67, and like they always said—
motto of the Army—*Hurry up and wait*:
we just sat there, more training,
and plenty of time to think about it,
so we got together and watched football,
lieutenants newly commissioned
including a grizzled former E-6 from Texas
with enough enlisted time for half a career,
part Indian, a Cowboys fan, and me
from Wisconsin—and the title game
was tight, thirteen below, wind chill
minus seventy, the field brittle as ice,
Dallas ahead by three
in the fourth, less than a minute
to go, ball on the one, and Donnie Anderson
can't move it a single inch against
the frozen Dallas line—two running plays
and nothing but time on the clock eaten up
until there's but sixteen seconds left
forcing Starr to call his final timeout:
he confers with Lombardi, says he can
sneak it past the goal though the coach
wants Mircein to punch it in;
Lombardi capitulates, says *Do it
and let's get the hell out of here*.
Starr, ever a master of deception,
calls Brown right, thirty-one wedge,
but the blocking assignments are the same
and Starr keeps the ball instead
of handing off to Mircein:
on the snap Kramer slams Jethro Pugh,
jams him outside just enough for Starr
to run through the gap, fall and
stretch across the goal: the Texan,
the Indian lieutenant, is crushed
like a beer can under a tank,

and I almost feel sorry for him:
as Tom Landry said after the game,
It was a dumb call
in a world filled with dumb calls,
but elation knows little of mercy,
and next month there's Tet,
a hard year for everyone,
not an inch of ground gained
in a losing season, no matter how
you look at it, and he didn't do well
when he came back, cold sweats
in a Texas heat wave, knees stiff from shrapnel,
bone shattered like ice, an unacceptable loss
where *Winning isn't everything*
he keeps telling himself
as the temperature falls,
as the wind—it must be the wind—
sends an icy chill down his shivering back.

A frequent contributor to **WLA**, **Dale Ritterbusch** is the author of two collections of poetry, *Lessons Learned* and *Far From the Temple of Heaven*.

