

Christmas

IN THE TRENCHES

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While looking for a Christmas item to write on, I uncovered a most intriguing event. Historians mark a lull in World War I where enemy soldiers ceased battle in order to celebrate Christmas on the frontlines.

The gruesome war had been draining on, and as Christmas Eve 1914 approached, soldiers realized they would not be returning to family tables for Christmas dinners as they had been promised by their leaders. Instead, they knew only there would be cold barracks in place of happy hearths; canons instead of merrymaking sleigh rides; bloody wounds rather than ruby ribbons tied about snowy trees;

“As Christmas Eve approached, soldiers realized they would not be returning to family tables for Christmas dinners.”

cold rations rather than homemade breads and pastries; the hard faces of enemies rather than the soft lips of sweethearts—these the grim realities of war. Historians record, the “food was scarce, the rats and the lice had taken over the trenches...”¹ “The soldiers—unequipped to face the rigors of the cold and rain—found themselves wallowing in a freezing mire of mud and the decaying bodies of the fallen.”² As the night began, memories of home, family, and civility flooded the GIs’ minds and memories of Christmases past, like cold torrents, washed over their minds. Some touched the letters tucked into their pockets. Others gazed on pictures of their children. Still others felt the gnaw of hunger churning in their bellies for their mothers’ Christmas pies.

Then, out of the chill, damp night, bands of German soldiers began to raise small flickering Tannenbaums aka Christmas trees—condolence gifts from the German government. As they did this, men on one side began to join into Christmas



carols. In No Man's Land, the area between the two battling armies, British soldiers recognized the sound of the familiar hymns, looked up at the brigade of lights across the berm, paused for a moment, even wondering if it was a trick—but then, they instead sang heartily back. Steadily the men grew closer; rifles were put down and in place peaceful civility was taken up.

History scholars today call this the Christmas Truce of 1914 or “Christmas in the Trenches.” This was later romanticized in the block-buster movie, *Jeux Noel*, and lasted the entire Christmas Day and up to New Year's Day along many trenches. British, French, and German soldiers in merriment exchanged brandy, letters, pictures from home, sacred rations and chocolate candies with enemies. In yuletide, warriors, like giddy school children, played soccer (who won varies on the historian's country), buried each other's dead and sang “Stille Nacht.” Performer and songwriter John McCutcheon penned, “and in two tongues one song filled up that sky... The cannons rested silent, the gas clouds rolled no more, as Christmas brought us respite from the war.”³ War



memorabilia and photos today show officers in full regalia, standing eye to eye conversing pleasantly—goodwill trumping country lines.

With this account, the writer in me recalled another truce, one where heaven went across No Man's Land into earth. In the first Christmas Truce, it's possible the most sanguine angel in heaven begged: “Please, let us go; it will be okay.”

The Father answered, “It isn't safe. Do you know



how violent sin is? Sin has separated our troops. Humans have made slaves of one another, harmed their children, hurt their neighbors, and betrayed their families.”

Yet, the angel persisted: “You’re already waging Operation: War on Sin. You just sent—the baby across enemy lines.” Reluctantly the Father agreed.



Heaven touched earth if but for a moment.

Whereby, the “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” Christmas Truce was born—a spiritual trove not of Hollywood making or Disney stardust, but of heaven touching earth, reconciling if but for a moment—in No Man’s Land.

Then, I read the saddest line of McCutcheon’s account of WWI, “Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more. With sad farewell we each began to settle back to war.”³ Some historians say one side said “Merry Christmas” and the other waved back “thank you.” Three shots were taken up and the war begun again.

“The Gloria in Excelsis Deo” Christmas

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And so the same with the Angel Truce: Heaven was heaven once more and earth went back to being earth; and the shepherds wiped the stardust from their eyes. Yet, for that moment, both sang together as one— But, “in two tongues one song filled up that sky.” And every cell in our fallible, terrible, sinful, bending selves lives and lives again—because of the Christmas Truce.



Merry Christmas,

Cindy Chamberlin

This story was inspired in part by the song, “Christmas in the Trenches.” To hear John McCutcheon’s work, see link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJi41RWaTCs>.

Cited:

1 “Minnesota Public Radio News.” Episode. *All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914*, November 14, 2011.

2 “First World War.com-Feature Articles-The Christmas Truce.” First World War.com—A Multimedia History of World War I. Web. 14 Nov. 2011.

3^{a,b,c,d,e,f} “Christmas in the Trenches,” Lyrics—John McCutcheon.” Song Lyrics. Web. 14 Nov. 2011.

