

TIS THE SEASON

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As Christmas is fast approaching ! So does people's attitudes change towards family, friends, and strangers, their attitudes even changes towards their **enemy's** as we look at history from and World War I, and World War II.

1914 The Christmas Truce

Just after midnight on Christmas morning, the majority of German troops engaged in World War I cease firing their guns and artillery and commence to sing Christmas carols. At certain points along the eastern and western fronts, the soldiers of Russia, France, and Britain even heard brass bands joining the Germans in their joyous singing.

At the first light of dawn, many of the German soldiers emerged from their trenches and approached the Allied lines across no-man's-land, calling out "Merry Christmas" in their enemies' native tongues. At first, the Allied soldiers feared it was a trick, but seeing the Germans unarmed they climbed out of their trenches and shook hands with the enemy soldiers. The men exchanged presents of cigarettes and plum puddings and sang carols and songs. There was even a documented case of soldiers from opposing sides playing a good-natured game of soccer.

The so-called Christmas Truce of 1914 came only five months after the outbreak of war in Europe and was one of the last examples of the outdated notion of chivalry between enemies in warfare. In 1915, the bloody conflict of World War I erupted in all its technological fury, and the concept of another Christmas Truce became unthinkable.

About World War 2: A Small Christmas Truce

No Repeat of the Christmas Truce of 1914

In World War Two, there was no truce similar to the one that occurred during Christmas in 1914 in World War One. In that earlier conflict, thousands of British, French and German soldiers, exhausted by the unprecedented slaughter of the previous five months, left their trenches and met the enemy in No Man's Land, exchanging gifts, food and stories. Generals on both sides, determined to prevent fraternization in future, saw to it that such activities would be severely punished and so there were no more Christmas truces the rest of that war or the next. But, in December of 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, while the Americans fought for their lives against a massive German onslaught, a tiny shred of human decency happened on Christmas Eve. A German mother made it so.

Three American soldiers, one badly wounded, were lost in the snow-covered Ardennes Forest as they tried to find the American lines. They had been walking for three days while the sounds of battle echoed in the hills and valleys all around them. Then, on Christmas Eve, they came upon a small cabin in the woods. Elisabeth Vincken and her 12-year-old son, Fritz, had been hoping her husband would arrive to spend Christmas with them, but it was now too late. The Vinckens had been bombed out of their home in Aachen, Germany and had managed to move into the hunting cabin in the Hurtgen Forest about four miles from Monschau near the Belgian border. Fritz's father stayed behind to work and visited them when he could. Their Christmas meal would now have to wait for his arrival. Elisabeth and Fritz were alone in the cabin.

Visitors at the Cabin

There was a knock on the door. Elisabeth blew out the candles and opened the door to find two enemy American soldiers standing at the door and a third lying in the snow. Despite their rough appearance, they seemed hardly older than boys. They were armed and could have simply burst in, but they hadn't, so she invited them inside and they carried their wounded comrade into the warm cabin. Elisabeth didn't speak English and they didn't speak German, but they managed to communicate in broken French. Hearing their story and seeing their condition-- especially the wounded soldier-- Elisabeth started preparing a meal. She sent Fritz to get six potatoes and Hermann the rooster-- his stay of execution, delayed by her husband's absence, rescinded. Hermann's namesake was Hermann Goering, the Nazi leader, who Elisabeth didn't care much for.

More Visitors

While Hermann roasted, there was another knock on the door and Fritz went to open it, thinking there might be more lost Americans, but instead there were four armed German soldiers. Knowing the penalty for harboring the enemy was execution, Elisabeth, white as a ghost, pushed past Fritz and stepped outside. There was a corporal and three very young soldiers, who wished her a Merry Christmas, but they were lost and hungry. Elisabeth told them they were welcome to come into the warmth and eat until the food was all gone, but that there were others inside who they would not consider friends. The corporal asked sharply if there were Americans inside and she said there were three who were lost and cold like they were and one was wounded. The corporal stared hard at her until she said "Es ist Heiligabend und hier wird nicht geschossen." "It is the Holy Night and there will be no shooting here." She insisted they leave their weapons outside. Dazed by these events, they slowly complied and Elisabeth went inside, demanding the same of the Americans. She took their weapons and stacked them outside next to the Germans'.

Tension and Roast Hermann

Understandably, there was a lot of fear and tension in the cabin as the Germans and Americans eyed each other warily, but the warmth and smell of roast Hermann and potatoes began to take the edge off. The Germans produced a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread. While Elisabeth tended to the cooking, one of the German soldiers, an ex-medical student, examined the

wounded American. In English, he explained that the cold had prevented infection but he'd lost a lot of blood. He needed food and rest.

By the time the meal was ready, the atmosphere was more relaxed. Two of the Germans were only sixteen; the corporal was 23. As Elisabeth said grace, Fritz noticed tears in the exhausted soldiers' eyes-- both German and American.

Parting Company

The truce lasted through the night and into the morning. Looking at the Americans' map, the corporal told them the best way to get back to their lines and provided them with a compass. When asked whether they should instead go to Monschau, the corporal shook his head and said it was now in German hands. Elisabeth returned all their weapons and the enemies shook hands and left, in opposite directions. Soon they were all out of sight; the truce was over.

Your Mother Saved My Life

Fritz and his parents survived the war. His mother and father passed away in the Sixties and by then he had gotten married and moved to Hawaii, where he opened Fritz's European Bakery in Kapalama, a neighborhood in Honolulu. For years he tried to locate any of the German or American soldiers without luck, hoping to corroborate the story and see how they had fared. President Reagan heard of his story and referenced it in a 1985 speech he gave in Germany as an example of peace and reconciliation. But it wasn't until the television program *Unsolved Mysteries* broadcast the story in 1995, that it was discovered that a man living in a Frederick, Maryland nursing home had been telling the same story for years. Fritz flew to Frederick in January 1996 and met with Ralph Blank, one of the American soldiers who still had the German compass and map. Ralph told Fritz "Your mother saved my life". Fritz said the reunion was the high point of his life.

Fritz Vincken also managed to later contact one of the other Americans, but none of the Germans. Sadly, he died in on December 8, 2002, almost 58 years to the day of the Christmas truce. He was forever grateful that his mother got the recognition she deserved.

The Shepherds and Angels Luke 2:8-20

8And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13And suddenly there

was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. 15And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 18And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. 20And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

No other event has ever had the impact that the birth of JESUS has had on the world AMEN

References

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