

## World War II and the Miracle of Peace

### Christmas, 1914

The Great War was only a few months old, but already the two sides were deadlocked in the grisly new pattern of trench warfare. Both the British and Germans had learned to shovel miles-long ditches in the rocky French farmland, ditches from which men blasted at one another with machine guns and mortars. In these muddy, rat-infested trenches, British soldiers opened soggy Christmas greetings from their King while a few hundred yards away German troops read a message from the Kaiser.

Between the rows of trenches, where shivering men thought about families at home, lay a barren no-man's-land, a zone of craters and shattered trees where anything that moved was instantly fired at. So narrow was this strip that whenever there was a lull in the roar of the guns, each side could hear the clink of cooking gear from the other.

Late on Christmas Eve, with the sleet tapering off and the temperature dropping, a British Tommy on guard with the Fifth Scottish Rifles heard a different sound drifting across no-man's-land. In the German trenches a man was singing.

"Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht..."

It was a tune the British soldier recognized as "Silent Night, Holy Night." The sentry began to hum along with the melody. Then, louder, he chimed in with the English words, singing an odd duet with his enemy beyond the barbed wire.

"...heilige Nacht...holy night..."

A second British soldier crawled to the sentry station and joined in. Little by little others on both sides picked up the song, blending their rough voices across the shell-pocked landscape. The Germans broke out with a second carol, "O Tannenbaum," and the British replied with "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." On and on the antiphonal singing went. A British soldier with binoculars reported that the Germans had hoisted a ragged evergreen with lighted candles in the branches to the top of the sandbag barrier. As dawn of Christmas day broke, signs appeared on both sides, in two languages: "Merry Christmas."

Pulled by a force stronger than fear, one by one the soldiers started laying down their arms, creeping beneath barbed wire and around mortar holes into no-man's-land. At first it was just a few men, then more and more, until scores of British and German troops met together in the first light of Christmas day. The boys brought out photographs of mothers and wives, exchanged gifts of candy and cigarettes. Someone produced a soccer ball and the men played on a few yards of crater-free ground.

Then the Soldier's truce was over.

By mid-morning Christmas day, horrified officers had summoned their men back to the trenches; firing had recommenced. Within hours the Fifth Scottish Rifles issued an order forbidding such contact: "We are here to fight, not to fraternize."

And the soldiers obeyed. The war, as history tragically records, destroyed almost that entire generation of young men on both sides. But there was an indelible memory in the minds of those

who lived to recall that first Christmas at the front. The memory of a few hours when their master had been neither King nor Kaiser, but the Prince of Peace.\*

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No matter the conflict that may be raging in your life, take a moment to withdraw your loyalty from the ego's world and allow the Prince of Peace to be born into your awareness. Even if it is only for a moment, ask the Holy Spirit to be your eyes, your tongue, your hands, your feet, so that your one purpose may be to bless the world with miracles of peace. (Lesson 353 paraphrased)

~ Beverly Hutchinson McNeff