

Silent Night — The WWI Soldiers' Christmas Truce

Jamaica Plain, December 19, 2004, Rev. Terry Burke

You have probably already heard the song "Snoopy and the Red Baron" multiple times this holiday season. Snoopy, the WWI dog fighter pilot, is forced to land behind enemy lines on Christmas by the German ace, who then offers him a glass of spirits. Certainly that was the spirit of the WWI soldiers' Christmas truce on the Western Front in 1914. Recently my old friend Jim Mathes, an astute social critic in the tradition of Gore Vidal, sent me a copy of Stanley Weintraub's moving book *Silent Night*, about the Christmas truce. I draw upon the book for this sermon. I had read stories about enemy soldiers playing soccer with each other on Christmas Day, 1914. I didn't know that most of Flanders kept the truce, and it was extended in some areas until New Year's Day.

In 1914, in five months of war, 1,000,000 lives had already been lost. Pope Benedict XV had called for a Christmas truce, which was ignored by political and military leaders. The Germans were winning, and both sides were digging dugouts in the water logged fields of Flanders, which were sometimes below sea level. The drainage system had been destroyed by the war, so they were in a sea of mud. A cold snap turned the mess to frozen mud. Field troops had simple rations, while the staff at the headquarters ate vast gourmet holiday meals.

On Christmas Eve, the Germans began singing carols like "Stille Nacht," "Silent Night." Thousands of Tannenbaum had been shipped to the front, which the Germans decorated with lit candles on their parapets. Along the line, Germans wrote signs like "We No Fight, You No Fight," and walked into "No Man's Land" under white flags to arrange a truce. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose son was killed in the war, wrote that this shared "ancient Saxon tree worship" made the British willing to believe that the offer was peaceful and not a ruse. As with Snoopy's Red Baron, the offer was initiated by the Germans. Usually the Germans calling for an end to the shooting were Saxons,

Bavarians, and Westphalens, who hated the militaristic Prussians. Perhaps the Catholic Bavarians had heard of the Pope's call for truce?

The soldiers decided to "play the game," as they put it, before higher up officers could stop them. Thousands celebrated together, exchanging plum pudding for sausages and beer for tobacco. The Germans could speak more English than the British knew German. 80,000 Germans had lived in Great Britain. before the war, where they often worked as cabbies, barbers, and waiters. Called up for military service, some had families still in Britain. One German barber recognized a British client on Christmas Day and gave him a haircut! There was a brisk exchange of souvenirs. Especially prized by the British were the pointed German helmets and their belt buckles with the inscription "Gott mitt uns" ("God with us"). In the spirit of Christmas, small groups of men were laughing and joking along much of the line. Reading about the Silent Christmas Night of WWI makes me uneasy remembering General George Washington's surprise attack on the Hessians at Christmas time in our War for Independence.

The men did play a great deal of soccer or football on Christmas Day, 1914, However, first, the dead soldiers left in "No Man's Land" (some had been lying there for weeks) had to be buried. At one joint memorial, the 23rd Psalm was recited in English and German. As Weintraub points out, along the front religious rites celebrating both birth and death were conducted that Christmas Day.

The soldiers had few real soccer balls, so they played with things like a cap filled with straw. The enemies played with great enthusiasm, eager to compete in a non-deadly way. The distance between the opposing trenches was often about the width of a standard soccer pitch or field. Somehow, the men played around shell holes, barbed wire, and ditches. One German unit was greatly amused to discover that Scots really don't wear anything under their kilts. The truce was not universal , and soldiers could be fraternizing and playing soccer while a mile away others were engaged in heavy fighting.

While it was considered bad form to spy on enemy positions or to improve one's own fortifications, many fixed up their rudimentary dugouts, and even repaired barriers. In one instance British troops borrowed a maul from the Germans to repair their barbed wire. An element of danger remained in being in 'No Man's Land.' Officers would sometimes order troops to fire, so soldiers would shoot over the heads of the enemy. However, bullets could ricochet, and in one instance the Germans apologized for the death they had inadvertently caused. Weintraub notes that such an apology would be cold comfort for the 39-year-old postal worker's wife and three children.

Not all soldiers approved of the friendly Christmas mingling. One highly decorated German veteran strongly disapproved. He was thought odd by his comrades because he refused to attend worship services and didn't smoke or drink. "Have you no German sense of honor left at all," argued Corporal Adolph Hitler.

Saxons and Anglo Saxons were more likely to stop fighting than the French, whose country had been invaded by the Germans. However, even some Algerian French troops, who were Muslims, agree to stop shooting. British Indian troops were peacefully reminded of the Hindu holiday Divali by the Christmas celebration and truce.

In many areas the truce held for at least a second day. For the British, December 26th was Boxing Day, when one remembered the servants and the poor, and for the Germans it was "Second Christmas," a more ceremonial Christmas day. Terrible cold rainy weather helped extend the truce even longer in many areas. One British officer reported that two of his men had drowned in the mud.

Also, the truce held for a while longer because it was clear, contrary to nationalistic propaganda, that the enemy was not a monster. The units that had laughed and sang and drank with the enemy were quickly rotated out of the front lines by their headquarters, as they were now considered unreliable. Still, the truce held in some places until New Year's Day. Then tradition and discipline among the soldiers caused the war to resume. A golden opportunity to negotiate for peace was lost, and soon casualties on the Western

front were over 6,000 a day. Weintraub never mentions if anything like the truce occurred on the Eastern Front. Perhaps it didn't happen there because of the absence of trenches and their regular proximity?

On Easter 1915, some Germans tried to arrange another truce, but were rebuffed. On Christmas 1915, the brass made sure that history didn't repeat itself - a constant artillery fire was kept up, and units were ordered to attack. As Weintraub quotes a soldier, "Nobody said we couldn't like them; we just had to kill them." The book makes abundantly clear the humanity of the ordinary soldiers and the brutality of the commanders, isolated from the fight.

Weintraub also tells how in 1999, the 85th anniversary of the Christmas truce, 9 so-called "Khaki chums" (who sound like they'd watched a lot of Monty Python) spent 9 days in December in Flanders re-enacting the truce. They lived in sodden trenches they'd dug, cooking their food and sleeping in the rain. The locals and the media found them fascinating. When they were leaving, after cleaning up and filling in their trenches, they happened on a lark to take two planks to form a cross, and set it in the mud in memory of the truce. The "Khaki chums" were shocked months later to learn that locals had treated the boards with wood preservative and set the cross in concrete. Now, in season, poppies grow around it.

Some journalists of the period compared the truce to the Medieval 'Peace of God,' where combatants would pause for worship and to bury their dead. The 1914 Christmas truce was more than that; the spirit of Christmas convinced soldiers to stop fighting and act as friends. Somehow the trees and carols made the soldiers willing to risk going out into "No Man's Land".... Many people take risks in the Christmas story - Mary in bearing the Holy Child, Joseph in marrying the pregnant Mary, the shepherds in leaving their flocks, and the Magi in traveling to a strange country. How do the trees and songs of Christmas call us to take risks in the name of the Prince of Peace?

