

A Miracle in No Man's Land

Okay, it's time to get serious. Before you talk about miracles and magic, let's have a good cold look at what happened in No Man's Land between British and German troops, December, 1914. Before you grab the Kleenex or get all teary and sentimental, you should remember that perfectly good reasons explain why peace broke out amidst war, why, for one unforgettable Christmas, a battlefield became an enchanted cartoon.

Be reasonable. The magic of that moment is perfectly explainable.

After all, *Christmas truces had happened before*. In the public mind, the great battleground Christmas of 1914 stands alone. Not so. This was not the first, so stifle yourself.

Second, war giddiness was still in the air. The Great War had just begun. A thousand Brits thought marching to France was a fine and proper test of manhood. Death had not yet held the throne for four long years, as it eventually would. That Christmas, war wasn't yet hell. So why not eat, drink, and be merry? --'twas Yuletide, so "Deck the halls."

What's more, most of the partiers were reservists who'd just arrived at the front. First line veterans had either trudged back, or had not returned at all. Rookies lined the trenches and hopped out quickly that Christmas.

And consider this (the Brits did). Ethnically, the German troops were Saxons and Bavarians, sweet-natured gents. Had they been Prussian, no Brit would have peeked over the edge of the trench, even with a helmet.

Look, you didn't have to have a crystal ball to guess that such a truce would happen. One British captain smelled one coming and commanded his men not to take part:

Friendly intercourse with the enemy, unofficial armistices (e.g. "we won't fire if you don't" etc.) and the exchange of tobacco and other comforts, however tempting and occasionally amusing they may be, are absolutely prohibited.

And then there's this: neither Brits nor Gerries were on their home turf. No French or Belgian troops swapped cigars or doffed each other's grog that Christmas. The war was being fought on *their* land, after all, so pass the ammunition.

Listen! Even the darkness weighed in. No Man's Land was strewn with the dead. Dozens of bloody corpses lay where advances from either side had failed. The yule celebration began as a burial detail--men who'd been shooting at each other teamed up to dig graves and lay their mutual fallen heroes to rest. Read Psalm 90 sometime: "teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Imagine killing each other with that funeral favorite playing in your soul.

There's perfectly logical explanations for a Christmas truce in No Man's Land. No big miracle. Just think about it.

Or not. Imagine how hard it would have been to shoot at men when thirty yards away, suddenly dozens of lighted trees went up on Christmas Eve. Good German folk had sent their boys half the Black Forest. You'd have to be heartless to shoot through a candle-lit chorus of shimmering Christmas trees.

Just imagine. An amazing sight.

And then there's this. Much of the world sits in silence on Christmas Eve, as if we all await the bejeweled skies all around to come alive once more with a heavenly chorus blessing us all with words we need so badly to hear— "Fear Not. Fear Not."

There's a king in a barn, the old story maintains. We're living a miracle.

No matter how you parse it, the peace that drifted in over the killing fields that night in France still breathes life into us because it came in on angel's wings. When those boys with their sodden boots climbed out of trenches and into each other's company, they created a joy that warms the soul a century later and a couple thousand miles away.

No organ, no trumpet, no drum—just a chorus of gravely men's voices airing an ancient melody in a harmony of language, in the night and the cold. "Silent Night, holy night. . . *alles schlaft, einsam wacht.*"

All is calm. All is bright.

It most certainly was a miracle.

Fear not.