

A Brief Moment of Christmas Peace

The impromptu Christmas truce of 1914 was a rare moment when human solidarity overrode the demands of hatred and war, when the guns fell silent over the Western Front of World War I and enemies became briefly friends, as Michael Winship recalls.

By Michael Winship

Last Friday night, I went to a small off-Broadway theater to see an engaging, poignant one-man show about the Christmas Truce of 1914. The title was *Our Friends, the Enemy*, written and performed by a young British actor named Alex Gwyther.

I felt bad for him; the theater was only about a third full that evening, probably because of the approaching holiday, but perhaps also because we Americans simply are too often indifferent to a century-old fight that scorched the European continent.

You would scarcely know it here in the United States, but since last year, the British, French, Germans and others of our Western allies have been commemorating the 100th anniversary of World War I, a conflict of extreme foolishness and colossal consequences, like almost every other.

Maybe our interest in this centennial has seemed lacking so far because we didn't enter The Great War until 1917. Or maybe it's because others' losses were so much more devastating than our own we lost more than 53,000 lives but half of all Frenchmen who were between the ages of 20 and 32 died, and more than 35 percent of German men ages 19 to 22.

Some 723,000 British were killed, more than would die during World War II. No wonder, as Benjamin Schwarz wrote in *The Atlantic* back in 1999, "The war is Britain's national trauma, and British and Commonwealth historians compulsively revisit it in the way that American historians revisit the Civil War."

So I felt bad for the actor and sad that more people weren't in the theater to hear an important story ingrained in British memory so profoundly that last Christmas a UK supermarket chain even used a highly romanticized version of the events as the basis of a wildly popular and sentimental TV commercial.

In December 1914, World War I had been raging in Europe for some five months; British, French and Belgian troops fighting against Germany and Austria. Along the western front, trench warfare rapidly became the norm, soldiers on both sides deeply dug in, stuck in mud, filth and pestilence with a no-man's land

sometimes just a few dozen yards wide running between the lines. This stalemate was steadily punctuated with rifle and cannon fire, death and anguished cries from the wounded.

On Dec. 7 that year, Pope Benedict XV called for a Christmas Eve truce, “that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang.” His plea was rejected.

Few if any of the foot soldiers may have known about that papal imploration, but many of them took it upon themselves to make their own peace, however brief. On Christmas Eve, German troops along the line raised across the trench tops small Christmas trees lit by candles. The two sides sang carols to one another, their voices drifting warily across no man’s land.

With daylight on Christmas morning, on each side, men cautiously peered from their trenches and a few ventured out to shake hands with their foes and exchange holiday greetings, followed by more and more. Artillery fire stopped.

James Boyce, the soldier played by Alex Gwyther in *Our Friends, the Enemy*, tells the tale:

“Grey and khaki begin to blend into one. Order of military rank and the barriers of language vanish, as they shake hands and introduce themselves in a mix of broken English and silent gestures. They offer small gifts of friendship, drinks, cigarettes, buttons, badges, sketches they’ve drawn and in the warm absurdity of their Christmas morning, some exchange addresses to meet up after the war.”

There are stories of impromptu soccer games or simple kick rounds with an actual ball or something vaguely spherical improvised from tin cans or straw-stuffed sandbags, nothing as organized as the match that supermarket ad suggests. More organized were burial details that the momentary peace allowed to retrieve the dead.

“We worked with the enemy,” the character James Boyce recalls, “collecting the men whom we had killed together and attempted to clean up the mess of this war. It slowly dawned on us all war was still upon us. A strange orange slithered over the dead, and two armies placed their heads in their hands.”

That Christmas of 1914, the peace lasted in some places longer than others; and in still others it never happened at all. Afterwards, word came from on high that such behavior, insubordination!, would never again be permitted. One German infantryman in the trenches also thought it was a disgrace.

“Such a thing should not happen in wartime,” he declared. His name was Adolf

Hitler.

In *Our Friends, the Enemy*, James Boyce recalls, “Tucked away from the war in a quiet corner of France, sheltered by trees and covered in frost, thick twigs tied together to form small crucifixes lunge out from the fluffy snow. A worn helmet rests under each cross.

“An old tree, built with a thick body stands over the small cemetery, its long branches watching over the small bumps in the snow. In its trunk, words have been carved using the bayonet of a rifle:

“*Death unites us all, and we all rest on the same side.*”

They called it “the war to end all wars.” Pause for sardonic laughter, fast forward to today. Once again, politicians and others run around ferociously beating the war drums, pandering to our fears and baser instincts. In the end, while there are really very few differences among us, there will always be those who seek to turn those small differences into monsters. Do not let that happen.

We all rest on the same side. See you next year.

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