

# A Christmas Message of Peace

Despite the commercialism of Christmas, some positive messages break through, often in movie classics, such as Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life" and Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol." But another entry should be "Joyeux Noel," a movie about the soldiers' Christmas truce in 1914, writes Gary G. Kohls.

By Gary G. Kohls

On Christmas Eve, 101 years ago, one of the most unusual aberrations in the bloody history of the organized mass slaughter that we call war occurred. It was so profound and so disturbing to the professional war-makers that it was never to be repeated again.

"Christian" Europe was in the fifth month of the so-called Great War that would grind on for another four years of what amounted to mutual suicide, ending with all the original participants financially, spiritually and morally bankrupted.



British, Scottish, French, Belgian, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Serbian and Russian clergymen from church pulpits in those overwhelmingly Christian nations were doing their part in fomenting the un-Christian-like patriotic fervor that would result in a holocaust that destroyed four empires, killed upwards of 20 million soldiers and civilians, and resulted in the psychological and physical decimation of an entire generation of young men in France, Britain, Germany and Russia.

Christianity, it needs to be noted, began as a highly ethical religion because of the teachings and actions of the nonviolent Jesus of Nazareth (and his pacifist apostles and followers). Tragically, the nations that profess Christianity as their state religion have, for the past 1,700 years, never nurtured their churches to be truly peacemaking churches.

And, contrary to the ethical teachings of Jesus, modern Christian churches have not been, by and large, actively resisting their particular nation's imperial

aspirations, their aggressive wars or their country's war-makers and war profiteers. Instead, the churches have become a bloody instrument for whatever warmongers and corporations that have achieved political and economic power.

So, it wasn't much of a surprise to see that the religious leaders that were involved in World War I were convinced that God was on their particular side and therefore not on the side of those followers of Jesus that had been fingered as enemies on the other side. The obvious contradiction (that both sides were worshipping and praying to the same god) escaped the vast majority of combatants and their spiritual counselors.

Pulpits and pews all over Europe with few exceptions reverberated with flag-waving fervor, sending clear messages to their doomed warrior-sons that it was their Christian duty to march off to kill the equally doomed Christian soldiers on the other side of the line. And for the civilians back home, it was their Christian duty to "support the boots on the ground" who were destined to return home dead or among many of the survivors wounded, psychologically and spiritually broken, disillusioned and faithless.

A mere five months into this frustratingly stalemated war (newly featuring trench warfare, artillery, machine guns, tanks, aerial bombardment and poison gas), the first Christmas of the war on the Western Front seemed to offer a respite to the exhausted, freezing and demoralized troops.

Christmas was the holiest of Christian holidays for all sides, and in this time of death, hunger, thirst, frostbitten limbs, sleep deprivation, shell shock, suicidality, traumatic brain injuries, mortal wounds and homesickness, Christmas 1914 had a very special meaning.

Christmas reminded the soldiers of the good food, safety, warm homes and beloved families that they had left behind and which – they now suspected – they might never see again. They did not yet know that even if they survived physically, they would never be the same again.

The soldiers in the trenches desperately sought some respite from the misery of the water-logged, putrid, rat- and lice-infested, corpse-ridden and increasingly frozen trenches.

### **Trench Warfare in 1914**

By this time, the frontline soldiers on both sides were wondering how they could possibly have fallen for the propaganda campaigns that had convinced them that their side was pre-destined to be victorious and that they would be "home before Christmas" where they would be celebrated as conquering heroes.

Instead, each frontline soldier was at the end of his emotional rope because of the unrelenting artillery barrages against which they were defenseless. If they weren't killed or physically maimed by the artillery shells and bombs, they would eventually be emotionally destroyed by "shell-shock" (now known as posttraumatic stress disorder – PTSD), suffering horrifying nightmares, flashbacks (usually misdiagnosed as a sign of mental illness), blindness, sleep deprivation, suicidality, depression, hyper-alertness and any number of other mental and neurological abnormalities, including traumatic brain injury.

Among the other common "killers of the soul" were the perpetual hunger, malnutrition, infections (such as typhus and dysentery), louse infestations, trench foot, frostbite and gangrenous toes and fingers. None of these survivors would truly appreciate being lauded as a military hero in future parades staged in their honor.

Poison gas attacks from both sides, albeit begun by scientifically-superior Germany, began early in 1915, and Allied tank warfare which was a humiliating disaster for the British innovators of the tank – wouldn't be operational until the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

One of the most stressful realities for the frontline soldiers was the suicidal, misbegotten, "over the top" infantry assaults against the opposition's machine gun nests. Such assaults were complicated by the shell holes and the rows of coiled barbed wire that sometimes made them sitting ducks. Artillery barrages from both sides commonly resulted in tens of thousands of casualties in a single day.

The over-the-top infantry assaults that sacrificed hundreds of thousands of obedient soldiers were stupidly (and repeatedly) ordered by senior officers such as Sir John French and his replacement as British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig. Most of the old-time generals of a century ago had trouble admitting that their out-dated horse and saber cavalry charges across the muck of No-Man's Land were both hopeless and suicidal).

The general staff planners of their disastrous attempts to end the war quickly (or at least end the stalemate) were safely out of the range of enemy artillery barrages. The general staff war planners were always comfortably back at their warm and dry headquarters, eating well, being dressed by their orderlies, and drinking their tea – none of them at any risk of suffering the lethality of war.

The continuous digging with their entrenching tools in order to improve the safety of the trenches was frequently interrupted by preparations for attack. Screams of pain often came from the wounded soldiers who were helplessly hanging on the barbed wire or trapped and/or bleeding to death in the bomb craters.

Often their deaths would linger for days, and the effect on the troops in the trenches, who had to listen to the desperate, unanswerable cries for help was psychologically devastating.

By the time Christmas came and winter hit, troop morale on both sides of No Man's Land had hit rock bottom.

### **Christmas in the Trenches**

So on Dec. 24, 1914, the exhausted troops settled down to Christmas with gifts from home, special food, special liquor, chocolate bars and the hope for peace, even for only one night.

A magnanimous (and deluded) Kaiser Wilhelm had ordered 100,000 Christmas trees with millions of ornamental candles to be sent up to the front, expecting that such an act would boost German troop morale. Using the supply lines for such militarily unnecessary items was ridiculed by the most hardened officers, but nobody suspected that the Kaiser's Christmas tree idea would backfire and instead be a catalyst for an unplanned-for cease-fire, a singular event previously unheard of in the history of warfare and one that was ultimately censored out of mainstream history books for most of the next century.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 was a spontaneous event that happened at a multitude of locations all along the 600 miles of trenches that stretched across Belgium and France, and it was an event that would never again be duplicated. An attempt at a Christmas Truce in 1915, orchestrated by the boots on the ground, was quickly put down by senior officers.

Ten years ago, the movie "Joyeux Noel" (French for "Merry Christmas") received an Academy Award nomination for best foreign film of 2005. It tells the moving tale that was adapted from the many surviving stories that had been told in letters from soldiers who had participated in the truce.

As told in the movie, some young German started singing "Stille Nacht." Soon the British, French and Scots on the other side of No Man's Land joined in with their versions of "Silent Night." Before long, the spirit of the Prince of Peace and "goodwill towards men" prevailed over the demonic spirit of war, and the troops on both sides began to sense their common humanity.

The natural human aversion to killing other humans broke through to consciousness and overcame the fear, patriotic fervor and pro-war brainwashing to which they had all been indoctrinated.

Soldiers on both sides gradually dropped their weapons and came out of their trenches to meet their former foes face-to-face. They had to step around shell

holes and over frozen corpses (which were later to be given respectful burials during an extension of the truce, with soldiers from both sides helping one another with the gruesome task).

The spirit of retaliation had been replaced by a spirit of reconciliation – and the desire for peace on earth. New friends shared chocolate bars, cigarettes, wine, schnapps, soccer games and pictures from home. Addresses were exchanged, photos were taken and every soldier who genuinely experienced the emotional drama was forever changed.

And the generals and the politicians were appalled.

### **An Act of Treason**

Fraternization with the enemy (as well as refusing to obey orders in time of war) is regarded by military commanders as an act of treason and is severely punishable. In the “Great War,” such crimes were dealt with by firing squad.

In the case of the Christmas Truce of 1914, most officers feared mutiny and did not want to draw public attention to the potentially contagious incidents by using such penalties. War correspondents were forbidden to report the unauthorized truce to their papers. Some commanding officers threatened courts martial if fraternization persisted (getting to know your supposed enemy was obviously bad for the killing spirit).

There were still lighter punishments to be invoked. Many of the Allied troops were re-assigned to different and less desirable regiments. Many German troops were sent to the Eastern Front under much harsher conditions, to fight and die in the equally suicidal battles against their Russian Orthodox Christian co-religionists.

If humanity is truly concerned with the barbaric nature of militarism, and if our modern-era wars of empire are to be effectively derailed, the story of the Christmas Truce needs to be retold again and again. These futile, unaffordable and very contagious modern wars are being fought by vulnerable, thoroughly indoctrinated Call of Duty or Halo first-person shooter gamers who, unbeknownst to them, are at high risk of having their lives negatively and permanently altered by the physical, mental and spiritual damage that always comes from participating in actual violence.

Combat war can easily doom its participants to a life overwhelmed by the wounds of war (PTSD, sociopathic personality disorder, suicidality, homicidality, loss of religious faith, traumatic brain injury, neurotoxic, addictive drug use, either legal or illegal) all of which, it must be pointed out, are totally preventable.

It seems to me that it would be helpful if moral leadership in America, especially its Christian leaders, would discharge their duty to warn the children and adolescents that are in their spheres of influence about all of the serious consequences that being in the killing professions can have on their souls and psyches.

War planners do whatever it takes to keep soldiers from recognizing the humanity of their enemies, whether they are Syrians, Iranians, Iraqis, Afghanis, Pakistanis, Yemenis, Vietnamese, Chinese or North Koreans. I have been told by many military veterans that military chaplains, who are supposed to be nurturers of the souls of the soldiers that are in their "care," never bring up, in their counseling sessions, the Golden Rule, Jesus's clear "love your enemies" commandment and his other ethical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Military chaplains seem to just be another cog in the apparatus of making war maximally effective for their military, economic, political and corporate overlords. Christian chaplains, who are very well paid, seem to not pay much attention to the Ten Commandments either, especially the one that says "thou shalt not kill."

In their defense, I suppose, military chaplains, similar to their colleagues from divinity school, may have never been schooled adequately (beginning in their Sunday School upbringings) in the profoundly important gospel truths about humility, mercy, non-violence, non-domination, non-retaliation, unconditional love and the rejection of enmity.

### **Theological Blind Spots of War**

These theological blind spots are nicely illustrated near the end of the "Joyeux Noel" movie in a powerful scene depicting a confrontation between the Christ-like, altruistic, antiwar Scottish chaplain and his Calvinist bishop.

As the chaplain was mercifully administering the "last rites" to a dying soldier, he was approached by the bishop, who had come to chastise the chaplain for fraternizing with the enemy during the Christmas Truce. The bishop summarily relieved the simple pastor of his chaplaincy duties because of his "treasonous and shameful" behavior on the battlefield.

The authoritarian bishop refused to listen to the chaplain's story about his having performed "the most important mass of my life" (with German troops participating in the celebration) or the fact that he wished to stay with the soldiers that needed him because they were losing their faith in God. The bishop angrily denied the chaplain's request to remain with his men.

The bishop then delivered a rousing pro-war, jingoistic sermon (which was taken

word-for-word from a homily that had actually been delivered by an Anglican bishop later in the war). The sermon was addressed to the fresh troops who had to be brought in to replace the veteran soldiers who, because their consciences had been awakened, had suddenly become averse to killing and were refusing to fire their rifles.

The image of the dramatic but subtle response of the chaplain to his sacking should be a clarion call to the Christian church leadership of our militarized, so-called “Christian” nation – both clergy and lay. This good man of God hung up his cross and walked out of the door of the field hospital.

“Joyeux Noel” is an important film that deserves to be annual holiday fare. It has ethical lessons even more powerful than “It’s A Wonderful Life” or “A Christmas Carol.”

One of the lessons of the story is summarized in the concluding verse of John McCutcheon’s famous song about the event. It is titled “Christmas in the Trenches”:

“My name is Francis Tolliver, in Liverpool I dwell.

Each Christmas come since World War One, I’ve learned its lessons well: That the ones who call the shots won’t be among the dead and lame And on each end of the rifle we’re the same.”

A critical scene from the movie is at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPk9-AD7h3M>

Additional scenes from the movie, with the narration of a letter from one of the soldiers involved can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehFjkS7UBUU>

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