

2022: CHRISTMAS MISSIVE

*“Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, Alles schlaeft, einsam wacht ...
Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright ...”*

“ ... the mist was slow to clear and suddenly my orderly threw himself into my dugout to say that both the German and Scottish soldiers had come out of their trenches and were fraternizing along the front. I grabbed my binoculars and looking cautiously over the parapet saw the incredible sight of our soldiers’ exchanging cigarettes, schnapps and chocolates with the enemy.”

Lieutenant Johannes Niemann
Eyewitness to Christmas 1914¹

The first part of this missive is about the most extraordinary day of the world’s most extraordinary war.

Less than half a year into the start of the First World War—in my view history’s most momentous modern event—all the glorious mobilization invasion plans of Germany, France, and England had stalled. By December 1914, both sides were locked into a 500-mile stretch of trenches, the so-called “Western Front,” extending from the English Channel to the Swiss border.

Each side had prepared for a short, victorious war.

Or so the leaders promised.

By December a bitter realization set in among the troops that the war would be a prolonged, bloody, and modern industrialized effort.

To make matters worse, it was an unusually cold and wet winter season.

For that reason, the troops on both sides were ill-equipped to deal with the bitter freezing weather, their misery made worse by the muddy “ditches” they had dug so hastily in the countryside (later these trenches would become more elaborate with mud-boards, underground command centers, tunnels and zig-zag “kill zone” trench corridors).

It was the ultimate nightmare in warfare.

No one knows exactly how it started.

It was miraculously spontaneous.

Most eyewitnesses agree on one thing: it began with a simple song.

¹ Niemann was a Saxon native who served in the German Army’s 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment and an eyewitness to the amazing “Christmas Truce” of 1914. His account is included in Mike Dash, “The Story of the WWI Christmas Truce,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (part of a special report: *World War I: 100 Years Later*), Dec 23, 2011.

About 7:30 p.m., on Christmas eve, German soldiers in their trenches began singing *Stille Nacht*, the classic Christmas carol written by an Austrian cleric almost eighty years earlier, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. English and Scottish troops facing them began to applaud. They sang their own carols.

Somehow, the German side slipped chocolate cake to the enemy. The British replied with cigarettes.

Agreements were made between the soldiers not to fire at each other.

It was all unofficial and illicit.²

Both sides laid down their arms.

Perhaps as many as 100,000 men.

Candles were lit and Christmas trees were set up.

The next day—Christmas—gifts, hugs and handshakes were exchanged. A German barber cut hair, and what formerly served as no-man's land between the trenches was transformed into a field for a football (soccer) match with hats serving as boundaries (the Germans reportedly won 3-2, but the Scots insisted one of their chaplains was overly generous in awarding the deciding goal).³

The glorious truce, and the seasonal time to sing praises to the Lord Jesus Christ—the Prince of Peace—ended almost as suddenly as it began. Officers on both sides, at the behest of their political leaders and generals safely ensconced in their capitals far from the front, snuffed out the truce initiative. There were threats of reprisals. Patriotic appeals were made. The troops picked up their arms, returned to the trenches and the ceaseless artillery bombardments continued.

As did the senseless slaughter.

The episode would not be repeated in the following years of the carnage.

It remains nothing short of a miracle.

Even today it defies explanation.

My favorite Christmas memory pales by comparison to that event. For those of you who are long-time readers, please forgive me for repeating my favorite Christmas memory, a story that traces back to pre-pandemic days and much, much simpler times.

I tell the story as often as I can. The episode itself dates back several decades, to a time when I served as the Director of the June Buchanan School—a small, private school located on the Alice Lloyd College campus—in remote Pippa Passes, Kentucky. Our students were from the rural Appalachian Mountains, a mixture of kids from local families, campus families and a scattering of kids from professional families in nearby communities.

² Gary Kent, “Silent Night—The Song That Stopped a War,” *The Incredible Journey (YouTube)*, Dec. 2020.

³ Dash, “Christmas Truce.”

As I've said many times, running the school, and working with those incredible kids and families, were the best years of my life.

What made the vision work (I merely was implementing Dr. Jerry Davis's original idea) was a special group of highly motivated teachers who believed in our mission of providing a high quality, college preparatory education for our students.

In those years, our usual Christmas tradition was a school-sponsored dinner party at a restaurant in nearby Hazard or Pikeville, where our faculty and staff exchanged mostly gag gifts and enjoyed each other's company. (A pair of pink-laced handcuffs made the rounds year-after-year as the most memorable gag gift for the couples).

Gary Gibson reminded me a couple years ago of a prank we pulled on John Jukes (one of the JBS teachers) during one of our holiday dinners at the *La Citadel*, a restaurant perched high atop a mountain on the outskirts of Hazard, Kentucky. The road getting to the restaurant went straight up the mountain, with several sharp cutbacks. The climb was a worthy challenge for the best vehicle transmissions. At any rate, with all of us assembled, we slipped the waitress a ten-spot and had her announce—with a decided sense of urgency—that a red Jeep was rolling down the mountain road, careening out of control. John leaped to his feet with a shout (nearly pulling off the tablecloth in the process) and sprinted to the exit. Only to find his new red Jeep was exactly where he parked it.

John didn't think it was nearly as funny as we did ...

Ah, the joy of a well-timed prank!

But one year, we departed from this restaurant party tradition.

I'm not sure whose idea it was.

We decided to select a needy family in our school population and instead of spending money on the usual white elephant or secret Santa gifts that none of us ever used, we pooled our money and encouraged the entire school population to donate food stuffs, toys and money. As I recall, the students eagerly participated in the effort.

Our choice was the Slone family. They had two kids in our school. To help defray tuition costs, the mother went above the call of duty in cleaning the school after hours and helping provide other tasks as needed. She was a blessing to us all.

Her husband was out of work. He had gone through a number of surgeries (he lifted up his shirt one day to show me his stomach, chest and back which were crisscrossed by a number of railroad-looking post-surgery scar tracks).

He was one of those individuals who was a magnet for bad luck. No fault of his own. Nothing ever seemed to work out. Most of you know people like that.

Like many men who lived in the mountains in those days, if you weren't fit enough to work in the underground coal mines, there was no work available.

(Today, years of well-meaning but ultimately destructive social welfare programs have spawned generations of young men in the mountains who deplore the idea of a hard day's work and use all their creativity to get "on the draw." The pandemic, and an ongoing opioid epidemic, only exacerbates the problem).

At the time, the Slone's didn't have two nickels to rub together.

They were, as the saying goes, poor as a pair of church mice.

They were the neediest of the needy.

One cold-gray, snowy evening, the entire complement of JBS faculty and staff met at the school. We loaded up in a convoy of cars to make the slippery trek up a narrow "holler" to the trailer where the Slone's lived. The unmistakable smell of burning coal lingered in the air.

We all huddled together, crammed inside the trailer's small but cozy living room.

We sang Christmas carols.

Including *Silent Night, Holy Night*.

(There remains something special about that song!)

We distributed foodstuffs, toys, and money to the family.

There were tears of joy from both recipients and givers of the gifts.

I will never forget the warm glow I felt inside that evening.

The frigid weather outside could not dampen that feeling.

That was my best Christmas ... ever.

I remember it like it was yesterday.

(As did many of the participants in the trench warfare holiday aberration of 1914, as evidenced by their many post-war remanences of the event).

Although my memory of what happened at the Slone trailer doesn't compare to the "Christmas Truce" on the Western Front in the cold winter of 1914, it is, nevertheless, a special memory for me. An event that continues to remind me, as the years race by, of the unique gift offered by the God of the Universe—His son, Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

That Appalachian memory sustains me. At this time of year, it is a constant reminder about the good that humans can do for others. That too, in my view, is the ultimate lesson to be gleaned from the 1914 story.

Of course, historians will not record our Appalachian love gifts as they have the extraordinary event of the 1914 truce. Nor should they. But in my thinking the two events are inextricably linked: both stemmed from spontaneous acts of love inspired by the Christmas story. Moreover, both, in their own way, offered a healing balm for troubled times.

As a final note, Ima and I wish each of you a Merry Christmas and a joyous, healthy, and prosperous 2023!