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An incredibly inspiring Christmas cease-fire

Tony Magliano | Dec. 21, 2012 Making a Difference

As the first Christmas of World War I approached, Pope Benedict XV on Dec. 7, 1914, asked the leaders of all warring governments to agree to an official cease-fire. He begged "that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang."

Sadly, his plea was ignored by government leaders. But many of the soldiers in the trenches declared their own unofficial truce.

On Christmas Eve of 1914, German troops in Ypres, Belgium, put candles around their trenches and sang Christmas carols. When opposing British troops heard the Germans singing, they responded with Christmas caroling of their own.

Artillery throughout the region fell silent.

Then a remarkable scene occurred. German and British soldiers climbed out of their trenches and ventured unarmed into the highly dangerous no man's land to exchange gifts of food and drink, as well as souvenir hats and buttons.

The truce also allowed opposing sides to retrieve their dead and participate in joint services.

A firsthand account of this inspiring Christmas truce was given by Bruce Bairnsfather, who fought with a British machine gun unit. He wrote: "I wouldn't have missed that unique and weird Christmas Day for anything. ... I spotted a German officer, some sort of lieutenant I should think, and being a bit of a collector, I intimated to him that I had taken a fancy to some of his buttons. ... I brought out my wire clippers and, with a few deft snips, removed a couple of his buttons and put them in my pocket. I then gave him two of mine in exchange."

Reportedly as many as 100,000 British and German troops along much of the Western Front -- a line of trenches stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier with France -- stopped fighting and engaged in similar acts of human kindness.

What an incredibly inspiring Christmas story.

But as is often the case, the "leaders" got in the way. High-ranking officers ordered all such truces to stop and to start killing again.

The political, cultural, military, media and economic forces for war have long been extremely powerful. And in recent decades, their power has become almost invincible.

Our culture praises warriors. Our entertainment industry inspires a sick delight in war. With patriotic platitudes, politicians send our young men and women off to battle to kill and be killed. Weapon-producing corporations get rich from war and war preparation. Clergy remain mostly silent. And countless people just simply accept all of this evil as normal.

Well, thank God not everyone follows the constant drumbeat to war. In fact, some who were once a part of the war machine are now committed to dismantling it. The organization Veterans for Peace [1] is an excellent example.

These former warriors, now converts to nonviolence, have a prophetic message to all who support war: "Our collective experience tells us wars are easy to start and hard to stop and that those hurt are predominantly the innocent."

The mass murder of war is right out of hell.

But Christmas is a time to think of heaven touching earth; a season to joyfully recall the Prince of Peace coming among us.

It's a time to climb out of our trenches, to grasp the hands of our enemies and seriously reflect upon the message of angels who call each of us to build peace on earth and goodwill towards all.

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