**What If They Gave A War and No One Came?**

**Suppose they gave a war and nobody came? What if people decided they’d had enough of fighting and overruled the politicians with their armaments and armies? What if men in uniform decided they’d had enough of playing soldier and lay down their weapons to play football or other games instead? It sounds like a fantasy, like a pleasant pipedream of peace in a grim and strife-torn world. But the truth is that the hope for harmony is more than wishful thinking. At any moment, human kindness is waiting to break out and bring an end to violence, making “peace on earth and goodwill toward all” much more than a season’s greeting or feel-good slogan.**

**In the made-for-TV animated movie “Snoopy’s Christmas,” the famous World War One Flying Ace lies atop his doghouse remembering his fierce airborne duels with the notorious Red Baron. With the wings of his Sopwith Camel icing dangerously in the December air, the beleaguered beagle is forced to crash land behind enemy lines, certain that he’s met his end. But with Teutonic strains of “O Tannenbaum” ringing in the background, the German pilot meets Snoopy with Christmas cheer and a bottle of bubbly rather than the expected barrage of bullets, and the two join in a small celebration.**

**The Baron then offered a holiday toast,**

**And Snoopy, our hero, saluted his host.**

**And then with a roar they were both on their way,**

**Each knowing they’d meet on some other day.**

**A predictable Peanuts ending, perhaps, but not all that far from the facts. For on Christmas Eve of 1914, the Royal Flying Corps dropped a brandy-laden plum pudding on the German airfield at Lille. The following day, the Luftwaffe retaliated by pounding the Brits with a well-padded bottle of rum. The Christmas Truce of 1914 was off and running. Unexpectedly and without prior planning, certainly without the knowledge or permission of the military higher-ups, peace was beginning to break out up and down the Western Front.**

**The war had started in August of that year, a century ago, with parades and speeches and youthful visions of glory, troops from both sides marching in the name of homeland security and the rescue of civilization. But within a few months, those visions were already becoming bitter memories, as more than a million men-at-arms faced the prospect of freezing temperatures in the muddy trenches that snaked along the barbed wire barrier defining no-man’s land down the length of France. In some ways, the war was just starting. Casualties would continue to mount at a rate of 6.000 a day for another forty-six months before an armistice was finally signed. But hundreds of thousands had already succumbed to the shelling, the gas, and machine guns that constantly harassed them. Men were weary and frightened and homesick. Where hatred of the enemy and patriotic pride might once have stirred their hearts, they were beginning to feel merely bruised and numb.**

**And so it was with decided ambivalence that most of the troops looked forward to the holidays. A few weeks earlier, the newly elected Pope Benedict had issued a plea for a Christmas cease-fire, but the proposal was rejected by both sides as “impossible.” The British High Command suspected the Germans might use the week between Christmas and New Years to launch a new offensive and declared a need for special vigilance. It was becoming apparent to the recruits that the jolly little war they’d signed on for that was supposed to last for a few weeks might slog on for months or even years. And it was equally apparent that the chancellors and prime ministers and cabinet secretaries were in no mood for conciliation.**

**Peace would have to begin at the grassroots, if it was to begin at all, and it seems as though the Krauts made the initial gestures. A week before Christmas at Armentieres, they slipped a chocolate cake behind enemy lines with a note explaining that “We propose having a concert tonight as it is our Captain’s birthday, and we cordially invite you to attend–provided you will give us your word of honour as guests that you agree to cease all hostilities between 7:30 and 8:30 pm.” At the appointed hour, the Germans lit candles along the lip of their trench, and a chorus broke out with invitations to “come sing mit uns,” but the British were wary, and nothing came of it. By nightfall of December 23, however, Christmas Trees had begun to appear all along the German lines, along with singing and hand-lettered placards proposing “You No Fight–We No Fight.” Soon the Belgians and the French, along with the Brits, were getting into the spirit of the thing. Albert Moren of the 2nd Queen’s Regiment remembered many years later that “It was a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere; and ... there was a lot of commotion in the German trenches ,,, And then they sang *‘Silent Night’–‘Stille Nacht.’* I shall never forget it.”**

**Others would try to forget it. The powers-that-be wanted to pretend the Christmas Truce never happened. In the French press, censorship was complete. There was no mention of what took place in the papers. The English military’s official history of the war minimized the occurrence, and the *Tägliche Rundschau* for New Years Day of 1915 reminded its readers that “War is no sport, and we are sorry to say that those who made these overtures or took part in them did not clearly understand the gravity of the situation.” In case anyone missed the message, fraternizing with the enemy was declared tantamount to high treason, punishable by death. Those in control of the war-making machine wanted to keep control. The idea that ordinary foot soldiers might simply put down their guns and refuse to kill was subversive, to say the least. And so the truce was treated with silence and with suppression by those in authority, leaving gaps in our historical knowledge. But what seems clear is that something unprecedented and remarkable happened.**

**Historian Stanley Weintraub notes that unofficial cease-fires have occurred in numerous conflicts as combatants momentarily pause to pray to their gods or bury their dead. But seldom has such a truce caused whole armies to sit down together at Christmas dinner, to join in the exchange of gifts, or to stuff their woolen caps with straw to create kick balls for impromptu games of soccer. Never has total war taken such a total holiday. “What a sight--” said one of the soldiers with the Seaforth Highlanders, “–little groups of Germans and British extending almost the length of our front! Where they couldn’t talk the language they were making themselves understood by signs, and everyone seemed to be getting on nicely. Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill!” That irony wasn’t lost on Sir Kingsley Wood, a major in the British infantry who later went on to become a member of Parliament. During a debate in the House of Commons in 1930, he not only recalled fraternizing with the enemy but declared that “if we had been left to ourselves there would never have been another shot fired.”**

**But of course, wars must go on, and when peace once again threatened to upset the grand strategy, the generals were ready. The following December, the British command ordered a slow, unrelenting artillery barrage during every daylight hour in the days leading up to Christmas, with trench raids by night. And though the First Scots Guards did attempt to sing and exchange holiday greetings across the lines, a court martial quickly put an end to that. Only sporadic attempts to make peace occurred the following two years. But by spring of 1917 the casualties had become so horrendous an entire division of French soldiers refused to returned to the front, leading to over 3,000 courts-martial and more than 500 death warrants that would never be reported in the French newspapers. Germans in regimental numbers were also saying “nein” to their orders to return to the trenches. Finally, more than a year later, the war dragged itself to an exhausted end.**

**What if they gave a war and nobody came? What if the Christmas Truce of 1914 had been allowed to continue, if the generals had been unable contain the spread of camaraderie and friendship across the battle lines? The history of the last century would certainly have been very different. Not only would the First World War have ended amicably, saving millions of lives, but the carnage of World War Two might also have been averted. There might have been no Nazi Germany and no Third Reich. For Adolph Hitler was a corporal in the German army in 1914. He was serving as a field messenger in Flanders that December. Others in his unit crossed the “*Niemansland”* to share Christmas with the British, but Herr Hitler refused. “Such a thing should not happen in wartime,” he raged. “Have you no German sense of honor left at all?” Perhaps the future dictator would have remained a corporal, or gone back to painting picture postcards for a living. Had it happened, the world today would be a very different place.**

**The Christmas Truce was ultimately short lived, a few days respite from a long and grueling war. But the notable thing is not that the peace was brief, but that it happened at all. It’s rather like the birth of Jesus that we celebrate this time of year. He was only one man, his life a brief flickering of light and love almost eclipsed by the dark passage of time and the shadows of hatred that haunt the centuries. He was an exceptional man in every sense, as forgiveness and compassion remain the exception rather than the rule in the conduct of human affairs. But it would be wrong to see him as an aberration for that reason, just as it would be wrong to see the Christmas Truce as a mere anomaly in the chronicles of warfare. Both have a deeper meaning. Though the Truce was unusual and though it didn’t change the world, it did manage to touch millions of lives and seemed to point toward what’s best and truest in human nature: not the desire for vengeance or annihilation but the simple urge to bury the hatchet and live together in peace.**

**The Christmas Truce was no myth, any more than life and ministry of Jesus was a myth. There are gaps in our information. Legendary elements have entered in. Some incidents have been forgotten. But these events were no hoax. Such things really happened, and what happened once can happen again. They live on as eternal possibilities within the human spirit, like candles in the darkness or the sound of singing in the night.**