

Cross of Christ Chronicles

The Grace of the Christmas Spirit

As you know, I've been writing about the horrific and insidious combination of World War I and the Spanish flu epidemic for the past several months and have now brought it up through November of 1919. This article will bring my review of World War I to a close (at least for now) but I still have at least one more installment to go on the relentless return of the flu epidemic in 1920.

As I've mentioned before, the worst phase of the flu coincided with the famous Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the biggest and bloodiest battle in American history! More than a million American soldiers took part in this 47-day offensive that began on September 26, 1918 and lasted until the end of the war on November 11. Again, I have to say it's truly amazing that our Stone Church Service Flag has only one Gold Star.

Even though the war had come to an end only after great loss at home and abroad, wasn't it a great Christmas gift for the Western World in 1918? Our current military engagements pale in comparison to the number involved in those final battles, but as we prepare for another blessed Christmas season let us not forget those who are serving today, and not just Americans, but those who are fighting for good all over the world. *May God Bless them all.*

Every soldier deserves to be remembered, although there will always be those whose efforts will go unnoticed and unrecorded, but overall isn't it equally, or perhaps more, important to remember what they were fighting for—was it just, did they succeed, did their efforts make the world a better place for *everyone*, and not just the victors?

At Christmastime we experience the power of a wondrous spirit – strong enough even to bring about the miraculous and now legendary ceasefire along the trenches in WWI! I'm sure many of you have heard the story—there has been at least one TV movie about it. (N.B.-No Americans participated in the truce since we didn't enter the war until 1917.) The following account from HISTORY.COM sums it up beautifully:

Christmas Truce of 1914

During World War I, on and around Christmas Day 1914, the sounds of rifles firing and shells exploding faded in a number of places along the Western Front in favor of holiday celebrations in the trenches and gestures of goodwill between enemies.

Did you know? On December 7, 1914, Pope Benedict XV suggested a temporary hiatus of the war for the celebration of Christmas. The warring countries refused to create any official cease-fire, but on Christmas the soldiers in the trenches declared their own unofficial truce. Starting on Christmas Eve, many German and British troops sang Christmas carols to each other across the lines, and at certain points the Allied soldiers even heard brass bands joining the Germans in their joyous singing.

At the first light of dawn on Christmas Day, some German soldiers emerged from their trenches and approached the Allied lines across no-man's-land, calling out "Merry Christmas" in their enemies' native tongues. At first, the Allied soldiers feared it was a trick, but seeing the Germans unarmed they climbed out of their trenches and shook hands with the enemy soldiers. The men exchanged presents of cigarettes and plum puddings and sang carols and songs. There was even a documented case of soldiers from opposing sides playing a good-natured game of soccer.

Some soldiers used this short-lived ceasefire for a more somber task: the retrieval of the bodies of fellow combatants who had fallen within the no-man's land between the lines.

The so-called Christmas Truce of 1914 came only five months after the outbreak of war in Europe and was one of the last examples of the outdated notion of chivalry between enemies in warfare. It was never repeated—future attempts at holiday ceasefires were quashed by officers' threats of disciplinary action—but it served as heartening proof, however brief, that beneath the brutal clash of weapons, the soldiers' essential humanity endured.

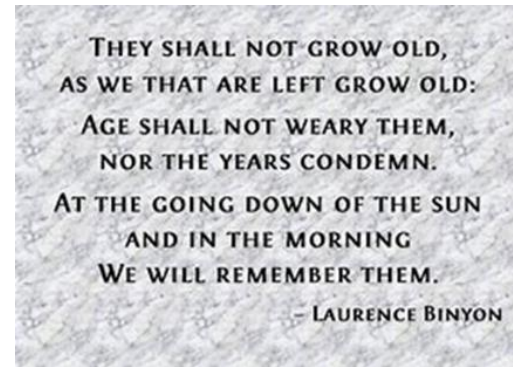
During World War I, the soldiers on the Western Front did not expect to celebrate on the battlefield, but even a world war could not destroy the Christmas spirit. —HISTORY.COM EDITORS



Wasn't that profoundly inspirational? Finally, we will leave you with this gracious and sentimental verse concerning those who gave all.

— Shelley and Jim, *Cross of Christ Archives*, December 2019

When it comes to graphic arts, the patriotic images that were created as an adjunct to The Great War are hard to beat! Because of this, and for purely aesthetic reasons we have included two of them here.



The first line, above, is the title of a recent documentary movie using only actual footage of WWI—restored and colorized—which follows a group of British soldiers from their enlistment through to the end of the war.

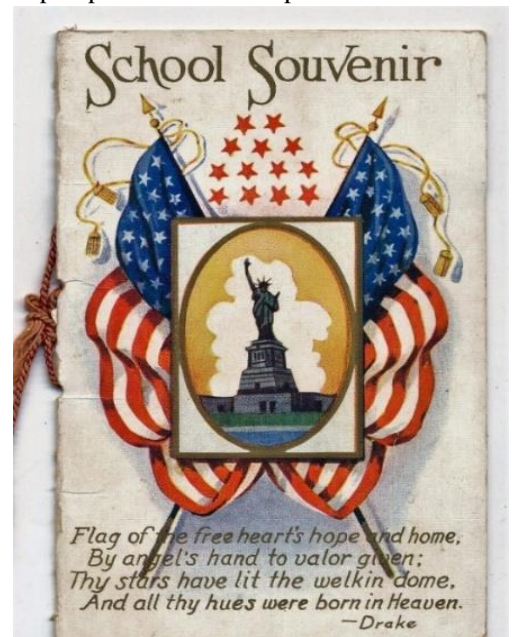
We'd never seen anything like it, and highly recommend it to anyone who would like a fresh perspective on the experience.



Although not as elaborate as those described last month for the Stone Church Homecoming, this snapshot shows the interior decoration of the Concordia Church, on the east bank of the Buffalo river near Moorhead, as they prepared for their own Homecoming Celebration. As you may remember, this church served the populace of Houston's largest Norwegian colony, and if you're from Houston and your roots are in Telemark you're very likely related to someone up there.

Notice the large flags and white gauze draping on both pulpit and altar rail, as well as smaller flags and a large floral wreath. There is also what looks like fake grass in front of the kneeler.

I was told by those who remembered it, that the boys entered in their uniforms, walking up to the front of the church where they laid on the floor around the altar ring and sang *Tenting Tonight*. Hence, they were recreating a scene which had often been played out during their time in service.



Black Hammer School Souvenir (1917-1918)-Dist. No. 80

N.B.-As usual, we tell the stories we know, but we would very much like to hear and share the stories and experiences of other families that have been a part of our churches, past and present. *Therefore, we beseech thee to let us include them in the history of our Congregations!*