

## No Man's Land

*"No man's land" is the way soldiers described the ground between the two opposing trenches in WW1. Its width along the Western Front could vary a great deal but the average distance in most sectors was about 230 metres.*

The guns were silent. In fact everything was eerily silent. It was as if the whole universe was aware something different was about to happen. Tomorrow would dawn on Christmas Day; yet what would that mean to the soldiers huddling for warmth here in these front line trenches? They had heard there was an unspoken agreement about a Christmas cease fire. Still, no one could take any chances; there were still soldiers on duty, keeping watch over no man's land, this Christmas Eve.

At the far end of the trench were three soldiers trying to stay warm and keep their spirits up: Lochy, Jim-lad and Arthur. Lochy was tall, good looking and fancied himself as a bit of a lady's man. Jim-lad was a young boy just off the farm. Arthur was older, married with a family. In an effort not to think about what they were actually doing in this foreign place, they were talking about what they would be doing back home ...

Jim-lad had a kind of wistful look as he told them about how his dad would have the fire roaring while his mum sang as she got the pies ready for baking and stuffed the goose for cooking. Arthur nodded and smiled as he thought of his girls tucked up in their warm beds and his wife putting a few treats in the stockings over the fireplace. Lochy said how he and his mates would be enjoying a couple of ales and winking at any girls who looked their way.

"And then we'd all go down to the village church," said Jim-lad. "We'd take our lanterns. It might even be snowing. And we'd sing carols and listen to the parson read about how the baby Jesus was born ..."

Arthur nodded, with a soft smile, as he said, "Yes laddies, that's just how we did it in my village too." He looked out across the vast expanse of nothing and blackness that was "no man's land", as if hoping he could see there a crackling fire and people singing and dancing.

"Well that's not what everyone does," said Lochy. "Some of us have a good night out then home to a warm bed to get our strength up to eat a huge Christmas dinner!" He too peered into the empty darkness. Though he would not admit it, he was missing home as much as the other two.

"Do you think," asked Jim-lad in his small voice, "that back home they'll be thinking of us?"

Arthur smiled, "Of course lad. They'll be thinking of us and wishing the best for us and praying for us."

Lochy almost snorted. "Really old man. Here we are stuck out in the middle of nowhere. Nothing to celebrate. Waiting to be shot at. Do you really think anyone cares?"

Just then the sound of whistling could be heard. "It's that bloomin' Padre," exclaimed Lochy. "What the heck is he doing here now - interrupting us on this quiet evening!"

"Just you leave him alone," said Jim-lad. "He's alright he is."

"He is indeed," said Arthur, nodding his head. "He didn't have to be here you know. Not like us. He could have been somewhere safe, but he chose to be here with us."

"More fool him then," snorted Lochy. "If I didn't have to be here, I wouldn't. This is no place to be. Especially on Christmas Eve."

"Well he's always got something nice and encouraging to say," said Jim-lad.

"And he's not afraid to get his hands dirty. He went out with the sergeant before dawn the other morning to bring our fallen comrades back."

"So there," agreed Jim-lad.

“And aren't you grateful for the cigarettes he's always dishing out?”

“Well there is that. And good thing too. Didn't smoke before I got here, now I'm like a bloomin' chimney!”

“Or a steam engine!” chuckled Arthur.

The whistling grew louder, then stopped. “How are you boys doing this fine evening, down here at the end of the line? Just wanted you to know you are not forgotten.” The Padre was shorter even than Jim-lad and stocky with it. He had a round face that somehow kept a genuine smile, and dancing blue eyes that always managed to see something hopeful. Even in the darkest of places.

“We're doing the best we can in this God-forsaken place,” Lochy barked. “What do you make of it eh Padre? Where's your God in all this?”

If Lochy thought he was going to get a rise out of the Padre he was sadly mistaken. “Believe me boys, I get it. Here we are at what seems like the end of the world. The way I figure it, this is just why and where God came down to earth.” He gestured over the top of the trench. “Right into the middle of no man's land.

“He left the comfort of heaven to share our life. As one of us. Born just like we are. Nothing special. In a borrowed stable. Not even a crib. A life of dirt and toil, laughter and woe. Believe me boys, God knows just how it is for us. For you. Christmas, even out here, reminds us of that.”

Lochy grunted. Arthur nodded knowingly. Jim-lad smiled. The Padre continued, “Boys, I can't explain why there is war. Why people who are basically the same are fighting each other. What I can tell you is we're not alone in this. God is real and gives us the guidance and strength to do our best in this horrible situation. God knows and God cares. That's why I'm here boys.

“Merry Christmas!” He passed a handful of cigarettes to Lochy and Arthur, and gave each of the three a brown paper bag. Then the Padre was off to dispense such comfort as he could in this God-forsaken, no not God-forsaken; rather to remind them of God's presence even in this desolate place.

Lochy looked in the paper bag. Chocolate! “Where on earth did that Padre get bloomin' chocolate?”

Jim-lad did not smoke. There were two lots in his bag. “Never mind where he got it. Let's just enjoy it. Thank you and Merry Christmas!” Jim-lad shouted down the darkened trench.

Lochy carefully drew on one of the cigarettes the Padre had given him, making sure the glowing tip could not be seen beyond the trench. He shook his head. Did it make any difference that God came into our world as a baby?

He looked up at the cloudy sky with the stars occasionally blinking through. What difference did it make that God was born as a baby in a stable, for us? He looked through the blackness and across no man's land – and for them?

Lochy thought he could hear singing. Yes it was definitely singing. Coming from the enemy trenches and drifting across no man's land. It sounded like a familiar carol, though the words were foreign. “C'mon boys, let's sing!” Arthur and Jim-lad could hardly believe it was Lochy who shouted this. They were just as astounded when he insisted they get the others around to sing also ...

... which they did. They all joined in singing those well-known words that were at once out of place yet totally appropriate:

*Stille nacht, heilige nacht ...*

*Silent night, holy night ...*

The words hung over the land between the trenches. Along with two groups of voices, it seemed an angelic choir could be heard as well ...