

A SILENT NIGHT

By John, William, and Connor McCormick



Author's Note

I always look for opportunities to share my love of history with my children. Historical events can form the foundation for a good story. As I often tell my children, history contains the best stories ever told, because no one could make up such spellbinding stories if they tried.

The following is based on a true story, one of the most poignant, yet uplifting events in history. It deals with the subject of war and the taking of human life. It takes the form of a

meditation, inviting the listener to contemplate how the human spirit endures even in the midst of suffering, fear, and hardship. – John McCormick

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there was a very terrible war. This war was terrible because it lasted over four years, involved armies from many different countries, and ended only after many, many people were hurt or killed.

No one was quite sure how and why this war started. Had the people of one country insulted those of another? Had anger over past feuds simmered so long under the surface that it only took a spark to ignite this anger into war? No one knew for sure. In fact, people still argue today over why this terrible war began and whether it had to happen.

The soldiers of this war had to fight in very horrible conditions. Each side developed new and terrible weapons. The soldiers sought safety and protection from these weapons by digging long ditches in the ground, called trenches. They cowered in the trenches to keep from being hit by bullets, shells, and bombs. Each army's trenches faced the other's. Because millions of soldiers were fighting, the trenches extended for hundreds of miles across the landscape. If you saw the trenches dug into the ground from an airplane, they looked like two, jagged scars running next to each other for as far as the eye could see.

To make matters worse, it rained most of the time. The rain turned the ground – already dug up by bombs and fighting – into a muddy slime the soldiers had to sleep, eat, and fight in. Sometimes the soldiers stood for days in water and mud up to their knees. Rats were everywhere, as were the fleas and lice that constantly tormented the soldiers. The fighting was

so intense it was often too dangerous for the soldiers to bury their dead comrades. The battlefield became a giant cemetery, as if all of mankind was doomed to die there.

Then, one night, something very rare and miraculous happened. The night was Christmas Eve. It was the first Christmas Eve of this long and terrible war. There was, thankfully, little fighting that night, and the whole battlefield was mostly quiet. The stars shone, and it was very cold. There was a dusting of snow on much of the battlefield. The soldiers huddled together in their trenches for warmth.

Suddenly, in the clear stillness of the night, some of the soldiers on one side of the battlefield began singing a Christmas carol. The soldiers on the other side held their collective breath and listened. They were amazed to hear singing when just a little while before all they had heard were the whizz and crash of bullets and shells. When the soldiers on one side of the battlefield finished singing, the soldiers in the opposing line of trenches started singing their own Christmas carols. *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen; Oh Come All Ye Faithful; Joy to the World; Good King Wenceslas*; and, of course, *Silent Night*. Back and forth went the singing all night. The soldiers took turns singing Christmas carols to those who just a few hours before had been their enemies. Many of the soldiers went to sleep that night in the glow of candles lit on small Christmas trees sent to them as gifts from back home. Others stared at the starlit sky in the light of lanterns they had strung across the tops of their trenches.

Morning – Christmas morning – broke clear and cold. Would the soldiers resume their fighting after last night's singing? All the soldiers waited quietly in their trenches. When it seemed that no one could stand the waiting any longer, one soldier climbed out of his trench. He

waved a white flag. The white flag is the age-old symbol of truce. The soldier did not wish to fight, but to talk.

Soon, other soldiers came out of their trenches. Many were just curious, and didn't know at first what to say to the soldiers from the other side. Conversations often started when one soldier offered another some tobacco, or perhaps a treat from a Christmas package sent from home. Before long, many soldiers gathered between the trenches, sharing food with one another and exchanging souvenirs.

The tension between the soldiers had broken. A grizzled old sergeant began singing Christmas carols again. Others formed up teams and played a football match right there between the lines. Soldiers took time to bury their comrades who had died on the battlefield. Groups from both sides held a church service to remember those who had fallen.

At the end of the day, the soldiers went back to their trenches. The war, sadly, resumed once Christmas was over. But many of the war's survivors who were on the battlefield that very first Christmas Eve and Christmas Day of the war remembered it as one of the most special Christmases of their lives, as if they had been living in a dream. Looking back, it now seems almost impossible that the soldiers decided – at least for a few hours – to call off the war. But that's exactly what they did. In future wars, what if all the soldiers ordered to go to war decided on their own not to fight anymore? And what if we all treated every day as if it were Christmas? Then, perhaps, we would never fight any more wars.

#