

Silent Night

By Erika Singh

A story of three soldiers who are brought together by unfortunate circumstances.

William Spencer hated a lot of things. He hated the snores of his fellow soldiers which kept him up at night, He hated the constant sound of gunfire that rang in his ears, He hated the feel of mud currently filling his boots as he kneeled down to repair the duckboards, but in this moment what William hated the most was the bright-eyed boy standing next to him who had a habit of narrating his life story to anyone who would listen.

“-and then each christmas morning, my mother would wake all five of us bright and early so that we can open presents before breakfast!” The kid paused for a moment. Could it finally be over?

“One year I got the softest jumper which my aunt knitted for me...”.

William should have known he was not that lucky.

“Look kid,” he interrupted, “ I know that it's Christmas eve and you feel the spirit and all that, but there is one thing you need to understand, in the trenches no one cares where you come from; our only goal is to kill as many Nazis as possible so we get to go home. Once we win you can tell me all about your aunt's socks.”

“Oh.” was all the kid said. For a second William almost felt bad. Almost.

Adam Smith loved a lot of things. He loved his family (which he had to leave behind when he got shipped to war two days after his 18th birthday), he loved looking at the sky at night when the gunfire ceased, he loved talking to new people and hearing about their experiences, but most of all, Adam loved Christmas. So, when Adam was appointed to duckboard duty with sour old William Spencer on Christmas Eve, he made it his mission to get the 40 year old to at least crack a smile. Needless to say, Adam did not anticipate his outburst.

“Oh.” was all he managed to say.

The duo finished the tasks without saying another word.

In the main trench Adam watched the other men shuffle around,lost in thought. He missed his family. Right now Don and Etta (his younger siblings) must be trying to figure out what was in their presents without alerting his mother. He pictured his house and wished he was curled up in front of the fireplace humming his favorite carol, instead of being stuck next to William with only a rat-bitten blanket for warmth. With a deep breath, Adam let out a soft tune, *Silent Night*, and watched his breath in the air.

Otto Becker did not understand the war at all. He came from a family of simple bakers in rural Germany and did as he was told. One day the Führer's men came to his village and ordered all eligible men to enlist, Otto left with them, but he did not like it. Infact, Otto did not like a lot of the Führer's policies, but he kept his opinions to himself. He may be meek, but he was not stupid.

Christmas was Otto's favorite time of the year and he was downright miserable to be spending it away from his village. He would miss out on decorating the tree in the village square, and playing football with the boys in the village on christmas morning. A scream rang out from the tunnel leading to the medbay and Otto realized with a wince that there were worse places to be. He raised his head from the trench- just a tiny bit- to peek at the trenches across from no man's land and wondered, not for the first time, why they had to fight and bring misery to everyone.

Otto was snapped out of his thought by a soft tune reaching his ears from across the battlefield. He was not the only one who heard it, suddenly men poured into the front line trench and shouts of Was ist es?- what is it? filled the space between them. The tune suddenly became more defined as multiple voices joined in. The English were singing the carol *While Shepherds Watched*, and Otto felt as though he might cry.

Adam's nap was interrupted by a song entering his ears. At first he thought it must be a dream, but as the sound became clearer, Adam's smile became wider. He jumped to his feet and followed the source of the sound to the frontline trenches, where the men were singing *While Shepherds Watched*, with bright smiles on their faces. As Adam looked around he noticed sour old William Spencer tucked away in a corner looking downright miserable, with a breath, Adam made his way towards the old man.

"Merry Christmas" was all Adam said. William nodded back and Adam took this as a sign to continue.

"I'm sorry for earlier, It's my first Christmas away from home, and talking helped me feel less alone."

William looked at the boy warily, then opened his mouth.

"I am sorry for reacting the way I did before." was all William offered and Adam decided this was enough.

The men stood in a comfortable silence as one carol turned into another. Just as the third carol started, William suddenly got up from his position.

"I can't watch this, and if you know what's good for you, you should follow me."

"Oh come on, don't be such a scrooge, a few songs won't hurt you"

With wide eyes William realized that Adam did not know what was to come. "It's a massacre." was all he offered. "It's a gift to the Germans, three songs then five rounds of gunfire"

Realization dawned on Adam and he looked at the men around him in horror with knowledge of what is to come.

Otto and the Germans had not felt this happy in months. Everyone had big smiles on their silent faces as they heard each word from the English's song carry through the air. The third carol of the night played its final note and an uncomfortable silence took over the trench. Otto then opened his mouth and out came the first few words of *Stille Nacht, Silent Night*. With even bigger smiles the men took it upon themselves to sing, after all the English can't be the only ones to contribute. As the song ended cheers broke out from both sides.

The man next to Otto shouted out "Merry Christmas, English! We are not shooting tonight!" With these words the men lifted themselves up from the trenches and ran to meet their new friends.

Williams' fear turned into confusion as the sounds of the last carol dissipated, they were replaced by new words in a heavy accent but the words were familiar.

"Silent Night" Adam gasped out.

All William and the other men could do was stare in shock.

A voice rang out, "Merry Christmas, English! We are not shooting tonight!"

William hesitated while Adam ran to the trench wall.

"They're climbing out!" Adam shouted to everyone else.

With kiddish excitement Adam climbed out of the trench as well, all while pulling William along. Both of them rush to the centre of No Man's Land with the rest of the English men right behind them. A young German extends his arm and Adam takes it. With a smile the rest of the men, from both sides, cheer and rush forward to meet their new friends.

Otto was playing football on Christmas morning. Granted it was with enemy soldiers in the early hours of night, but Otto felt like he was back home. The English man he was playing with, Adam, seemed to be around the same age and were currently chasing after the same ball.

"Wait, wait" Adam panted, doubled over, "You win, I cannot run any longer"

With a smile Otto extended his arm for the second time that night, and Adam took it without a thought. This warmed Otto's heart. The two men made their way to the German trenches where they exchanged stories about what their lives were like before the war.

Across the field, William still could not believe it. He was never one to celebrate Christmas, not after his wife and son died in a German bombing a few years ago. He did not even believe that Germans

had souls until a few hours ago. But here, right now, the sight of German and English greeting each other like family made his heart swell.

In Adam's opinion morning came far too early. Talking to Otto was like talking to an old friend, both of them came from large families and found comfort in each other. As the whistles echoed across the field, signifying the end of the truce, both men looked at each other with sad smiles. With a last glance and a hug, Adam and Otto turned on their heels and made their way back to their own trenches. Right when Adam was about to jump into the English trench, he heard his name.

"ADAM" said a voice in a thick German accent.

He turned around and was met with the side of Otto tunneling towards him.

"I wanted to give you this" Otto said.

In his gloved hand was a tree ornament in a shape of a football. With one final hug both men turned around, for real this time.

In both the German and English trenches, the men felt a loss of their companions, knowing that they might never see each other again. The Christmas day truce of 1914 may not have been a traditional, peaceful holiday, but instead the day turned into a symbol for unity and compassion that still inspires people over a hundred years later.