

## Battlefield Truces

The December, 2014 issue of *The National Geographic* has a one-page article about a battlefield truce that took place at several points along the western front on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, 1914. German troops placed lighted trees along trench parapets, and the Allies joined them in an impromptu peace. Slowly troops laid down their weapons and emerged into the open, where they shared a cigarette and agreed that they should do the same thing the following day, Christmas, so that they could bury their dead properly. This they did, all helping to dig graves with no thought as to the country of origin; gifts from home were shared among them all.

No one wanted to go back to the shooting and killing, but the high brass did, threatening court marshals for fraternizing with the enemy, and so they all reluctantly went back to “the business at hand”.

A similar scenario happened during the American Civil War, during the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, when a temporary cease fire was called in order to retrieve wounded and dead from the no man’s land between the battle lines. Food, tobacco and newspapers were shared, along with information such as “My friend and I are behind that log yonder”, or “I’m holed up behind that boulder”. Each could count on no enemy fire from the direction of his new acquaintance.

There is a reason for me to write about this subject now, as the short article in the *Geographic* indicated that this was a fairly rare happening, and I would agree, except that I am quite sure most such events never get reported. I am no spring chicken now, and thus I had better write down a couple of such events that I know about that will pass into oblivion if I remain silent.

The first is a story told to me by a Connecticut game warden, recently returned from his duties in the Army Air Corps during WWII. His name was John Samilus, and he had been stationed on the island of Ascension, situated in the South Atlantic Ocean for a good part of that conflict. Ascension was of vital importance in the 1940s, because the piston-driven airplane engines of the day could not fly non-stop across the Atlantic without refueling, thus much of our military flights took the route that began in the southern U. S., then to South America, where they began their trans-Atlantic trip at Recife, Brazil, then a 2,500 mile flight to Ascension, followed by another 1500 miles or so to Dakar, on the western-most point of the African continent. From there they were within striking distance of most objectives in Europe.

Security was tight along this route, as was the case everywhere involving military security. Censors inked out any mention of the word “Rock” or “Hump” in letters back home, and of course the island’s actual name. The references to the previously-mentioned two words had to do with the fact that the airport runway had a noticeable hump about dead center, which, if not avoided, could cause the aircraft to bounce or skid, hence the term “The hump” meant to anyone in the know just exactly what island in the World you were talking about. As there wasn’t much else on Ascension, many referred to it simply as “The Rock”.

South of this island a German submarine had taken up station, where they could monitor the activity on the air base and at the same time be far enough away to be able to take evasive

action if Allied warplanes should decide to come after them. Everyone knew of the existence of this U-boat, and for the most part generally ignored them.

Then one day the sub established radio contact with the air base and told them that “they had heard” that the island was going to get a surprise inspection by an Army general on such and such a date, and that he would be specifically looking for certain irregularities and deficiencies. Just as they had predicted, the American general showed up “completely unannounced”, and at the conclusion of his inspection announced that this was the best-run base he had ever had the pleasure to inspect, and gave the entire base a letter of commendation.

Of course a short time later a cryptic message went out over the airwaves saying basically “thanks!”

Later on, the base was able to return the favor, as a highly secret report was received that an effort was to be made on a particular date to eliminate a certain German submarine known to be deployed south of the island of Ascension. Although an armada of ships and aircraft scoured the area known to harbor this sub, no sign of it or any other German warship was ever discovered. After a short period came another cryptic message: “Thanks”.

You will learn a lot about human nature if you are able to establish contact with someone who, many years before, was a combatant on the “other side”. Dr Tury, a long-time Colebrook resident, had served in the medical corps from Hungary (a Communist nation at the time) in North Korea during that war, and we had some interesting conversations about things that happened then. When I went to China in 2004 to help establish contact between our school system and theirs, I had a conversation with a CCTV (China Central TV) news photographer who asked me pointedly if I had served in North Korea. When I answered in the affirmative, he asked what my duties had been then. I could see where he was going with this, and I was really happy and relieved to report that I had never killed a person in my life; I had been in communications. A huge smile spread over his face, and he told me that his father-in-law had been part of the Chinese army that had crossed the Yalu River into North Korea with a terrible loss of life.

Many years later it means a great deal to have a conversation such as that one with someone who had been your sworn enemy at some point. I suppose this comes under the heading of “I guess you had to have been there”, and no one should come away with the idea that there is, or was, anything disloyal or treasonous about any of these human interactions.