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A Soldier's Christmas on the Rhine

Reminiscences and a Page from a Dairy Written in the Army of Occupation

It was about two weeks before Christmas, in 1919, that units of the Third Division marched into various towns and villages along the Rhine river to take over an advanced sector in the American Army of Occupation. The march up from the old St. Mihiel front in France had occupied something more than a month. It had been extremely cold—with a damp, penetrating cold—and we had been obliged frequently to sleep out in the fields under flimsy army duffels, wrapped in thin army blankets, taking turns at stirring up the fire to keep out the frostbite.

In the last days of the war he had fought through an interminable drizzle. We were chilled to the marrow, and many of us had burned holes in our hob-nailed shoes trying to warm them over a fire. On the march into Germany, nails from the burnt edges of the soles and stones from the frozen highway had stuck into our feet, causing them to swell up and bleed. Occasionally a stray rolling kitchen caught up with us, but there were days when "iron rations" were the only available food, though usually we had orders not to eat them. Once when we violated orders the whole company was double-timed up a steep hill after a day's march and forced to run in a circle till two of our men fell in a faint.

Passing through villages and towns the band at the head of the column always struck up entraining strains of march music, and though tired and drooping under the weight of heavy packs, we invariably caught some of its exhilarating spirit and straightened up to march with military precision as we entered the town. During the ten-minute intervals of rest after fifty minutes of marching, we used to ding ourselves down on our packs and roll cigarettes and wonder how much farther it was; and when we started to march again we chewed tobacco. Now and then, when we stopped for the night, a good German woman would give us dinner, and sometimes her son who was home from the war would offer to sell his iron cross in exchange for a loaf of white bread. Our arrival in Andernach, on the Rhine river, marked the end of the long trek into the Rhineland. It was, as I have said, about two weeks

before Christmas. Recently, looking through a batch of old papers that I had stored in the attic ten years ago, I came across a few papers of an old diary. I had written it in this quaint old town on the Rhine river. Here are a few passages from it, crude, immature and sentimental, but sincere enough and indicating what an American soldier might have thought and felt spending the first Christmas after the war in Germany.

"It is only a few days before Christmas. I fear it will not be much of a Christmas, for the people seem to have scarcely enough to eat, let alone to think about celebrating Christmas. We are billeted in a steam-heated piano factory and have the freedom to go and come almost as we please. After practical starvation at the front and during our march up here, we are getting so much that I seldom eat more than twice a day.

"Of course, we have orders not to fraternize with the enemy. That is a political necessity. However, we do, in fact, we frequently share our rations with the Germans and spend evenings with them. For them, white bread and chocolate and soap are unheard-of luxuries.

"As for cotties, myself and my clothes have been through the 'de-louser' three or four times, and I am glad to say I sleep in peace once more. The Y. M. C. A. and the K. of C. provide plenty of entertainment, but not chocolate, and there is a government commissary where we can purchase almost anything we desire. There are also parades along the river front, and drills and horse-shows.

"Today our regiment was decorated with the Croix de Guerre with palm leaf. They say it was for our 'gal-hat' fighting in stopping the German drive on Paris, July 15th. We were on dress parade for the occasion, and had to stand stiff and be reviewed, but I much prefer staying in the barracks.

"This is Christmas Day in Andernach. It is a day long to be remembered, and I feel that I shall think of it at each Christmas as the years pass, not because I am particularly happy, but because of the strangeness of my surroundings and because it is the first peace Christmas after the war.

"In fact, I may describe my feelings and emotions as those of sadness, as I passed through the snow-covered streets tonight, gazing in at the windows, here and there, I could see the Christmas trees with their dazzling lights, and I was sorry for the happy children within. They are happy, indeed, their Christmas has not been marred by the war, but they do not seem to know.

"Last evening—Christmas eve—the snow began falling and continued to fall till late in the night, covering everything with a blanket of dove white. It was good to be out at it. The flakes were large and sticky and clung to one's eyebrows. Several of us went to midnight Mass. The church was filled, and as we knelt down inside, the organ peeped out the notes of 'Adeste Fideles.'

"Afterward, when the snow ceased the clouds began to break up and drift away, and when I awoke early this morning the moon had come up and was shining brilliantly on the breast of the new-fallen snow. The frozen pond down in the field below resembled a pool of quicksilver, so brilliant was its surface, swept clear by the wind. This morning dawned clear and cold, and the people began to pass to and fro, going to Mass and coming back.

"All this time, all day, my thoughts have been elsewhere. I have been thinking what an ideal Christmas this would make were I at home again, back among the friends I used to know and with my mother and father whom I love. It will not be long now, I think, for everything seems to be running along smoothly enough in this part of Germany and I can see no reason why we should be required to occupy German territory for any great length of time.

"I received twelve letters last night. They came just in time for Christmas. Several of them were from home. It had been such a long time since I had received any letters, and coming at this time they helped to make things seem a little more like Christmas.

"Surely, the whole world appreciates this first peace Christmas after

the war. The war has been a tragedy to everyone. But, egotistically, I feel that perhaps there is no one can appreciate peace as much as a soldier who has come face to face with war's consequences. What does it mean to me? What if I were this very night crouching in a shell crater, listening to the merriment of the wind in the barbed wire, and confidently expecting every moment that in the next I should be blown to atoms?

"Instead, God has given us peace and I am able to sit here in the comfort of a warm room, and jot down my thoughts as a pleasant means of idling away a Christmas night. And so I feel that I appreciate for the first time in my life the following passage from the Gospel of St. Luke: 'And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army praising God, and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.'

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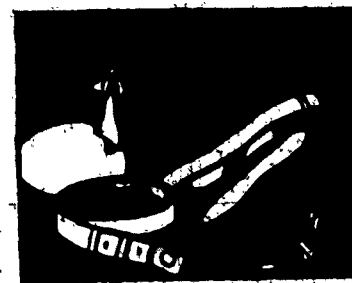


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