

## CHRISTMAS IN THE TRENCHES by DG Davis (Rated PG-13)

*Synopsis: Christmas comes even on the battlefield.*

[*Authors Note: I began this story in 2006 after hearing a story on National Public Radio about the WWI Christmas Truce. It struck an a-ha chord with me since Logan, according to canon, was a very young man at the time. He might've volunteered to serve since Canada was a British colony. If you check history, some of the dates, especially in the Epilogue, are a bit fudged. I hope you enjoy it.*]

{All names & locations are either fictional or are being used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental. The X-men character, Logan, belongs to Marvel/20thCentury Fox.

Credit for a few lines of text and dialog, marked with double-stars, must be given to Stanley Weintraub, author of Silent Night, The Story Of The World War I Christmas Truce. Inspiration also gleaned from All Quiet On The Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque and Gifts of War by Mackenzie Ford.

\*\*\*\*\*

There are two states of existence here in the trenches: bored to death or scared to death; often both at the same time. Add hunger, cold, sickness, loneliness and a thousand other miseries and you have a not so tidy muddy, bloody, rat infested corner of hell.

And there's no relief in sight.

Tonight, fog thicker than pea soup blankets the pocked no man's land known as Ypres, Belgium; the Polygon Wood to be exact. Freezing mist forms tongues of ice that clings to the barbed wire snaking above the trenches and masks deadly shell bursts with ethereally beautiful halos. Talk about paradoxes!

A half dozen of us huddle in thick muck around a low, smoky fire. A man has to stick his hands or boots into the coals to feel any warmth because wet, itchy woolen uniforms let the cold sink bone deep.

The coffin nails we're sharing don't do much, but the flask of brandy making its way around does warm the belly, even if it's only for a couple minutes. It's against regulations to imbibe in an active battle zone, but for crying out loud, it's December twenty fourth, Christmas Eve.

Maybe we'll get lucky, get called on the mat and tossed into the brig. Above ground with dry pallets for sleeping and real latrines, they tell me it's a palace compared to the trenches.

Though it's my second rotation here, I'm still considered a rookie and have to prove myself. The old sweats don't make exceptions taking measure or dishing out the dirty jobs. So far, I ain't managed to let 'em down.

It's a rigged cycle for sure. One month, usually more, on the front line followed by a couple weeks in support or reserve and, if you're lucky, a long weekend rest. Problem with rest in these parts is there ain't anywhere to go.

Professional soldiers, that's what the recruiter told us we'd become. So, too young and too stupid I signed up with two others keen on escaping the dead-end drudgery of the coal mines back in frozen no-place Alberta.

We bolstered and competed against each other through basic training. Bonded through endless games of poker and sea sickness on the trip across the pond. Gripped about advanced training at what we thought at the time was the earth's armpit: Salisbury Plain, England. Reveled and got gloriously drunk the night we received our orders to the same unit.

The kid of the trio, I had little experience with booze or broads and I guess my mates figured I better get my lesson before we lit out. My last recollection 'til the next morning was passing out in some lusty wenches embrace.

Bugger me! The train ride to the front the next day was torture par excellence. My head wanted to explode and I didn't quit barfing 'til the sun set late in the afternoon. Absinthe? Never again!

My zeal to kick the enemies butt is strong, but any fool notions of it being some grand and glorious hunting expedition died along with my mates, Muldoon and Swensen, victims of a gas attack launched by the enemy.

Just three days in, we were caught in a depression between the front and the trenches. We emerged from the noxious green cloud offering high praise to our gas masks. Yeah, our eyes burned and teared and we hacked up our lungs for a while, but it passed and the medic sent us back up the line.

Later that night, after chow, Swensen started hackin' and pukin' and it wasn't long 'til Muldoon and I were

hanging our heads between our knees adding fertilizer to the mud.

Hostilities erupted before help came from the rear and by the time the medic got to us we could hardly breathe, let alone hold a rifle, for coughing up blood. After a few hours I was doing all right, but through the night I heard my mates gasp and beg for help that nobody could give. Just before sunrise they fell silent. The medic said I was lucky and released me for light duty in the rear trenches. I remember it rained for days on end and I was glad: nature's camouflage for tears of grief and guilt.

Right after Muldoon and Swensen passed all I wanted to do was massacre every bloody Fritz I could get in my rifle site. One bright day I had one in the cross hairs of my rifle. He didn't know it and looked in my direction. A kid like me, maybe younger, I suddenly realized they were just like us. Vowing to myself that I would never look another one in the eye, I pulled the trigger.

I missed.

There is good reason to kill: to eat, survive, to protect. There's even a perverse sort of honor in taking a life, but lobbing cans of death vapors or shooting a man who never knows your bullet's coming ain't honorable. God knows, I've straddled both sides of the fence. More wrong than right, soldiering is my last chance.

A man gets toughened to it after a while. It's either that or lose your mind. Doesn't mean I understand it. But I ain't collecting pay for understandin'. Can't cut and run, so the only thing left is to do the job and pray for a quick end to what they're calling "the war to end all wars." Ain't that what they said of the Napoleonic Wars or any other ya pick out of the history books?

The trick, so they tell me, is to get into a routine. So it's eat, sleep, stand to and fight. In between, it's endless trench digging. For fun we pick coots from our knickers, sizzling the vermin in candle flame.

Lovely little war, ain't it?

It's strangely quiet tonight. The usual crack of rifles and rumble of artillery has petered off to almost nothing on both sides. The fog seems to hug voices to the ground and I hear the Huns only a few meters away. Someone's squeezing out a soft melody on a concertina joined by voice in song. . . *Oh Tannenbaum, wie grün sind deine Blätter...*

From a sentry perch I hear, "Stone the crows! What those bloody Krauts about?"\*\*

The lot of us scramble, peering between sand bags heaped on the parapet.

"Mind ye heads, boy-o's! Or be blessed with a g'night kiss,"\*\* says a sprite of Mick. He's warning of the local enemy sniper who never fails shooting at us each night. Our good night kiss!

A break in the fog and mist reveals an ugly, treacherous stretch of ground between us and the enemy: No man's land. Something glows atop the German parapet. Blinking and rubbing my eyes, I don't quite believe what I see.

It's a bleedin' tree.

A small evergreen lit with candles. Germans call it Weihnachtsbaum.

A Christmas Tree!

In a combat area? What the devil kind of trick is this? My sentiments echo down the length of our trench. What else can it be? Everybody *knows* the Germans are conniving buggers.

Apparently not convinced of this truth, an idiot among us shouts, "Guten singing, Fritz!"\*\* A German shouts back for us to join in.

"We'd rather die than sing for the Boche!"\*\*

To which a German jokes across the line, "It would kill us if you did." \*\*

A senior non-com comes down hard on the miscreant, "Why don't ya stand up and shine a light on y'self? Shut yer bloody yap, mister." Beaming disgust at the rest of us he barks, "What y'standing 'round for, girlies? There's a war on."

I ain't keen to be on the non-com's bad side, so I make busy cleaning my sidearm. My rifle could use it, but that's a task best done in the rear trenches. It's bad form being caught in a firefight with your main weapon in pieces.

A couple of men break out and begin frying tin rations over the meager fire. A mystery concoction of meat,

beans, potatoes and vegetables; you could call it stew if you scoff in the dark! Still, the aroma makes my stomach growl and I rummage through my pack. Meat and vegetables? Vegetables and meat? The choice is underwhelming.

A rat scurries along a support beam, sniffs casually at a sack hanging from a rusty hook then dodges the rock tossed at it. Smart buggers, they filch and foul our provisions at will. This one, smart and cocky, raises itself on its hindquarters, chattering and squeaking, cusses up a rat blue streak.

As the night deepens the weather turns clear and brutally cold. More German Christmas trees appear up and down their lines. Spying between the sand bags, it's positively bright over there. They're still serenading and, from the sound of things, it's caught on our side too. I hear the strains of Tidings of Comfort and Joy from a few yards down our trench.

Comfort? Too right! Rats, coots, muck and cold.

Joy? Ha! Maybe I'll dance a little jig just to show 'em how happy we are. Chuckling bitterly and hurling my empty meal tin into a puddle earns me uneasy glances from my mates.

My thoughts drift recalling the grand spectacles my family celebrated every season. Every season before my mother lost her mind and that old buzzard, my grandfather ran my arse off, that is. Yeah, there was the solemnity of Advent, but then came the revelry and excesses of the Twelve Days! No one celebrated like the Howletts. Not in Edmonton, that's certain.

Ah, stuff it ya sentimental sod! Anything seems better than what I'm stuck in right now.

"Gather round, lads," burly Angus MacPherson interrupts my nostalgia. "Mail call!" He's hauling a bulging sack and, if it weren't for the shock of flaming red hair, beard and kilt, he could be taken for Saint Nicholas.

Cold enough to freeze yer privates to ice and the bloody Scot's wear kilts?

Ain't gonna be anything for me so I motion for McAdams to queue up. With a wife and young ones, he'll have at least a letter.

He returns with a packet of letters and a pair of boxes; one he tosses to me, "Good King George sends 'is best'r at least Princess Mary does."

I don't have a clue. "Eh?" I mutter, prying open the small, ornately stamped tin box. Centered and encircled by leaf clusters is the profile of a reasonably attractive young woman, Princess Mary.

I laugh at the engraved greeting card: *May God protect you and bring you home safe. HRH King George, V.* I salivate over the contents chock full with smokes, chocolate, raisins, biscuits and sausage.

McAdams shoves a sheaf of paper in my direction, "Be a good fellow and read Mary Margaret's letter. Never picked up the knack, ye know?"

Being privy to this kind of personal stuff makes me twitch. Stuffing a chunk of sausage in my mouth, I begin, "Dearest Seamus..."

Excited conversation creates an undercurrent as I read the letter to my mate. The word "cease-fire" gets our attention. If the scuttlebutt working its way along the line is true, it seems the enemy is infected with the spirit of the season. I'll believe it when pigs fly.

"Thank ye kindly," Seamus offers as I return the letter. There's a sad smile on his face as he shifts on the wooden pallet masquerading as a chair.

We both go quiet until he asks, "Where ye hail from boy-o?"

"Canada."

"Aye. Family?"

"No. Orphan since twelve."

"That explains no mail then."

I grunt, grateful he doesn't pry for particulars I'd just as soon forget.

"Sweetheart?"

Pain seizes my heart, her loss still fresh in my mind and it must show because Seamus' expression becomes a dark shade of somber.

"Aye, lad," he says softly. "Sorry for askin'."

Hauling myself upright and muttering, "No harm," I need a change of scenery.

Treading slippery duck-boards and thinking about my 'sweetheart', Rose, the pain is still fresh as if it happened yesterday and if I live a hundred years I will never live it down or forgive myself. In a fit of uncontrolled rage and revenge aimed at the cur who tried to defile her, I killed her. I didn't have the control over myself to keep from--strike me down--running her through with this cursed abomination of mine. Claws! Keen as the finest hunting knife, they pierce through the flesh between my knuckles. When the rage takes hold there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Suddenly, I feel sick. The tin rations I ate form a vile lump in my throat. Dropping to my knees, I heave my guts and shame into the slimy mud while salty tears scald my cheeks.

One of my mates squats down beside me, "There, there, lad. The flux gets us all now and again."

If he only knew.

Dipping my head to my chest to hide the tears, I snort and clear my throat, "I'm alright."

He nudges my shoulder and goes his way. Weary and numb, I seek a dry patch of ground near the fire pit.

"Ay, Canuck, still got those playing cards?" Private First Class Martin LeDoux breaks through my gloom. Too posh for his own good, he's of the opinion anyone not from Quebec is sub-par. To him, a bumpkin from the Canadian plains, like me, isn't fit to muck the cesspits. Makes me wanna shove his face into one.

"What if I do, fancy pants?" I reply in formal French then debase his regional pride with, "Ka-becker?"

"Bon homme, these fancy pants," he slaps his wool covered thigh, "keep mon derriere warm." He flips a pail up-end, "Maintenant, fermez votre bouche and deal."

The soldier has a point, even though I wasn't referring to fancy pants in the true sense of the word.

I grin like a hyena sizing up a meal, "Like pain, LeDoux?" and set my arse on a discarded wooden crate.

"Not this time, mon ami."

"Uh-huh. Pick yer poison, bub."

"Whist."

"Got lace on yer knickers?" I laugh.

"Pardon?"

Unguarded laughter breaks out around us and another pair pulls up crates to join. Since he ordered me to deal, Whist it ain't. I shuffle the cards two-handed, "Who's up for a few hands of Skat?"

The eyes have it and LeDoux shrugs, out voted. I deal each man a three-card hand, putting three into the pot, two face up and one down. I watch their faces. On guy scratches his head, another, his twin, and comments, "Bleedin' chat eat ya alive." No one disagrees.

The caroling continues. Raucous German voices in broken English challenge across no man's land, "English soldiers! Happy Christmas! We no shoot. You no shoot."

Evidence suggests they're honest. There hasn't been a shot fired in our sector since before sundown.

Somebody from our side answers with a bawdy music hall ballad: "...*his face was bold as brass...we don't want your Christmas pudding, you can stick it up your ass...*" Another chorus of Comfort and Joy follows an even bawdier verse.

"Bravo, Tommy!" echoes from the enemy side and a Fritz announces a gift is on its way!

Suddenly, we're scrambling for gas masks and cover.

Thunk!

Bouncing across the duck-boards, landing with a squish in mud, it's a boot! And it's stuffed with sausages and chocolate!

Alas, clean knickers ain't included.

Returning 'fire' with tins of Christmas pudding and cigarettes, the skirmish continues long after I've racked up in a dug-out for a few hours. Curling up on a coot-infested pallet with a damp, stinking flea bag, I will myself into a half kip. Anything more invites rats to dinner.\*\*

"Stand to!"

A bellicose voice rouses me. Bolting to attention, I slam my forehead into the overhead bunk. Groaning, I roll

and drop to the ground. I'm stiff from the cold and it's tortuous stuffing my feet in frigid boots. What I'd give for a roaring stove.

My groin aches from a full bladder and it's misery hiking to the jakes, but not as much misery as using the things. Nothing more than a series of holes dug into the mud; it's a place you can't linger for the stench or threat to life and limb. Fritz takes particular pride in locating ours and lobbing grenades.

Conversation is sparse out of necessity as we swing into the morning routine. Personnel movement is always risky even under cover of pre-dawn darkness. It's still eerily peaceful with only the sound of distant rifle fire and it's sporadic at best. Normally the shelling is fast and furious.

My duties lead me close to the officer's area where uncommon aromas tickle my nose. Cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves? I follow the scent to a dugout kitchen and I'm not the only one.

I must be dreaming!

My knees go weak observing a cook stirring a kettle of chopped meat and spices while another, illuminated by torches glow, works a mound of dough on a makeshift tabletop.

Tortiere?

Well, something like it. I can't help cracking a grin vividly recalling Roses special brandy soaked Tortiere. She had a way about her, a gift bringing warmth and civility to our shack at the mining camp.

Saliva moistens my mouth and my stomach burns from empty. A breakfast of tea and moldy biscuits ain't likely to ease the discomfort. Gotta make sure I find an excuse to get over to this part of camp in, oh, two hours.

Golden first light bleeds into the eastern sky and seeps slowly into the trenches. It's clear and promises to warm up. The terrain stretching before me might have been something to behold at one time, but now it's barbed wire, skeletal trees and bloated corpses.

Word at muster is the rumored cease-fire is true and the lieutenant requests 'volunteers' to venture between the enemy trenches and ours to retrieve and bury our dead. Lucky me! I get volunteered.

Suicide mission, if he'd ask me. He doesn't.

Enemy and ally alike litter the ground scape in varying degrees of decay. Some are weeks if not months old, their faces brown and leathery with deeply sunken cheeks. Others are bloated and ready to bust wide open with the slightest disturbance.

I shouldn't be shocked. I've seen the dead, but nothing like this. The faces of men – make that kids like me, obliterated by fire from close range. Echoing in my head are heart-stripping cries heard night after night of men dying slowly and painfully of wounds they might've survived if they'd made it back to the trenches.

I feel sick and powerless. I want to hate the enemy. I want to grab my rifle, shove it in his face and pull the trigger. But looking around I see the enemy is like me. Regular blokes trying to survive in a nightmare bred by a hierarchy that promises an easy and fast path to glory. We die while they remain fat and safe.

"Di'ja hear we're getting a visit by some brass hat from field command?" Seamus McAdams reports as he struggles wrapping a gruesome corpse into a scrap of canvas.

"Zat so," is my unimpressed reply hoisting a leathery, stiff bag of bones over my shoulder.

"Aye and word is he's one of the toughest birds you ever want to make acquaintance with. They say he'd shoot his silver haired grand mum if he thought it do him good."

I sigh, shake my head and trudge for the makeshift burial mound. Bloke like me, lowly in rank ain't likely to attract much attention from the likes of an iron-balled superior like Seamus is talking 'bout. Least wise, I hope not.

Bugger! Now I know why cook's going to all the trouble with the meat pies. The promise of steaming Tortiere for noon chow just evaporated like the morning dew.

Trudging back across the dismal wasteland between fronts, my ears pick up a deep drone. It's coming from the east; I judge a mile away, give'r take. This is not a good development. Drone like that means an aeroplane. Coming from the east means enemy aeroplane. Don't my mates hear it?

I barely have time to shout warning before the drone becomes a deafening roar. A bi-winged German bomber swoops in low and fast. All we can do is face plant in the dirt and pray.

Should 've known the Huns'd take advantage. Truce? My flux-chapped arse!

Strangely, the expected pelting of lethal lead does not come. I lift my face from the muck and steal a glance. The aeroplane veers toward the German line, slows and seems to drop low enough a man could reach up and touch the wheels mounted to its belly. The aviator in the rear seat shouts in German; words I don't understand.

What in bloody hell!

He shoves a pair of crates out of the 'plane. They hit the ground with a thud and I watch the Germans descend on the booty like a pack of starving wolves. The plane guns its motor and roars out of sight. In his wake I observe the enemy hoisting amber bottles to the sky riotously shouting, "Danke!" The only other thing I comprehend is 'schnapps'.

Lucky buggers.

We manage to clear our dead from no man's land as the sun peaks in the December sky. Past noon chow and appetite killing task complete, my stomach growls loud complaint.

I ease past the kitchen dugout, hoping against hope for a scrap of meat pie. But it ain't to be. Several yards distant in the officers' tent, the fat cats are devouring my Tortiere and everything else edible in this stink-hole. Do they fight off thieving rats? Choke down half spoiled rations? Slake their thirst with muddy, fouled water?

Frustrated and angry, I slump my shoulders, adjust my rifle and cut back to the trenches to scrounge up yet another tinned ration. Adding Princess Mary's sausages and biscuits to the swill is a poor consolation prize.

Warming ourselves by a low fire, the scuttlebutt centers around nervous speculation over our guests from field command and this mysterious cease fire that, if intelligence is right, has spread all along the lines. One rumor making the rounds is that a couple units down the line actually shared a Christmas meal with the Germans! No doubt we'll hear how they all die of poisoning in the next day or two. A few optimists even suggest the war might be over. Won't find me sweating on the top line for that.

The enemy seems to have taken the truce to heart raising banners with *You No Fight. We No Fight* written on them. With few intact bits of canvas to spare, our sides reply has been more of the verbal kind. But a few yards down, the Manchester Infantry boys tacked a sign with *Happy Christmas* onto the barbed wire curled atop the trench.

You don't have to listen hard to hear across the trenches. To my ears, their songs, in harsh, guttural German, are akin to bullfrogs with a bellyache. I can't help laughing hearing our side reply with bawdy pub toasts. Shame we don't have ale to toast 'em right and proper.

"Danke, Tommy!" echoes from the unseen trenches and Fritz announces another gift from his side is coming.

Bugger! Last time it turned out all right, but there's still a war on.

We dive for cover, shouting for a sandbag. The gift, a tin this time, explodes with more chocolates, sausage and cigarettes!

Our side returns fire, delivering tins of the old girl's Christmas pudding. Dense as a brick and foul tasting, if ya ask me, that stuff is as lethal as its namesake artillery shell.

They taunt us with offers of good Deutsche Schnapps if we agree to meet them in the middle for a football kick-about. They're nuts to ask and we're nuts for taking 'em up on it. German helmets and Scot Balmoral caps marked the goal posts. An actual football is produced, whose side managed it, I don't know.

Growing up in the mines, I didn't play the game much. Most of my skills came from the morale builder matches we played during basic training. These Tommy boys've been playing since they could walk. The Germans, at least the ones we're facing right now, are just as good.

Breathless, laughing, barreling full speed down the field, me and Seamus kick pass the ball while shoulder butting enemy interference. Seamus goes down cursing a blue streak. His ankle is victim of a shell hole.

"Kick the bloody thing!" he screams at me.

I do and earn a Fritz body slam for my trouble. It's worth the pain. Clean and true, the ball sails into the goal box. Spectators from both sides shout cheers and jeers depending on allegiance.

Thirsty, I'm ready for a break. My mates and the enemy loiter on the sidelines passing amber flasks of happy

juice among themselves. If I wasn't witnessing it with my own eyes, I'd never believe the sight of a German medic tending Seamus' ankle.

Nor would I expect to see a German soldier hunched over a tablet busily sketching. Curious, I get close enough to watch him letter *25<sup>th</sup> Dezember 1915* and *A. Hitler* on the bottom corner of a drawing of the football match. It ain't half-bad, so I compliment him in barely passable German.

Glancing up, his eyes are flat and aloof, even a bit dull-witted. He seems to stare right through me and mutters something I don't understand, but doesn't sound particularly friendly. I shrug and back off. Something about him ain't right. He's evil, twisted, dangerous and the dull-witted expression is a well-crafted ruse. I feel it in my gut and if I never make his acquaintance again, it'll be too soon.

The Fritz who body slammed me approaches, "Good foot, you have dere," as he offers a cigarette. He's referring to my goal.

"Ja! Danke," I reply to the compliment and a smoke.

A flask of schnapps makes it my way and I throw back a hearty chug. It makes me cough and Fritz laughs.

I flash an embarrassed grin and pass it.

"You play football back home, Tommy?"

"Canadian," I correct. "Nah."

"Ach! Ja, Canadian. I once haf visited Canada. Mein Onkel hunts buffalo dere. Haf you hunt buffalo?"

"Mostly killed off where I come from."

"Such a shame," he says, takes another swig and returns the bottle. "Dey are majestic beasts."

My second swig goes down easier. "They are," I agree.

He pokes out his hand, "I am Gunter Nord of Leipzig." Gotta be the booze loosening his trap.

I reciprocate minus the handshake, "James...uh...Logan."

It's sad. After seven years the name Howlett sticks like a bad habit.

He shouts and stomps his feet vigorously as his side matches score. "It would be better if dis dum var was settled over football."

My chuckle is humorless, "Tell that to good King George and the rest."

"Ja! And to t'ink your King and my Kaiser are vetter...ehm, cousins"

As the Germans take the lead, he stomps his feet cheering, "Hoch! Ho..."

I don't hear as much as I sense it just as he gasps and clutches his chest.

Sniper?

Reacting, I dive for the nearest artillery crater, pulling my enemy in with me while hell breaks loose all around. Soldiers dive for the trenches, any cover handy, as machine guns roar to life from parapets lining the trenches and rifle fire cracks overhead.

Pinned down, unarmed except for my knife, I feel panic and rage crawl up my spine.

What stupid, sheep-buggering mongrel broke the truce? I find out and...

We Canadians call it Silent death. Wait silently in the dark. Along comes Fritz and before he knows it, he lays dead in the dirt, cut open by a trench knife. With claws sharp as any knife, I'm apparently born for it.

The German moans, "Herr Logan..."

Keeping pressed to the earth, I inch closer, nearly spooned against his body, "Don't talk, man." The scent of his dying fills my nostrils.

Ping! Inches away, a bullet showers clods of mud and rocks on my head. I'd duck, but I'm already face down in the dirt.

He makes to raise his arm, but I shove it down, "And don't move. Our only chance is to play dead."

And pray somebody doesn't lob a grenade on top of us.

"Play...dead?" he wheezes in my ear. He gestures to his chest, "Help me...please," as he fumbles with a double row of buttons. "In my pocket..."

He can't manage it. Moving as little as possible, I loosen enough buttons on his great coat. A trembling,

ice-cold hand guides mine to an inner breast pocket. I retrieve a lumpy, blood soaked felt pouch. Opening it, a pair of silver oval framed photographs, no larger than a watch fob, slides into my grimy, bloodied hand. Wiping blood away from the first, a young woman's delicate face stares back at me. What's her name? I turn it over, but the name isn't revealed. Better luck with the other one. A photo of a small child bearing strong resemblance to the woman, the name Kristofer David and a date engraved on its back.

"Nice lookin' family."

His mouth forms a sad, pained smile, "Danke."

Firing continues over our heads as we go quiet. I can't think of anything more to say and he closes his eyes, resting maybe.

"You will be relieved to den hinteren Linien...er...da rear lines. Perhaps leave soon?" he asks during a lull.

"No, not for a while."

"Still, you will lif...to fight another day..." He coughs, spraying spit and blood, "I vill not."

"Bollocks! Ya got a woman, a son, everything to live for."

He shakes his head, "I do not know why I trust you, but...please, inside da pouch."

I retrieve a tightly folded piece of paper soaked through with so much blood, I'm afraid to unfold it.

"Ja, give it to me." It rips as shaking fingers peel the saturated folds apart. "Dey are at dis address...not far... Amsterdam."

"Don't talk. Save your strength." Taking a risk, I raise my head just enough to peer across the barren no man's land toward the German trenches. "It'll be dark soon. When it is, you're crawling back to your line and I'm crawling back to mine."

"I vill not survive. You can see dat."

Yeah, I can see it, but I don't want to. And I don't want the responsibility he's forcing on me. He's the enemy. I should stick my bayonet in him and be done with it. Get caught doing this and it's *san fairy ann* that Amsterdam is neutral. I'll be a traitor facing a firing squad. "Not me, Fritz. You have casualty liaisons same as we."

"Nein, nein. You are my only hope. You see, Frances, my wife, is Englisch. Dese things, dis letter...I cannot rely on my own people...she vill... never get dem."

"Ya sure about this, man? What if..."

He chokes and shudders as blood oozes from his mouth. Failing fast, his whisper is a liquid gurgle, "Swear you vill do dis. He chokes, "Bitte."

Close to his ear, I murmur, "Yeah, I..." How do I say it? "Ich schwore...I promise." But he doesn't hear. He's dead.

Inside I feel dead. I'm as rotted and hopeless as the corpses I buried just this morning.

So, this is Christmas?

\*\*\*\*\*

## EPILOGUE

"Put a sock in it, Maverick. History ain't repeatin' itself and we're both gonna live to score braggin' points. Ya hear me?" I hope my voice don't sound as anxious and frustrated as I feel.

The whole deal went south and we got screwed royally by our own, the Reds trying to keep Chiang Kai-shek in and Mao out. Now, we're stuck waiting for extraction. The slug in Maverick's belly and the risk of capture by the Chinese make it imprudent for us to do anything but wait 'til our teleport home, Kestrel, shows his sorry butt. He'd better have a good excuse.

"'Da heck that mean?" He grunts from pain between each word.

"Sheesh! It's yer gut, not yer brain."

I think he'd grin, but it hurts too much, "History repeating . . . what's that about?"

"Phew!" I rake my hands through greasy, sweaty hair and think back to a December day, strangely enough,

exactly thirty-four years ago. “Picture this, Chris. Two soldiers; enemies in truth, standing around gabbin’ like they’re best pals. Somebody starts shooting. They hit the dirt, but one of ‘em’s hit. Hit bad and he don’t make it. But before he checks out he asks the other ‘un to deliver something to his wife and kid. That dyin’ soldier was Gunter Nord, your father. The other guy was...”

“You,” Maverick finishes.

“Got it in one.” I lean over my friends’ prone body so I can look him in the eye, “And if it’s up to me, you ain’t goin’ out the same way your ol’ man went.”

He grabs for my hand and actually smiles, “Coming from you, I believe.”

I nod. Good on ya, bub. I’ll do my best. Wanna, but don’t dare voice a promise for lots o’ reasons.

Now, *this* is Christmas... if I succeed.

### *The End*

Helpful translations: *coots, chat* = lice; *Boche, Hun, Fritz, Kraut* = German soldiers; *Mick* = Irish; *scoff* = eat; *jake* = latrine; *flea bag* = sleeping bag; *kip* = sleep; *posh* = snobbish, know-it-all; *Skat* = a popular trick-taking card game; *Tommy* = English soldier; *Tortiere* = a French-Canadian meat pie; *absinthe* = green liquor with wormwood added; *san fairy ann* = a slang pronunciation of the French “ça ne fait rien,” meaning “it makes no difference or it doesn’t matter.”

{Editors note: for those unsure, the Epilgoue is referring to the period of the Communist take-over of China.}