

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

In late November, Alfred Anderson, Scotland's oldest man, died at the age of 109. Most likely you have never heard of him, but his legacy is about more than just living almost eleven decades. Alfred Anderson was the last surviving soldier to have witnessed the spontaneous "Christmas Truce" of World War I.

Can you imagine a spirit of peace and compassion so powerful that sworn enemies--men in the middle of a bloody war -- would stop their fighting for the moment, shake hands, share photographs of their families, and wish each other well? As hard as that might be to believe, Christmas in 1914 was celebrated by several informal truces along the trench-lines of Northern France and Belgium during World War One in spite of a warning from Allied General Headquarters at St. Omer that they believed the enemy was contemplating attacks during Christmas and New Year's. "Special vigilance will be maintained during these periods," they ordered.

In that year, German soldiers brought Christmas trees into their trenches and dugouts and decorated them with little battlefield candles. It was a cold, starry night when the Scottish Seaforth Highlander troops across the trenches that were called "No-Man's Land," saw the lights, suspected an immediate attack and began firing. But, surprisingly, no attack came and no fire was returned. By midnight, it was calm once more. As dawn approached, on that particularly bitter cold and foggy Christmas morning, several German soldiers called across the trenches – Merry Christmas (*Fröhliche Weihnachten!*) – they shouted to their enemies. Slowly one of the Scottish soldiers stood up and walked across No-Man's Land toward the German troops. And then, the most amazing thing happened. A German Captain threw down his rifle, picked up a barrel of beer and walked across the bloody ground toward the Scotsman. They met, shook hands, and all the troops cheered. Soon the soldiers were shaking hands and wishing each other Merry Christmas. They exchanged small gifts of tobacco and rations. The Germans shared their barrel of beer and the Scots brought their ample supply of Plum Pudding. They marked the goals with their helmets and played soccer amid the icy mud and barbed wire. A young German Lieutenant wrote about the game, "It was far from easy to play on the frozen ground, but we continued, keeping rigorously to the rules, despite the fact that it only lasted an hour and that we had no referee. A great many of the passes went wide, but all the amateur footballers, although they must have been very tired, played with huge enthusiasm."

These soldiers – these enemies -- sang *Silent Night* together. The next morning, the truce ended just as it had begun, by mutual agreement.

Captain C. I. Stockwell, of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers recalled how, after a truly "Silent Night," he fired three shots into the air at 8.30 AM on December 26th and then climbed onto his parapet. The officer who had given him the beer the previous day also appeared on the German parapet. They bowed, saluted and climbed back into their trenches. A few moments afterwards, Stockwell heard the German soldier fire two shots into the air and, as he said, "The War is on again."

This image of enemies becoming friends – if even only for a day – is one that I hold in my heart during this Christmas season. I can only imagine how our world would be so

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different if we found ways of respecting and celebrating our common humanity, of finding civilized and compassionate ways of resolving conflict, of being the best that we can collectively be. I am convinced that love, goodwill, and the pursuit of peace are more powerful forces than hate and violence. And yet, there is so much anger and aggression in the world today. Still, wouldn't it be something if we could keep the Christmas spirit – of peace and goodwill -- all year long? I'm going to think about that while I'm enjoying the warmth of my family and friends, the good food, and the exchange of gifts. With the death of Alfred Anderson -- the last witness to this powerful demonstration of love and peace during war – the legacy falls on our shoulders. My best wishes for a wonderful holiday to everyone, and may the courageous men and women serving in our Armed Forces far from home during this Christmas season be safe and abundantly blessed.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.