

# "LET THERE BE PEACE TONIGHT!"

Boyhood memories of Christmas 1944  
by Fritz Vincken

I was twelve years old, when on a night in April, 1944, a heavy bombing raid on the city of Aachen left my family homeless. My parents' bakery had burned like a torch and together, we all were evacuated out of the smoldering ruins to a village near the river Rhine, where we found shelter. Ten miles away was Neuwied, a town where my father was placed to supervise the operation of a large bakery, owned by the chief master of the local retail bakers' guild. Then, a few months later, this bakery, too, was war damaged beyond repair. Father, 48, was about to be drafted to become a soldier, but fortunately, the chief master knew the right people and was able to have him conscripted as a "field baker", to bake bread for the German army. He was ordered to report for work at a "Field Bakery", somewhere along the border to Belgium. It was late summer, the allied invasion was rolling towards Germany and seemed unstoppable. There was an assumption among many, that the war would be over before the end of autumn, and plans were made to go into hiding, while waiting for the front to pass by. Only a few feared the Western Allies. One evening, my father arrived in our village with a small army truck, picked up mother and me, and drove all through the night to take us to be in his proximity. There, about 20 miles from where he was housed at the bakery, deep inside the Ardennes Forest on a wooded mountain, there was a clearing on whose edge stood a lonely hut, empty and forsaken. A Belgian friend had shown him the way to this hidden refuge, and helped to prepare for our arrival. "Here, you'll have to spend the next three to four weeks," father told us hopefully, "then the war is behind us." It was not to be. Weeks turned into months as the front stiffened, and in December, Hitler surprised the Allies with a last bold offensive history was to call the Battle of the Bulge. We were still living in our cabin, deep snow had compounded our isolation and cut us off from the outside world.

My father, who had supplied us with provisions until well into November, couldn't get through to us anymore. Our cabin had two small glassed windows, an oven built from bricks for heat and cooking; ample firewood was stored in a nearby shed. Our basic foodstuff would last us a few more weeks. Before the big snow fell, I would make my way down into the valley to a potato clamp, where wild boars had dug a hole through the heavy cover. I went there with my knapsack as often as weather permitted. And there was a deserted farmhouse with its gate wide open. It had been pillaged of any food, but there were some candles, scattered on the floor. Knowing how much we needed them, I picked them up. There was also a lonely inhabitant, a scrawny rooster, that followed me in his search for something to eat. Mother named him "Hermann", and he became our boarder for a while. His appetite was voracious, our oatmeal supply dwindled fast and he became very plump. Hermann's frequent crowing grew louder too, which was worrisome in our lonely hideout. About a week before Christmas, all hell broke loose. Up from the valleys came the sound of heavy fighting, machinegun staccato and the howling of rockets. We felt safe in our cabin, but as a precaution, Hermann was silenced. It was hard not to worry about father.

We hoped for the best, which in his situation was to have become a Prisoner of War. For him, that would mean relative safety in an American camp. By the 24th of December the weather cleared up. Temperatures dropped overnight to below freezing, but the sun rose on a cloudless blue sky. All day long, many hundreds of Allied planes flew on their deadly missions undisturbed. The gloomy, heavy, roar of their engines, would remain forever entrenched in my mind. When darkness fell in late afternoon, the sudden quietness was conspicuous, as countless stars reclaimed the heavens. Long icicles had formed outside our windows. One single candle lighted the vicinity of our stove, where mother was preparing a hearty soup, of which Hermann was the most substantial ingredient. Our thoughts were with father, whom we missed now more than at any other time.

At that moment, we could hear some noise outside, quiet human voices. Mother hastily blew out the candle and we waited in fearful silence. There was a knock, careful and full of anxiety, then another. My mother went to the door. I slipped behind her and when she opened it there were two men in the doorway, like phantoms against the endless white background. They wore steel helmets and mother asked them where in God's name they'd come from on a night like this. One answered in a strange language and pointed to a third man, sitting in the snow. We knew by then they were American soldiers. My mother paused. She realized very well how dangerous the situation was, they were armed and could have forced their entrance, yet, they stood there and asked with their eyes. And there was someone on the ground, who seemed more dead than alive. "Kommt rein," said my mother and made an inviting gesture toward the door. The soldiers carried in their comrade and placed him on my mattress. One of them had a little knowledge of French and, assuming we were French speaking Belgians, tried to communicate. Mother responded with relief. She had learnt to speak French as a child, while attending a convent school in neighboring Belgium. Now she was told about the German offensive and how they had lost their battalion and wandered for days through the snowy Ardennes Forest, carrying their buddy who was wounded in his thigh. We relit the candle. It was warm in the cabin and now, after I had helped the soldiers to take off their heavy coats, they looked like big friendly boys. And that was the way mother treated them.

We learned that the stocky, dark haired fellow was Jim; his comrade, tall and slender, was Ralph. Herby, the wounded one, was now sleeping on my bed. "Get me some more potatoes," mother told me, while she lit an additional candle, "we need more soup." By that time, a very tempting smell spread through our room and before long, dinner was ready. I put plates on the table and we all sat down to eat, when suddenly, there was another knock at the door. Without hesitation I rushed to open, expecting more straggling Americans outside. There were soldiers, four of them, all armed to the teeth. With one look I realized they wore the uniform familiar to me after five years of war. They

were men of my people. Germans! I was almost paralyzed with fear, for though I was still a child, I knew the harsh law of war: Anyone giving aid and comfort to the enemy will be shot. Would it all come now to a horrible end? While I stood and just stared, my mother stepped behind me in the doorway. I couldn't see her face, but her calm voice eased my fear a little.

"What a freezing night to be out in the open," she said to the men, "you look like you could use a hot meal." The soldiers seemed surprised at the sight of a woman and a young boy at this time and place, but happy, to have found a German family in this borderland. They returned mother's greeting with a friendly smile. "We have to wait for daylight," explained one, who wore the shoulderstraps of a corporal. "Do you have a little warm space for us to get some rest and perhaps a bit of sleep? We won't trouble you too much." "Of course, you can stay with us," mother replied as cheerfully as she could, "I wouldn't leave you outside in a cold like this." She appeared very motherly and her friendly reception obviously impressed the weary warriors. "You can also have a hearty chicken soup with us." Through the half open door drifted the overpowering aroma of Hermann's stew into the clear winter night and the men sniffed with enthusiasm. "But," mother added with a calmness born of panic: "we also have three other half frozen guests who came a little while ago, asking for shelter. For God's sake, let there be peace tonight!"

"What is this?" the corporal protested gruffly, catching mother's hint at once, "Who's inside? Amerikaner?" Disaster seemed just moments away. Mother looked at their faces and said, "Listen to me, boys, all of you could be my sons, and so could those three in there. One of them is badly wounded and they're just as cold and hungry as you are." Then, mother's voice became very firm as she spoke directly to the corporal: "This is Christmas Eve and there will be no shooting around here!" The corporal was speechless. Two, three endless seconds of silence followed. No inkling of support came from his little group, who seemed more than ready to accept this unexpected invitation.

Mother broke the stalemate. "Enough talking," she commanded with convincing authority. "Place your weapons here in the woodshed and hurry up. Dinner is almost ready." That did it. "She is right," the corporal told his men, "we all need something hot to eat." The soldiers stepped toward the shed and placed their arms on a pile of firewood. It was quite an arsenal when I covered it with an old blanket. Mother had hurried inside already, when we approached the door. I could hear her rapidly speaking French, then Jim said something in English. Never before had I felt my heart throbbing as at that moment. The Americans, realizing there were "krauts" outside and uncertain about their hostess' negotiation, had turned to their guns. Meanwhile, the Germans had entered, looking at them with suspicion, but apparently unarmed. Mother, with her left hand got a firm hold of Jim's rifle, with her right she took a pistol from Ralph. What a relief! Never losing her motherly smile, she now tried to find a seat for everyone. We had only three chairs, but mother's bed was big,

and two of the newcomers were placed side by side with Jim and Ralph. For two minutes, perhaps three, there was a strain in the room, you could almost feel the tension this unique situation emanated.

When all were assembled around the table, cautious glances were exchanged, then suddenly, Herby moaned in his sleep. one of the Germans inquired, in what seemed to be fluent English, about the American's injury.

While inspecting Herby's wound, he told Jim and Ralph the good news: only flesh was cut, no bone was hurt, and coldness had prevented infection. "Are you a doctor?" mother asked him. "No, but I hope to be one some day," he replied with a smile. Then he proceeded to apply some dressing and a bandage from his first aid kit. "His weakness is caused by a severe loss of blood. What he needs now is rest, liquids, and good nourishment. He'll be allright." By now, the strain had disappeared and all seemed relaxed. While Herby was being attended to, I had added water and some more potatoes to increase the soup's volume. Hermann wasn't growing any bigger at this stage and, besides mother and myself, we had seven hungry mouths to feed.

The corporal unscrewed the cork from a bottle of red wine and one of his men brought a large loaf of rye bread to the table, which mother sliced and put on a plate. From the wine, mother reserved a small portion for our patient, the rest was equally divided. At last, the soup was ready to be served and the heavy, steaming kettle, was placed on the table, flanked by flickering candles. Mother finally sat down on an improvised seat at the table's head. All eyes were looking at her. The mood had become somewhat festive, almost solemn, and even though they were very hungry, no one would start eating. Ralph took the hands of those sitting next to him, Jim did the same, and all of sudden we were holding each other's hands like they do it in America, when giving thanks to God. Mother spoke a spontaneous prayer for all of us, thanking not only for our meal, but also for this night of peaceful togetherness. "And bring an end to this terrible war, so that we all can go home, where we belong. Amen." There were tears in her eyes and as I looked around the table, the soldiers were filled with emotion and their thoughts were many miles away. Now they were boys again, some from America, some from Germany, all far from home.

After dinner we had American instant coffee and pineapple pudding in small olive-green cans. Then, cigarettes were passed among our guests, but before the smoke, there was my mother, who went to the doorstep and asked us to join her to look at the stars. It was a wonderful winter night with the heavens sparkling with thousands of lights and the brightest of all was Sirius, which, mother said, was like the Star of Bethlehem a harbinger of peace and the answer to millions of prayers. No one spoke. All had their private thoughts and might have dreamed of the time when this bloody war would be over and done with. The soldiers slept on their heavy coats, while I found space in my

mother's bed. Herby woke in the early hours and was fed an invigorating drink of red wine and sugar. Morning came soon enough and our patient felt much stronger. For breakfast he ate with all of us what was left of the chicken soup. He couldn't walk, of course, so a stretcher was made with two strong sticks and canvass from a German tent square. Then the corporal explained to Jim and Ralph, how to find their way back to the American lines, while the medic translated his words into English. A German compass changed hands. "And watch your step, there may be mines out there. And if 'Mustangs' come your way, wave with your arms like madmen."

After this, they all received their weapons back, and the time for departure had come. It was a farewell like among old friends, they hugged merrily and promised to meet again: "as soon as this damn war is over." Jim and Ralph kissed mother's cheeks, Herby was placed on his stretcher and with big smiles on their faces the three Americans were on their way. Sometimes they turned their heads toward us and waved. We waved back until they disappeared between the trees; happy for the encounter and sad because it was so short. "They're people just like us," I heard the corporal mumble to himself.

Now it was time for the German soldiers to return to their regiment when my mother, to mine and the soldiers complete surprise, asked the corporal: "Please, take us along!" This impulsive decision was based on sound reasoning. Isolated for many weeks, hoping father was in safe American captivity at best, we could not remain in this lonely but for much longer. Now was the chance to leave this inhospitable wintry woodland in the company of four strong men.

To the corporal it was "a sacred duty" to honor mother's request to escort us civilians out of no-man's-land. We trudged in a row through the deep snow down to the valley where it was easier to walk. Darkness had fallen when we arrived at a small, badly ruined town. It was here, that our new friends had to say good-bye to us. of this, I have no memory. I was asleep walking on mother's hand. Both my parents knew the address of a relative who had been evacuated from the war zone to a place in central Germany. That's where we were heading now. The following night a German army truck gave us a ride to Koblenz. From there we went by train on a journey of many detours and several days, through ruins and destruction, to the city of Gotha. Now, only a few more miles and we would reach our destination. But first, mother and I went to a soup kitchen, next to the railroad station, where ladies from the Red Cross attempted to feed many hundreds of refugees who arrived at all hours from the eastern provinces.

Here, amidst the countless hungry, like in a fairy tale, we spotted a familiar face, albeit unshaven: It was father's! We were jubilant, even though he was not easy to recognize. "You look like a vagabond!" mother exclaimed. "And so do you!" father replied and we all had a good laugh. He had been on the road

for two weeks, heading for the same address as we. Somewhere on his way, he had been stopped by a local Nazi party official, who detained him as a potential deserter. Taken to a ground floor office at the townhall, he was to stand facing the wall, while this ardent freak telephoned with the dreaded military police, reporting, he had "just intercepted another one." Father intensely feared for his life. But then, rescue came sudden and from an unexpected source: An American fighter bomber on a mission to create havoc behind German lines, dived over the town, firing its machine guns at the narrow streets and dropping a bomb that exploded nearby with an infernal sound. Father turned around and found himself all alone in the room. Everybody had hastily run away, seeking shelter somewhere.

He made it outside through an open door and, while looking for his old squeaking two-wheeler, was confronted with the modern, glistening bicycle of his captor, which he appropriated swiftly and without the slightest feeling of guilt. The road was clear and no one followed, as he pedaled away as fast as he could. How sweet it was!

Reunited, we arrived at Herrenhof, a small village on the edge of the Thuringian Forest, that same day. Here on April 8, 1945, we were liberated from the horrors of war by the soldiers of the Third US-Army's 4th armored division under General Hoge. Weeks thereafter, we returned to Aachen and rebuilt our lives. But Jim, Ralph and Herby, had somehow planted the seed to my American dream, growing stronger as I became a man. In 1959, together with wife and daughter, we left Germany for the USA and four years later, moved to its 50th state. Here, in 1971, we started Honolulu's "Fritz's European Bakery", which is now run by the second generation.

My parents had remained in their homeland, where they lived out their lives. Father passed away in 1963, mother followed three years later. Meanwhile, I have become a proud American grandfather and many years have gone since that bloodiest of all wars, but the memories of that night in the Ardennes never left me. The inner strength of a single frightened woman, who, by her wits and intuition, prevented potential bloodshed, taught me the practical meaning of the words: "GOOD WILL TOWARD MANKIND". Now and then, on a clear tropical winter night, I look at the skies for bright Sirius and we always seem to greet each other like old friends. Then, unfailingly, I remember mother and those seven young soldiers, who met as enemies and parted as friends, right in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge.

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