

Christmas Eve - 1944 - and Afterthoughts

It was a universe not of our making nor of our choosing. Yet it was beautiful and deceptively peaceful in German Silesia that Christmas eve. For a brief moment the moon was alone and silent in the night sky. It softly and kindly illuminated the blanket of snow that hugged our barbed wire and the guard towers as we few survivors of aerial battles, some as long as five years ago, remembered distant homes and better times.

Suddenly, the quiet night was shattered by the foreboding wail of sirens, soon followed by the ugly sounds of exploding flak and bombs as Bomber Command and the Luftwaffe were taking, and losing, young lives and killing or maiming hundreds in their homes while sickening us with a revulsion against all who worshiped the same God yet saw fit to continue the slaughter even on his birthday.

We all longed to be home with the war a receding memory, yet there was little or no animosity towards the Luftwaffe flak gunners or fighters who were up there killing our comrades while defending their homeland. We were all victims of man's insanity. In a way we pitied them. We believed they were fighting a losing and hopeless battle. And they had it so much worse than we. We, in Bomber Command, were excused further operations on the completion of 60, a fond hope when the life expectancy was only five, but they had to go on until they found "the Hero's Death". Numerous were the obituaries of those who did. Just a couple:

Helmut Lent, in his Messerschmitt 110 destroyed 110 of our bombers over several years before he found the Hero's Death in October 1944. Heinz-Wolfgang Schnaufer fought 164 night battles in an Me 110, destroyed 121 of our bombers, survived the war, only to be killed in a car accident. These two men killed some 1,500 of us.

Men, boys really, like these caused us grievous losses, like the night of 30/31 March 1944 when, on a Nürnberg raid, they destroyed 94 of 705 bombers, killing 658 of 4,935 aircrew.

In the end we prevailed, at enormous cost to us and even greater cost to them, but what did we learn? This Christmas our highly-flawed species remains at war.

For me, it all seemed so sad when in 1957 I met, and became friends with, the German who shot me down in March 1943. I felt that both of us were flanked by the ghosts of lost comrades, created by the inability of our victorious veterans of WWI to prevent inept politicians from setting the stage for WWII and robbing the world of the promise of the war-to-end-all-wars.

In wars it is the military that creates, and endures, the greatest sufferings. So, in those countries where individual rights are cherished and where civil authorities control the military, is it not the responsibility of less-restricted veterans associations to speak for the concerns of the military that has such an enormous stake in world peace, and to ensure that they get at least as much attention as commercial and political interests?

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