

Christmas in Surbourg, France , 1944 Part One

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It was a Christmas holiday unlike any other. And that's saying a lot for tiny Surbourg. Located virtually on the border with Germany, this French cluster of farm homes and simple tradesmen will rarely be found on a map. Actually it features a tiny schoolhouse, unusual for these hamlets. At the beginning of this story it also claims a tiny ancient Rathouse--- more about its impending fate later.

Surbourg is in Alsace, that forlorn border strip of nothingness which the Germans and French have fought over for well over a century. German in its speech and in the town names and roads, it has been French in its nationalism since WWI. French despite the occupation and threatened re-annexation since 1940 by the Germans--nothing new about that They've been switched back and forth for decades.

But now it is December, 1944, a month to be known to historians and hapless World War G.I.'s as the Battle of the Bulge month.. It wasn't called that yet, but fragmentary reports told of all hell breaking loose a ways to the North, in the Ardennes. So what's new---there's always hell breaking loose in this C'est la Guerre conflict.

But Surbourg was preparing to celebrate Christmas with its newly-found friends--the curious and confident Americans whose troops had swept through days before, on Dec. 17. A makeshift hospital had set up in the dingy schoolhouse. Real doctors, and REAL American nurses, beautiful but laughable in their sagging "G.I. Duds", (whatever that meant).

Like a movie miracle, huge French flags had quickly appeared, hung from the windows of every miserable dwelling even as the combat troops roared through in their tanks and jeeps. Now you knew where your neighbors stood on the war, or so you hoped. Not far over the North hill was the German border--May the Nazis now stay there where they belong!

The tiny hospital grabbed the locals' attention. They noticed that it even treated German prisoners.. Some were German boys as young as 14, struggling to hide their fear. Sometimes a mysterious truck would come from the North and park behind the hospital. The local Pastor said it contained American bodies, frozen stiff as a board. The war was not yet far away.

The Americans had put a huge Red Cross Flag over the roof of the school, and those in the know felt this to be more than a good omen--surely the Germans would not re-attack or bomb the village with a hospital in its center, would they? What a Joyous Christmas it would be! The school children, with no school, practiced like never before, to please the friendly "Yanks" and make their duty away from home a little more special.

And so they sang on that misty Christmas Eve, sang to the Americans, and to the 14 year old boy, and the German patients---sang the message of Peace and Goodwill. Was there a dry eye in the makeshift little hospital? You could hardly see---I guess it was the mist....



Above, Our Field Hospital (Later renamed a M.A.S.H). A bomb destroyed distant buildings. Below, visiting tank stops for lunch prepared from powdered potatoes, etc. Poor, but it beat K Rations.



Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, alles Schlaft, einsam wacht
Nur des traute hochheilige Parr, Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh! Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!

Schlafen Gut, Surbourg. Morgen will not be so eintracht. (to be continued)



After the war in Europe ended, we lived in this old castle,
converted by the Germans into a Sanitarium.