

Wartime Christmas Images

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I remember one particular wartime Christmas. The year was 1944 and the world was deep in World War II. As a young boy I was aware of the events taking place in the South Pacific, Europe and elsewhere.

The sawmill across the street from our place was surrounded with barbed wire, and guard towers had been erected in strategic locations to prevent sabotage of a vital war product, lumber.

B-25 bombers from the air force base in Spokane, Washington, made practice low level bombing runs up the Palouse River Valley that ran just south of town.

When school let out in the afternoon, all the kids would pass by the local telephone office, where the operator was using the old-style switchboard with hundreds of plug-in wires for all the local party lines.

The latest news bulletins would be posted on the window, including the casualty list. On a separate list, all the local servicemen and servicewomen's names were shown, the branch of service they were in and where they were stationed. It seemed like everybody I knew had a relative in the service.

My uncle was in the South Pacific.

This particular Christmas is memorable because of the emotional events that took place on the night before. It had snowed heavily all day.

The snow was wet and the flakes came down slow and fluffy. The trees looked like the Christmas scenes from Currier and Ives.

The Christmas lights in the store windows and the residences hid the hardness of a company town and gave off a feeling of warmth and hospitality.

There was to be a Christmas dance and party at the community center. The center served as a basketball court, meeting place and the downstairs offices for the town council and mayor.

In those times, the whole family went to the dance—the children, grandparents and anyone else who wasn't working the night shift at the mill.

When my father, mother, grandparents and I arrived at the dance, I immediately headed for the balcony that surrounded the combination dance floor and basketball court. That's where all the kids were, and that's where the action was, as far as I was concerned.

When I did look down, I saw the men mostly gathered around a makeshift bar at one end of the room, smoking and drinking, and women and small children seated on the other side of the court, gossiping among themselves. The youngsters ran wild and noisily in the balcony.

Some couples were dancing to the music of a three-piece band on a small stage set up under the scoreboard.

Late in the evening, the band leader asked the hall to be quiet while he made an announcement. Standing next to him was a sailor in uniform. The band leader introduced this young man as a former choirboy from the local Methodist church. He had just arrived back home on leave after spending three years in the South Pacific.

The image of this young man has never left me. He looked like he had grown since his uniform had been issued. His arms were too long for his sleeves and his pants looked like he was getting ready to wade across a creek.

He did have several rows of ribbons on his chest and three red chevrons on his sleeve. He had the type of haircut called a "white wall," which I, too, became familiar with years later in the Marine Corps.

The band leader announced that the sailor was going to sing a Christmas song for us. As he began to sing, gradually the men quieted down, the glasses stopped clinking and the chatter from the women and kids ceased.

I must point out that a large percentage of homes in this community had a little flag hanging in the window with one or more stars on it signifying that at least one member of that family was in the service somewhere overseas.

In the winter of 1944, there was a battle going on in Belgium called the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans had launched a tremendous counter offensive, and thousands of our troops were surrounded and cut off from supplies and reinforcements.

The war in the Pacific was progressing from island to island at a terrible cost of human lives.

The sailor on the stage was singing, "I'll be home for Christmas," a capella.

I don't remember if his voice was good or bad; it didn't matter at the time and it doesn't matter now. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was transfixed by the young sailor singing, what to many people in the room, was a prayer for a loved one. To some it was a prayer that would never come true.

I doubt that there was a dry eye in the house when the sailor finished. At first,

all were silent as he stepped off the stage and walked across the dance floor. Someone in back of the room began clapping, and then the place erupted into a spontaneous ovation with applause and cries for more.

He actually left the auditorium with people slapping him on the back, women giving him hugs and grateful cheers from the crowd gathered at the door. I never saw him again.

As the years have gone by, I realize more and more how that performance symbolized the struggle that was taking place across the world at war.

How utterly helpless the people at home felt and how desperately each wanted their loved ones to come home for Christmas.