Two Christmas Mornings of the Great War

Edward Hulse and Wilfrid Ewart

This incredibly powerful true story of World War I has been patiently waiting for 2014 to arrive for many years now. Each Christmas I'd sigh and say, "Not yet." But now, since the one hundredth anniversary of the event has at last arrived, it is time.

Why is the truce still remembered? According to The Week *(December 27, 2013), it is because "in a horrific war that claimed the lives of 10 million soldiers, the Christmas Truce represents an extraordinary moment of human kinship. When the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, most soldiers assumed they'd be home by Christmas. Four months later, almost a million men had already died—with no end in sight. Amid that carnage came the truce. Starting with a handful of sporadic ceasefires between exhausted British and German soldiers . . . the unauthorized truce spread across the 500-mile Western Front, encompassing more than 100,000 men."*

In 2006, the French film director Christian Carion released Joyeaux Noel, *his documentary of this event. The story was first told in print by two British officers, Captain Sir Edward Hulse, Bart., and his friend, Captain Wilfrid Ewart. Both were members of the famed Scots Guards, and both appeared in* Harper's Monthly Magazine *in December 1920, an issue that has waited patiently in my archives so many years. The 1914 story was written by Hulse; the 1915 by Ewart.*

Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun Times *wrote that the "trench warfare of World War I was a species of hell unlike the agonies of any other war, before or after. The enemies were dug in within earshot of each other, and troops were periodically ordered over the top so that most of them could be mowed down by machine-gunfire. . . . An additional novelty was the introduction of poison gas."*

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December 18–19, 1914, was a night of tragedy in the British army. . . . It was only on the front of two divisions that the troops advanced at nightfall, artillery firing a quarter-of-an-hour's bombardment, all the earth shaking, and a sprinkle of musketry shattering the dark. For the most part, the Germans sat quietly waiting while the shells whined overhead to their support lines: only when figures loomed up in their wire did they open fire. The attack wavered, but the survivors came with a rush to the lip of the trench where for several moments a silent, tremendous struggle took place between bayonet, rifle butt, revolver, and physical strength. Some lay where they fell under the enemy parapet, some dragged themselves back and died in the open, some were

made prisoners. Here and there a party of ten or a dozen British fought their way into the German trench and hung on till daylight; then, upon order given, withdrew.

It was left to daylight to reveal—as daylight faithfully reveals—the truth of tragedy, and the price to pay.

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Less than a week later the first Christmas morning of the war dawned.

After weeks of rain and mud, we are told, it broke keen and clear with white frost powdering everything. The flat Flanders landscape was strangely silent and still. No guns fired, and few rifles. Birds, usually so rare in winter trenches, appeared in numbers, as many as fifty sparrows being fed around a dugout.

At 8:30 A.M., a British officer, looking over his parapet, saw four unarmed Germans leave their trenches, which at this point were some 350 to 400 paces distant. This officer and one from another company immediately went out and met the enemy outside our barbed wire. The latter consisted of three private soldiers and a stretcher bearer. They stated that they thought it only right to come over and wish us a happy Christmas, trusting us implicitly to keep the peace. The spokesman of the party, who spoke excellent English, asked that a post card—which he wrote forthwith—might be sent to a young woman whom, together with a motor bicycle, he had left in Suffolk. This request was carried out by one of the British officers.

These four Germans were Jaegers and Saxons of the 158th Infantry Regiment—the troops which had successfully defended their trenches on the night of December 18–19th. They protested that they had come over out of good will; that they had no feeling of enmity toward the English; that everything lay with their authorities and, being soldiers, they had to obey. There had come into their possession a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* of December 10th of that year which, they averred, had caused no end of amusement. "You English are being hoodwinked!" France was "done," they said, Russia had received a series of very heavy blows and would shortly give in. England alone carried on the war! There was more conversation of the same sort in the middle of No Man's Land. The Germans protested that the English press was to blame for working up feeling against them by publishing atrocity reports. There was a discussion about soft-nosed bullets (which the Germans claimed to have seen in the possession of English prisoners), dum-dum bullets, and the high velocity, sharp-nosed bullet. Finally the truce was formally ratified, a ditch being appointed as a halfway meeting place. The interview terminated with an exchange of English cigarettes and German cigars.

A short while later there floated down between the two lines of trenches the strains of the well-known marching song, "Tipperary," followed by those, taken up all along the German line, of "Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles." Out in the middle of No Man's Land stood six or seven large groups of mingled German and English. And, although it must be said that the fraternization was of the most genuine character, considerable suspicion prevailed on the part of the English and no precautions against possible treachery had been neglected. Not so soon could the lessons of Zonnebeke or Kruseik be forgotten! Every sort of souvenir was exchanged and many strange presents given. Addresses were taken down and the photographs of families handed round among those who

six nights before had been locked in a life-and-death struggle. One German, on being offered a Virginia cigarette, smilingly said: "No, thanks. I smoke only Turkish!"

Next, a Saxon noncommissioned officer, wearing the Iron Cross and the badge of an expert sniper, started his men on a marching song, the British meanwhile chanting national airs and Christmas carols such as "Good King Wenceslas." Finally the keen air and this remote spot in Artois were awakened to the loud singing of "Auld Lang Syne," in which all—English, Prussians, Scots, Saxons, Irish, and Würtembergers alike—joined. For the groups of Jaegers and Saxons of the 158th Regiment had been swollen by men of the 37th and 15th Infantry Regiments.

After the singing of "Auld Lang Syne," it is related that a hare, not surprisingly startled by so unwonted a sound, rose from between the trenches and ran across the frozen plow, through the soaking cabbage patches, over the ditches, and over two lines of disused trenches. British and Germans gave chase until, all piling in a heap, they killed it in the open.

It was at this juncture that the commanding officer of the British battalion appeared and, wishing everyone present a "Merry Christmas," produced from his pocket a bottle of rum, whereat a shout of joy went up, exceeding all that had gone before. A German soldier uncorked it and proceeded ceremoniously to drink his opponents' health in behalf of his *Kameraden*. All then retired to their respective trench lines for the Christmas dinner.

During the afternoon similar scenes were enacted. There was another coursing meeting. Of four more hares pursued, one was killed; this by right went to the Germans. There was much conversation. A German said that he hoped to get back to London soon; a British soldier remarked, "So do I!" A number of English newspapers were handed to the Germans who, with few exceptions, agreed that the war would be over within three weeks. Blind, incomprehensible delusion! Judging by the censored letters of that and a later time, it was one entirely shared by the British private soldier. The enemy expressed admiration for the charge of the English on the night of the 18th and 19th and announced that they also had suffered many casualties. They further expressed their intention of not renewing hostilities unless our side did; there would be no more shooting until they were relieved.

Nor had the hours of this day been, nor were those of the succeeding days, wasted. A great deal of work had been done—work which could not be done in ordinary times without mortal danger from snipers. Masses of timber, wire, and trench material were carried up in full view; parties were hard at work at drainage and on the parapets and on the roofs of dugouts. At night wiring went forward at speed and without risk. And there were not lacking among the British officers eyes to espy something of the condition and wiring of the German defenses.

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Meanwhile, however, a brief episode of another character was being enacted two or three hundred yards to the left of the festivities. Here the trenches approached each other as close as 90 or 100 yards, and, naturally, greater care had to be exercised. It was over this ground that the night attack of December 18th–19th had been hurled back, and the British dead still lay clustered about the German wire and close up under the parapets. In the course of the morning a British

officer met a German officer of an unusually agreeable type at a halfway point and discussed the question of burial. The matter was quickly arranged, and, one by one, the Germans carried twenty-nine bodies to the halfway line where they were laid side by side in a single large grave, Germans and British meanwhile standing in a semi-circle around. All personal effects and pay books were removed, only the rifles on their side of the halfway line being retained by the enemy. Pointing to the fallen, the German officer remarked, repeatedly, *"Les braves, c'est bien dommage!"*

That night a present of a scarf was sent by the commanding British officer to the German officer in recognition of his consideration. Very soon after a German orderly appeared at the halfway line, bringing in return a pair of warm, woolen gloves.

In the course of that same night heavy wiring was carried out along the British line. In dim moonlight the Germans sat upon their parapet and watched. From the British side word had already been sent that the truce was considered at an end. Nevertheless, when morning came the enemy was seen strolling unarmed and unconcerned as before outside his trench. The same four Germans as on the day previous came out to the halfway line and bespoke their desire for a truce. But our men were forbidden to leave their trenches, only a small patrol being allowed to enter No Man's Land. A present of plum pudding, sent across to the German trenches, however, was received with profuse thanks. Much heavy outside work was done on the British trenches. At four-thirty, as before, the truce formally ended.

In the night that followed alarm came. A German deserter, crawling over to the trenches of the division on the right, volunteered information that the whole German line would attack shortly after midnight. All stood to arms. Reinforcements came up hurriedly. The English artillery opened in anticipation. . . . Nothing more happened.

But the next morning shouts of laughter were heard in No Man's Land. It was the usual German truce party and English patrol comparing notes over the previous night's experiences. The Germans protested they knew nothing of an impending attack from their side. On the British artillery opening they, too, had stood to arms, expecting attack. There had been casualties in their back areas. The base English! The dirty Boches! . . . but now they laughed together. And again the truce lasted all through that 27th of December. And only when one unit relieved another on either side did those two strange companies—none ever stranger, surely, in the history of war—go their respective ways.

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One year passed.

The scene shifted a few hundred yards to the south. Only a few hundred yards, but perhaps the battlefield had become a little grimmer, a little more gashed with shell holes, a little more torn and rent with trenches dug and trenches outward blown; a little more sprinkled and sown with the terrors and dreads and ineffectual, perishing protests which are the seed crop and harvest of battlefields; a little more haunted and possessed by ghosts of the slain of Festubert, of Neuve Chapelle and late September.

Christmas had come again to this world which had changed not in kind, but only in degree, and to a world beyond which wept and prayed and waited and trembled and began to despair.

But there was no outward terror in these earliest waking hours of Christmas morning 1915. On the contrary, Nature had mercifully and kindly, with her compassionate cloak of night, covered up the wounds and scars. There was only, in the words of Rupert Brooke,

> Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
> A width, a shining peace, under the night.

And this battlefield lay under the glance of stars, so clear, so calm, so keen, and so kindly winking as to belie the very credibility of war, the very existence of fear or pain.

It was only possible to believe, as children do, that God looked on from behind such stars. . . .

Down in the trenches frost grimly held. . . . Frost binding all things, frost coming down on icy breaths from the east and seizing the ground and binding every coruscation and binding every rib and knoll so that they were brittle as bone or ivory. The trenches were clean as marble passages and hard as pavements. And rising up from them, that strange, crisp scent of frost-bound sandbags and of the upturned earth at night, incommunicable, never to be forgotten. There came to the ear no sound but a far-away shot at intervals and at intervals the loud, sharp crack of a bullet against a brick wall in the near-by ruined village, and now and again the harsh shrieks of the Little Owl from neighboring orchards.

All slept save the sentries who peered out into vague spaces of moonlight, seeing nothing, however, but the grinning outline of contorted willows, frost gleaming white on parapet and parados,* dim fields of barbed wire, the white, banked-up frontage of the German trenches, and beyond all a faint lightening of the eastern sky that was Lille. An officer and a noncommissioned officer walked up and down the trench and, meeting, said as one voice, "Christmas morning!"

And as if to echo these words, to join in their greeting, to proclaim far and wide to the world in the speaking voice of that sinister time the age-long message of "Peace on earth and good will toward men," the guns suddenly woke up. Far and near, along the whole frontage of the army corps, the guns blazed and whined, boomed, banged, and thundered, while sparks danced like luminous fiends above the German trenches, and wherever a shell burst a quick glow rose against palls of moonlit smoke. And far beyond a dull glow rose where farmhouses behind Aubers began to burn.

It lasted for twenty minutes. From the other side no reply came. One or two lone bursts from a machine-gun; one or two lone figures upstanding in brilliant moonlight as they, too, watched that strange and memorable scene. For the rest, emptiness, desolation.

As suddenly, silence fell again, stiller, colder, knife-edged, and, if possible, more profound. A gentle stirring of the icy wind and frost binding, binding. Stars a-watching, moonlight and shadow vying. Rats a-hunting, death and doom a-flying. A sad world sleeping. A war at rest. . . . The second Christmas dawn a-breaking.

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Gray, steel-gray light crept out of the east, above Aubers, above Fromelles, above the yet sleeping world of the trenches.

One by one the drab features of the landscape emerged as

* The bank behind a trench, to protect troops from enemy fire.

facts emerge out of the phantasmagoria of dreams. And night in the trenches was a dream—sometimes a nightmare.

Countless days had broken thus—and passed—and passed. And by force of repetition every detail of the landscape took shape . . . first the ruined village with its great white husk of a church tower, then the skeleton trees waving withered, palsied, protesting arms at the winter sky and the double line of skeleton trees following the deserted road that ran parallel to the trenches; and the confused world beyond with its drab fields, its dikes, and ditches, its shattered groves and orchards, out of which the stark red of brick walls peeped here and there. And in the foreground, the waste beyond the trenches—the cesspools, the mud and earth upchurned, the shell holes, the strands of wire, the gray, crooked crosses, the oozing, battened graves, the silvery shrine of cast-out ration tins and heaps of refuse and heaps of sandbags—such the daylight showed. And beyond again, far beyond the German trenches, in the enemy country, the husk of a church tower showing above scarlet roofs and leafless trees near the summit of the long, low Aubers ridge—and never a sign of life.

From the trenches themselves came those indefinable insignificant sounds which so far went to the making of all that queer subterranean life. There were sounds of men stamping feet to get warm and sounds of men slapping themselves, and sounds, very distinct, of men shouting to one another through the keen air, and sounds—of all the most familiar—of the rifle's bolt being worked and the trigger's click at morning cleaning. Wherever sentries stood breath vaporized upon bitter stillness. The blue smoke of fires began lazily to rise in thin wisps along the respective lines, while to the nostrils came strongly the reek of bacon frying.

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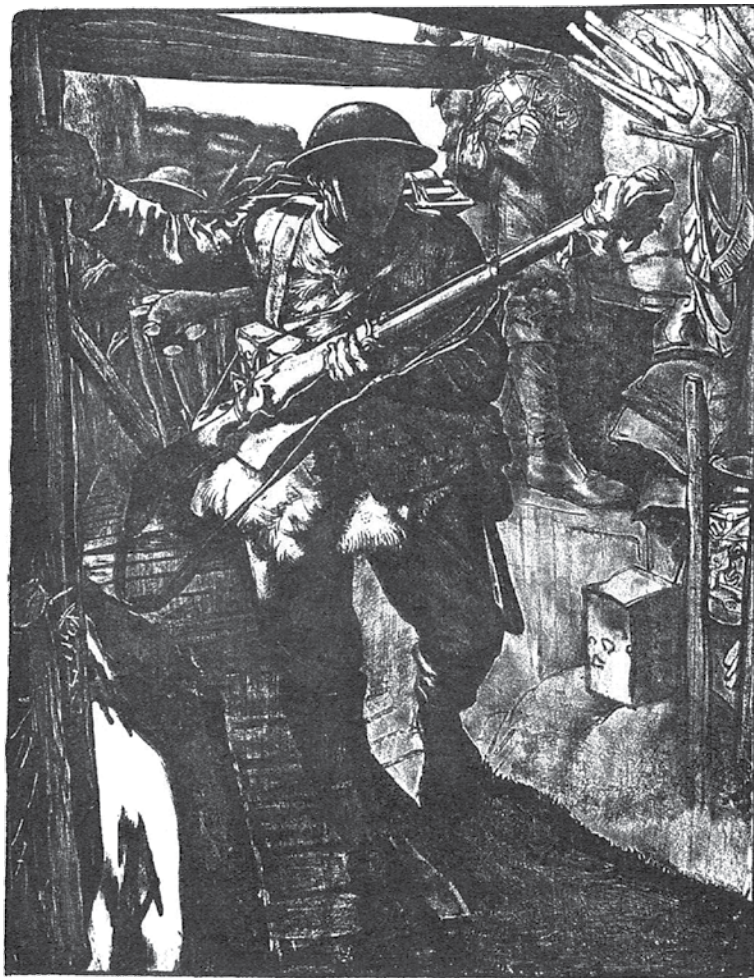
About seven-fifty a man was seen standing on a distant parapet, half a mile or more away to the right. There the trenches bent back, bent round so that it was impossible to tell whether this solitary figure was German or English. An unusual excitement had already begun to manifest itself among the soldiers who had been talking and laughing during "stand-to," all agog—for what?

Episodes like those of 1914 had been forbidden, it is true. [Officers who had permitted it to take place had been severely reprimanded and punished.] Sentry posts had been doubled in anticipation of a German trick or surprise. Somewhere in the trenches a staff officer with special instructions lurked. Rumor said that the French objected to "incidents," deeming them unbecoming the spirit of the life-and-death struggle.

But there are things of which governments and policies and army commands, and even staff officers, take scant cognizance, and of which they have necessarily an imperfect control. One of these is the collective human impulse—the self-generated, spontaneous action of a number of human beings that is beyond authority and outside restraint because accomplished almost as swiftly as the thought which inspires it.

So it happened now.

No sooner had they observed the solitary figure standing on the parapet half a mile away than, leaving the cooking breakfasts, the cleaning of the rifles, the shaving or washing in which they were severally occupied, all rushed to the fire bays. Looking over, at first cautiously and then boldly, we beheld two Germans in field-gray overcoats and "pill-box" caps standing calmly on their parapet a couple of hundred yards away, while



a third was in the act of clambering on to it. Seeing our men, the Germans immediately began to wave and shout across incomprehensibly. There was then no further hesitation on either side. Heads popped above the rim of the opposite trench and before long the white glacis, or embankment, lighter in tone than the surrounding drab soil—which had always seemed a dead thing—was alive with field-gray and with men clad in what appeared to be whitish canvas overalls.

What was the feeling on beholding these? It was one of intense curiosity and surprise. What had been expected? It is impossible to say. Giants, perhaps, dragons, or devils. Through frequent peepings over, through long confronting of that high, muddy glacis with its tumbled rows of sandbags along the top, through long peering into emptiness and shadows and deceptive moonlight and through the sense of an enemy beyond—the imagination had created a nebulous, inhuman figment of the beings who all this while had dwelt over there. There could have been no greater surprise than the discovery of those who came clambering over the long-impenetrable barrier, who stood, hands in pockets, upon it, and who presently strolled leisurely out to No Man's Land, were men of ordinary proportions and of common shape.

But so it was. And the English, for their part, now climbed out of their muddy ditches or leaned over the fire bays, shouting such remarks as: "Hullo, Fritz!" "Good morning, Fritz!" "Merry Christmas!" "Happy Christmas!" "How's your father?" "Come over and call!" "Come and have breakfast!" and the like, amid

roars of laughter. Far away to the right other men were doing the same, standing up above the trenches against the sky line—English on the one side, Germans on the other.

Some distance off, occasional snipers' shots could still be heard. The truce thus far held good on a comparatively short frontage, so that, by reason of the curious twisting and convolution of the trenches, stray bullets occasionally wandered at queer angles overhead. In the midst of the merrymaking a tall sergeant, well-known and popular with all, tumbled down dead into the trenches where he lay for the rest of the day, his life blood trickling out upon the muddy duck boards, his face covered with half a sandbag.

That was not in itself remarkable—it was probably an accident. But to the onlooker it appeared strange, and on this quiet Christmas morning altogether terrible. It seemed like the tumbling down of the world itself; of the whole illusion of civilization, of the whole human creation. Lying at length there in the trench, never to move again, this fine man looked like a fallen idol—a shattered illusion. Something more than he—and more than us all—the *soul* of him—dead and killed.

The incident was hardly noticed. All around the shouting and the exchange of jokes and compliments went on. In the orchards near the ruined village, the little owl shrieked demonically, as was its wont at that hour of the morning, and its cries resembled nothing so much as peals of ironical laughter.

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Presently the soldiers of the two armies began to swarm out into No Man's Land, which consisted of coarse, ashen grass with a willow-lined stream running down the middle. The movement had started on the right. It spread like contagion.

The khaki and the gray-uniformed soldiers met at the willow-lined stream, only the sentries, the officers, and a few noncommissioned officers remaining in the trench. They formed into large groups at crossing places and their shouts and laughter came freely back to the trench. They were glad to meet—there could be no doubt about that—to shake hands, to clap one another on the back, and to exchange presents. They resembled nothing so much as boys of rival schools meeting on a common playground. Repeatedly they leaped the stream and back again for the sheer sport of the thing, helping one another over. Laughter was never so loud as when an Englishman fell in knee deep and a German dragged him out.

A colloquy between the rival forces took place somewhat as follows:

GERMAN: "When's the war going to end?"

ENGLISH: "After the spring offensive."

GERMAN: "Yes—after the spring offensive."

ENGLISH: "What are your trenches like?"

GERMAN: "*Puf!* Knee-deep in mud and water. Not fit for pigs. We're fed up. Aren't you?"

ENGLISH: "Not yet. We can go on forever."

GERMAN: "You gave our back areas a bad doing last night. What's it all about?"

ENGLISH: "Oh! only a Christmas present."

GERMAN: "I hear you got some of our billets and killed about forty."

ENGLISH: "I suppose you'll do the same to us to-night."

GERMAN: "I shouldn't be surprised. I think we met you at Loos."

ENGLISH: “You haven’t forgotten—eh?”

GERMAN: “Ah!—wait till the spring offensive!”

ENGLISH: “Yes—wait till the spring offensive.”

Several of the enemy could speak English, some well. Great admiration was expressed by the British for the German canvas trench suits and by the Germans for the British fleece-lined leathern jacket waistcoats. But strangest of all was the fact that the men of the 95th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment had among them the tradition of Christmas morning, 1914, even to the name of the British regiment and battalion concerned. They recognized us. By means occult, but all-powerful in the armies, the story of 1914 must have traveled through the length and breadth of the German forces.

The whole episode had lasted not more than an hour. The colloquy in No Man’s Land had lasted not more than a quarter of an hour. But now two German officers in black accoutrements and shining field boots came out. They emptied their cigar cases among the British soldiers and expressed a wish to take photographs of the groups. This, however, our men refused to allow, whereupon one of the German officers intimated that their artillery was about to open fire; that we had five minutes in which to get back to our trenches. It was, however, agreed that there should be no more firing of rifles or machine guns for the rest of the day.

And, sure enough, it happened that within a quarter of an hour the German cannon were plastering the rearward roads with shrapnel. And within the same quarter of an hour there limped into a dugout one of those who had been most active in No Man’s Land. He had a shattered ankle.

So ended Christmas morning 1915—the second, and, as we believed, the last, fraternization during the Great War.

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Trench life quickly settled down again with its sniping and its fitful shelling. In the spring the armies stirred, taking their places one by one in preparation for the greatest conflict the world has ever seen.

Among those who passed—and perhaps the majority of them have attained that bourne where all doubtings are solved—among those who passed from the quiet winter trenches under the Aubers Ridge into the sun-scorched maelstrom of the Somme, one or two must have debated within themselves as to the nature of war, the nature of man, and as to their joint significance in life. The issue is a confused one, the evidences complicated and contradictory.

But the nature of war may be defined as fear born of peril, hatred born of fear, cruelty born of hatred, torment born of all; its origin, the nationalism of peoples (not their patriotism), the self-generating imperfections of monarchs, of statesmen, and of governments, their vague purposings, their misconceivings, their jealousies, schemings, ambitions, and their mistakes; its purpose, revelation, a purging, reduction of civilization to reality, travail, above all, out of which alone new life can spring.

The elemental nature of man, simple, spontaneous, and undefiled, is, in the words of the Christmas hymn, “Peace on earth and good will toward men,” and so revealed itself upon the battlefields of the Peninsula over a century ago. And so revealed itself upon two Christmas mornings of our own time.

While Rupert Brooke was undeniably the unofficial poet laureate of this terrible war that left millions of dead there in Flanders fields, it was a young Canadian, Lt. Col. Dr. John McRae, who penned the poem that spread like wildfire across Canada, America, and the British Empire. He wrote it while the second battle of Ypres was in progress. Like thousands of others, I, too, cannot read these words without tears. It is known by two titles: "We Shall Not Sleep" and "In Flanders Fields."

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Edward Hulse and Wilfrid Ewart wrote during the first half of the twentieth century.