A Writing Life
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Chapter 15
Wartime Christmases

Except for carols played incessantly on Armed Forces Radio from Tokyo, my two Christmases in Korea during the war were much like all the other days and nights. Only the cold weather muted the aromas of dung and death. There were other dimensions of earlier wartime Christmases, but they were elsewhere. I gave them little thought until decades later.

In the 1980s I discovered in researching a book on the days leading up to the Armistice in 1918 that a Christmas truce had apparently happened in 1914, in the first year of the First World War. Most historians had scoffed. It was largely rumor and legend. If it happened at all, it was brief and quickly suppressed. It was hardly more substantial than “The Angels of Mons,” a fantasy about Flanders many readers accepted as fact. Overtaken by curiosity, I decided to explore the truce once I had completed A Stillness Heard Round the World. The End of the Great War (1985). Was there an earlier, if only abbreviated, stillness?

Histories were of little help. “Christmas Truce” did not appear in the indices of almost any of them, even the works of highly respected and allegedly authoritative historians. Where fighting allegedly ceased it was dismissed as an aberration of no consequence. I ransacked the library shelves for published letters, diaries and memoirs which furnished intriguing evidences of its reality. As Rodelle and I were making summer research trips to England annually on other projects, I determined to explore the holdings of the Imperial War Museum and to search the daily press for at least the month after Christmas 1914. As we worked, an illustrated book based upon a BBC television program using mostly British sources appeared, confirming that the truce happened somehow. We intended to go further. At the British Museum Newspaper
Library in Colindale, a long journey on the Northern Line, we called, one by one, for all the London newspapers, and after that all the brittle, yellowing, regional papers, daily and weekly, that had escaped the Blitz of 1940. The results were remarkable, especially on the letters-to-the-editor pages. In 1914 war correspondents were not yet permitted at the fronts, but there was no censorship in place for soldier mail. Some troops sent graphic letters home, others the evasive “everything is fine out here.”

The reality left us, daily, in awe. Recipients often forwarded the remarkable letters, or copies, to their local newspapers, which printed them without restraint. Soldiers wrote about encountering friendly enemies—ordinary men like themselves. Opposing sides were flush with official Christmas boxes—brass ones offered to the British troops, wooden equivalents to the Germans, each filled with tobacco, sweets, or snacks. The urge for bartering arose. No Man’s Land between the warring sides, once cleared of corpses buried with due honor, and bomb craters filled in, became places for fraternization rather than confrontation, for sharing Christmas gifts and souvenirs, for singing holiday carols and bawdy service songs, even for playing football—American soccer—with improvised balls and goals.

We found that official unit records as well as personal letters and diaries described the friendly contests and even the scores. Despite hate propaganda from headquarters, a fearsome diet of daily casualties from artillery, machine guns and small-arms fire, and trench life in disgusting filth and sludge, the ordinary soldier had no strong desire to kill or maim the enemy—who at the other end of the rifle was his unanticipated counterpart—a farmer, factory worker, barber, cabbie, milkman, salesman.

The brief truce in which they mingled was the only hopeful episode in the four years of slaughter. Although the shooting stopped for only Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in some sectors, and prevailed until New Year’s Day in others, it survived in memoirs, letters, song, drama and story. Some soldiers in writing about it to their families described it in awe as if the truce was a waking dream. When the happy episode, however uneven, ended, military discipline returned and the troops returned to the grim business for which they were there. Yet the remarkable moment had happened, and the opportunity for the truce
to turn war into peace had vanished on both sides under re-established command authority. It was imperative for the survival of warring governments to render even a temporary truce unappealing and unworkable—only an impulsive interval in a necessarily hostile and competitive world.

Year after year we returned to read letters in *The Glasgow News*, *The Belfast Evening Telegraph*, *The Yorkshire Post*, *The Leicestershire Daily Mail*, and other papers across the spectrum of Britain. From Germany, Jürgen Kamm sent his students to newspaper files to locate letters-to-the-editor, and Heinz Kosok directed me to a semi-autobiographical story by James Krüss, a German veteran of the next war, who then wrote to me about his uncle’s experience during the truce. Dominiek Dendooven, in Belgium at the new Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, which we visited, sent me extracts from the diary of Kurt Zemisch. In Ypres, also, we were in the audience one crowded evening as taps were sounded movingly at the Menin Gate Memorial for the tens of thousands of missing whose bodies, lost in the soggy Flanders lowlands, were never recovered. Roelina Berst and Roland Fleischer translated Dutch papers for me, and Bob and Beate Engel Doyle translated *Die Feldpostbriefe des Gefreiten Knetschke* from the satirical *Der Brummer*. The staff of the Paris Opera confirmed that tenor Victor Granier sang *Minuit, Chrétiens, c’est l’heure solennelle* (“O’Holy Night”) across the trenches, although the French military had denied that any fraternization with the Germans took place. We found documentation that at least twenty French regiments had participated in the truce.

Although *Silent Night. The Remarkable Christmas Truce of 1914* (2001) covered the truce from its origins to its ragged conclusion, the chapter that mesmerized most readers abroad was “Football.” There had already been an imaginative *Blackadder* dark comedy sequence on British TV about the truce, even to football. Captain Sir Edmund Blackadder is asked later in the war whether he remembers the truce. “How could I forget it?” he says. “I was never offside.” (I found, to the surprise of the producers, that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission listed six dead surnamed Blackadder. Even the fiction was fact.) That there were soccer ball kickabouts, even to colorful reminiscences and recorded scores, became such news in England that I appeared on radio and TV programs devoted to sport. In the U.S., “CBS Sunday Morning”
devoted its TV presentation to *Silent Night*, and to secure appropriate background filmed me at the American Bible Society at Columbus Circle to exploit its huge Christmas tree, which was hardly visible on screen. NPR produced a dramatic Saturday morning show on the truce, with striking sound effects and song. As of these lines the paperback edition, years later, is in a twentieth printing.

Although the Christmas truce seemed more invention than reality when we began, some of the fiction proved based on experience, even the 1960s pop hit “Snoopy’s Christmas.” In the mock ballad, the cartoon Snoopy dreams of confronting, in his Sopwith Camel, the dreaded “Red Baron.” Von Richthofen forces Snoopy down, then emerges from his black Fokker not with a pistol but with a bottle of champagne to toast Christmas. The reality proved not far removed from Snoopy’s dream. On Christmas Eve the Royal Flying Corps dropped a brandy-steeped plum pudding on the German airfield at Lille. The next morning a German pilot responded with a careful air-drop of a bottle of rum. Also, the 1960s sentimental yet bitter stage satire *Oh! What a Lovely War* includes a scene in which the truce is initiated by a German boot filled with sausages and cigars heaved into the Tommies’ lines—which never happened, but suggested the Christmas exchanges which indeed occurred.

Robert Graves had published a short story told by “Dodger Green” about “Putzi Cohen,” a German juggler who performed on a trestle table, with a Cockney verve, in No Man’s Land between the lines. Graves
had not joined his unit in Flanders, but he had apparently heard of the episode. The battalion war diary of the 3rd Londons confirmed that the juggler “drew a large crowd.” In Henry Williamson’s novel A Fox Under My Cloak, his alter ego, Phillip Maddison, treks safely into the Saxon lines at Messines on Christmas Day. Williamson was not at the front until January 1915, a month later, but his evocation of “Maddison” proved based upon accounts from soldiers he had joined. A two-column index page in Silent Night would list all the songs and stories with a Truce dimension. Some were mistaken and even misleading, but they suggest how the reality of the Christmas Truce prevails. Garth Brooks, the Nashville country and western icon, sang in “Belleau Wood” of snowflakes at Christmas on American troops joining the action—but there were no snowflakes in June 1918 during the actual Battle of Belleau Wood, nor were Doughboys in the war in 1914. John McCullough in his moving ballad “Christmas in the Trenches” described two young officers condemned to death for participating in the Truce, then pardoned by King George V. Actually, both were involved in a thwarted attempt at another truce in 1915, and their much lighter sentences quickly quashed. However re-imagined, the Truce lives.

Universal Pictures proposed a film version and offered an advance on an option. I signed and waited. No one consulted me thereafter. Apparently, the producers canvassed ideas and engaged the stage and screen playwright Jon Robin Baitz. He submitted a script which Universal returned for rewriting, which it needed, and in the hiatus I was paid for an option renewal. Eventually a European producer, after an ambitious editor with a German newsweekly had e-mailed question after question to me, which I answered unwittingly, announced a romantically fictionalized film on the truce, Joyeux Noël. Universal meekly canceled its film and sent me the abandoned script as an ironic souvenir. The Truce as filmed was further travestied as a melodramatic opera in English, French and German, female singers added, and retitled Silent Night, by Kevin Puts and Mark Campbell. It is an implicit commentary on the award system that it received a Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2012. Scottish soldiers receive crates of whisky and the French receive Christmas sausages. A German tenor and his soprano companion defect improbably across the truce lines to the other side. Other absurdities abound. The opera, like the film, has almost nothing to do with the real thing. In a paradox to muddy matters further, a horror movie, Silent Night, also
appeared in 2012, a re-make of the slasher film of 1984, *Silent Night, Deadly Night*.\(^1\)

I did not expect to write about another wartime Christmas. While working on a long book, *Iron Tears. America’s Battle for Freedom, Britain’s Quagmire: 1775–1783* (2005), about how the American revolution appeared from the other, losing, side, I found myself during a December holiday interval visiting our daughter, Erica, and her family in Pullman, Washington. The last day of elementary school classes was our first day there. Through Erica, the teachers of her sons Jimmy and Noah had invited me to talk to their classes about writing. The first and fifth grades at the Thomas Jefferson School were not my usual audiences. I wondered what I might say. I hardly expected that whatever we would discuss that wintry morning, as Christmas was approaching, would be of any interest to them as they itched for Christmas dismissal. I arrived wearing my “Grandad” T-shirt given to me at Christmas the year before.

With two Founding Fathers in mind—their school and their state—I told both classes about a book I was preparing, set during the American War of Independence. If the writing I had begun went well, I explained, a book would emerge with chapters, a colorful cover, pages they could turn, and pictures. It would end, I planned, with the Revolution over and a peace treaty signed granting the thirteen American colonies their freedom from England, far across the sea.

Some British troops still remained in America in 1783, although the shooting had stopped two years before. The Redcoats had been ordered to remain until both sides had approved the peace terms. While awaiting that confirmation, George Washington longed to go home for Christmas. On the way to Mount Vernon, where he lived in Virginia before the war, he intended to give up his appoint-
ment as commander-in-chief of the Federal army to Congress, then meeting in Annapolis, Maryland. His soldiers, too, yearned to be back with their families before harsh winter weather, and travel problems, complicated their journeys.

Late that November, I explained, with Christmas only four weeks away, the General was still many miles from home. Before he could return to Mount Vernon, overlooking the Potomac River, he had one last mission to accomplish for the new nation. He had to reoccupy New York City, which the British forces were finally going to leave. Their ships were beginning to arrive in the harbor. Then the long war would really be over.

As I paused in each class, small hands shot up urgently. Some children offered answers to questions I hadn’t yet asked, even to questions I hadn’t yet formulated simply enough for their understanding:

- Did General Washington really get to Virginia in time for Christmas?
- How many miles did he have to travel?
- Did his army come with him?
- Was there still any fighting anywhere in America?
- What happened to the soldiers he left behind?
- Did he go home on horseback?
- Was there any other way?
- Did he have a favorite horse?
- What was its name?
- If there were no big bridges yet, how did Washington cross all the rivers?
- What rivers? (There must have been rivers.)
- What was Christmas like then?
- Did he have a Christmas tree waiting for him at home?
- Were Christmas trees, that long ago, like ours?

The first graders were half out of their seats. To many of them, Santa Claus was still real. They quickly brought him into the picture:

- Did Santa and his reindeer visit Mount Vernon, which must have had a lot of fireplaces?
- How did Santa know which chimney to come down?
- Were there any little children there expecting Santa?
- Did General Washington bring home any presents?
- How did he get them?
Did children have toys then?
Were they like our toys?

Some answers, many of which about that little-remembered month in our early history were wrong, were shouted enthusiastically into other questions. There were further queries about what Christmas was like long ago. To some of the questions, I didn’t know the answers. Still, their knowledge about our early history was surprising. Even the first graders knew about Paul Revere’s ride, about Jefferson’s role in drafting the Declaration of Independence (after all, their school was named for him), about the Liberty Bell, about Betsy Ross’s flag of thirteen stars, and about many of the events that led to the victory at Yorktown so long before Washington could start for home.

Before each class closed, the last sessions now seeming too short, I had learned how much those American beginnings still meant, even in distant states not yet so much as an idea in Washington’s time.

I had also told the children about how all soldiers away from home at Christmas, for that day had become a family festival, especially longed for home. I recalled how I had spent two Christmases thousands of miles away during the Korean War, when many of their fathers and mothers had not yet been born. I did not tell them of the wrench to many soldiers when the Armed Forces Network in Tokyo played “I’ll have a Blue Christmas Without You.” The wry counterpoint to “White Christmas,” which they all knew, would have been lost on them. Nor did I mention the sardonic G.I. responses to “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus,” the irony of which appalled soldiers too far from home to play Santa themselves but worried about that somebody else behind the phony white beard.

“My war” seemed more remote to the children than Washington’s. It wasn’t discussed in grade school, nor was Korea itself familiar on their roll-down classroom maps. Like many adults, they also knew little about the two years of puzzling stalemate after the apparent finality of Yorktown or the ultimate withdrawal of the last British contingent from colonial America. But they wanted to know how Washington, and Christmas, fit into that story. I realized that I had a different book to write than I had begun. I would have to close Iron Tears at an earlier point and write another about Christmas in 1783 and the memorable weeks in Washington’s life leading up to it. I would learn a lot about
colonial Christmases, early children’s toys, whether Christmas trees yet existed in the colonies, the geography of journeying home, and the pressures on Washington to forgo retirement and become George I, America’s equivalent to George III.

December 1783 might have seemed to promise an era of peace on Earth and goodwill toward men, at least in America, but the thirteen fledgling republics were flimsily united, without a compass to guide them into a nation. Many unsolved problems remained from the long war. Even while returning to Mount Vernon, Washington could not escape them. His homeward journey after retaking Manhattan would be an escalating triumph, a celebration of a human being as godlike as grateful Americans could envision. It would also be a test of his stubborn humility. Like the fabled General Lucius Quintius Cincinnatus of ancient Rome, to whom he would be compared, he hoped to withdraw from fame and return to his plough. But could he?

I left that answer hanging as I closed General Washington’s Christmas Farewell (2003) with his arrival at Mount Vernon on Christmas Eve. One of the talks on the book I would give would be at the Samuel Fraunces Tavern, 54 Pearl Street in lower Manhattan, built in 1719 but now in a 1907 reimagining after several fires, where on December 4, 1783, Washington bid farewell to his last officers. “I cannot come to each of you,” he said, unable to hold back his tears, “but shall feel obliged if each of you will come and take me by the hand.” Then without daring to look back, he strode out toward Whitehall wharf, and what he thought would the close of his public career.

One of the book-signing talks I endured was at the National Archives in Washington, televised by C-Span2 Book TV, which recorded many of my presentations from different locales. In the question period following, with the camera still rolling, a lady in the audience asked me: “Is it true that while farming at Mount Vernon, Washington grew hemp?” The audience gasped. In our contemporary culture the dried flowers and leaves of hemp are cultivated to produce marijuana. In Washington’s day, I explained, the tough fiber of the cannabis plant was used to make rope for sailing ships. The first President was not in the narcotics trade. But whether we were running overtime or the camera crew exercised prudence, the exchange never appeared on television.
On December 27, 2005 I gave a talk on *Silent Night*—the requests kept coming—at the Liberty Memorial Museum of World War I in Kansas City, introduced by a representative of the National Archives, who had something in a frame to present. It was Draft Registration certificate 2441 from the local board in Marshall, Missouri for someone actually named Santa Claus. It was for the wrong war, but I was already deep into a long book about the intersected careers of three generals—George C. Marshall, Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower—who served in both wars.

All three became five-star generals toward the close of World War II. Accordingly, the book would be titled *15 Stars* (2007). (My editor imposed a jarringly pompous subtitle: “Three Generals Who Saved the American Century.”) Interleaving three crowded lives was challenging but the narrative worked until I reached mid-December 1944 and the Battle of the Bulge. The Ardennes “Bulge” was complex to explain and in some ways humiliating as an intelligence and strategic failure. Eisenhower was rescued from his multiple embarrassments as Christmas came and Bastogne in Belgium, surrounded by the Germans, was relieved, notably by General George Patton’s troops. Chapter 11 became so long and complicated by competing operations that I pulled the pages out, trimmed the chapter drastically and realized that if expanded rather than shredded, the original version had the bones for an independent book—a look at a battlefront, and how it seemed through the lens of Christmas.

That Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Commander survived the Bulge militarily, and politically, and parlayed his shortcomings into victory and the presidency, may be one of Santa’s unacknowledged gifts. At midpoint in December 1944 a sixth wartime Christmas lay ahead with what appeared to be a bleak winter stalemate on the edge of the German frontier. In the earlier war the Germans had asked for an Armistice which prevented even a single acre of its soil from being invaded. As the new war, ongoing since 1939, lurched toward a conclusion, the frontier west of the Rhine had been breached but the seemingly outgunned and outmanned Germans hung on, thanks to command cleverness and Allied complacency. In an inhospitable terrain straddling Belgium, France and Luxembourg, nearly dark in daylight, where dense, snow-covered evergreens recalled the season, there were
few other vestiges of Christmas. Most troops hardly knew the calendar
day they were living through.

Forward intelligence officers realized that the enemy was preparing
to break through in Hitler’s last, desperate attempt to alter the war’s
outcome. Exposed and unprepared troops were about to be trapped,
and thousands surrendered. Remote from the front, upper-level brass
was more than negligent. Paris was full of holidaying brass with eagles
and stars on their shoulders, feasting and drinking in posh eateries that
had catered compliantly to the Nazis, playing golf and bedding expen-
sive prostitutes. It did not seem to be a Christmas story in any plausible
way, but I returned to my chief documentary sources to flesh out the
bungled crisis and bring in more forcefully its Christmas dimension. I
also went to veterans of the Bulge whom I knew.

Morris Crane, the late husband of my cousin Sylvia, Philadelphia
Uncle Lou Weintraub’s elder daughter, had been a Medical Corps cap-
tain in the Bulge. He had told me decades before about his involve-
ment but I did not want to credit old and perhaps flawed memories,
and asked his children. Rather reluctantly, because neither wanted any
connection to Christmas, one complied, sending me pages from the
mimeographed, immediately postwar, 78th Infantry history, in which
Morris’s unit heard a German loudspeaker blaring across G.I. lines:
“How would you like to die for Christmas?” George Nakhnikian, the
father of my daughter-in-law Judith, was a general’s driver in the es-
caping remnants of the 28th Division. John Hill, a Delaware neighbor,
had been a radioman with the green, unproven, 491st Armored Field
Artillery, directing traffic in geography unknown to him, and playing
an abandoned German violin he had found. Victor Brombert, whom I
had invited to Penn State from Princeton as a French literature expert,
had been in a jeep in which all three occupants were immigrants, one
of his companions with “a heavy foreign accent.” MPs suspicious that
they were enemies in captured uniforms asked them to identify “the
Windy City.” None could name Chicago, but somehow they evaded
being shot. Meeting Octave Merveille at a talk I gave in Missouri, I
acquired his boyhood memories of occupied Belgium and surrounded
Bastogne. Often one contact led to another, and veterans, their widows
and their children, wrote to me enclosing wartime letters and memo-
ries. A woman in Phoenix sent me two swastika flags that her late hus-
band had liberated. I gave them to local historical collections.

The dramatic climax of 11 Days in December. Christmas at the Bulge, 1944 (2006) came via someone I had written about earlier in A Still-
ness Heard Round the World. The End of the Great War (1985). One book can surface in another. Yet no single soldier can be said to have made Christmas 1944 memorable or to have saved the contested Ardennes. Many ordinary men did extraordinary things, and many extraordinary things happened to ordinary men. Still, one brash and theatrical gen-
eral stood out in my story. As a wounded young officer at the close of the earlier war, he had rushed without discharge from an army hospital to get back into the fighting before the Armistice occurred, but paused en route to pen a poem about a dead comrade. He could always be ex-
pected to do the unexpected. As Christmas 1944 approached, at a me-
dieval chapel near the battlefront he knelt at the altar and asked God, as if the Almighty were merely a military colleague of superior rank, to grant a Christmas gift of proper killing weather. Although his form of worship seemed itself medieval, Lieutenant General George Smith Patton was an anachronism, and this was no ordinary Christmas.

Writing about World War II led me to think about the wartime presi-
dential election of 1944, when millions of men in uniform voted from afar by absentee ballot. The first wartime election for president had occurred in 1864, when Abraham Lincoln ran for re-election against a general he had relieved, as much for diffidence as for incompetence. Would a book about that earlier election with soldier ballots be worth researching—and reading? I found out that it was indeed worth doing—in fact had been done in 1997. I bought the book. Reelecting Lincoln, by John C. Waugh, is an excellent history. But in my preliminary and then aborted research I found that six weeks after the election, when General William Tecumseh Sherman completed his army’s march to the sea, he telegraphed to President Lincoln in Washington: “I beg to present you as a Christmas gift the city of Savannah, with one hundred and fifty heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, also about twenty-five thousand bales of cotton.” Savannah for Christmas: there was a compel-
ling title—and book.

I did not want to rewrite the 1864 election, and planned to begin af-
ter it was decided. No event in American history is so written about as
the Civil War, and I knew that I could drown in its documentation. Still, I wanted to explore the resources of the rather new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois. Rodelle and I traveled there from Indiana with our Purdue friends, Linda and Mike Lipschutz. In my earliest days at Penn State, Mike had been my student. We returned with new stuff, and I began writing. The capture of Savannah was not only a Christmas present for Lincoln, but for the Union. The cutting of the Confederacy in two paved the way for the end of the war.

The book opens on Thanksgiving Day 1864. Sherman was relentlessly pushing his troops nearly three hundred miles across Georgia, reaching Savannah just days before Christmas. His methodical encroachment of the city from all sides convinced the Confederates, who had refused a surrender demand, to slip away in darkness across an improvised river causeway and escape into South Carolina. In freezing rain and through terrifying fog, equipment-burdened soldiers crossed the Savannah, burning abandoned gunboats. General Sherman could then send his soon-to-be-famous telegram to Lincoln.

As the book reached proof stage I received copies of the proposed dust jacket, which was to be folded onto bound proofs to be sent to reviewers. The artist’s conception for Savannah for Christmas. A Civil War Saga had a striking period flavor. I was sure it would go well. Then the marketing gurus at the publishing house intervened and imposed a new title, which required a new jacket design. It was utterly misguided. The book became General Sherman’s Christmas. Savannah, 1864 (2009)—with a bearded, scowling Sherman in a center cameo. That pretty much ended any likelihood of sales in the South. Perhaps anywhere.

Too late for the book, a reader, David Monigal, sent me a penciled jotting by Sherman, written on December 25 from Savannah. Known for his motley dress on the march, Sherman was initiating a new self on Christmas Day. The Union steamship Arago, waiting offshore with supplies for the Federals, was among the first to drop anchor in Savannah harbor. Sherman hastily scrawled a note to its master, Captain Henry Gadsden. When the Arago returned to New York, the general wanted everyone there to know that “we are all well” and he wanted Brooks Brothers, even then the famous outfitters, to “send at once to me in Sa-
vannah the suit of clothes I had ordered.” The _Arago_ would turn round after offloading and arrive in New York on December 30.

I sent the previously unknown message to the publisher for a second printing. But there would be none. My editor for this book had left for another opportunity, and her successor was uninterested. It wasn’t his book. Such musical chairs often bring about book executions.

Changing publishers, I proposed two books on Franklin D. Roosevelt, one on the 1944 fourth-term campaign and another on his apprenticeship to power during World War I. As teaser I also proposed a small book on the post-Pearl Harbor FDR, when Prime Minister Winston Churchill crossed the Atlantic on a battleship to confer with the President on a Germany-first strategy although the American public, unaware that the Pacific fleet had been crippled on December 7, wanted to retaliate against Japan. As I had successfully integrated the attack on Pearl Harbor with worldwide events on the same date, I intended to follow that timeline strategy during Churchill’s unprecedented stay in the White House—a residency reminiscent of the hit comedy of 1939–1940, _The Man Who Came to Dinner_. In the play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, the radio personality Sheridan Whiteside, a monster of selfishness but mellifluous and charming at the microphone, becomes a couple’s insufferable long-term guest at Christmas when he apparently breaks a leg and becomes wheelchair-bound. Perhaps the prime minister had not intended to remain into January 1942, but the food and drink were excellent, and unrationed, no _Luftwaffe_ bombs were falling, and his speeches on radio made gratifying ego-satisfying headlines.

Research took me for the first time to the FDR Presidential Library at Hyde Park on the Hudson, where I would return several times for work on Roosevelt, and again for televised talks and book-signings of my Roosevelt titles. There seemed always to be something new in the archives, as the papers of FDR’s family, friends and associates often were lodged at the library, as estates were settled and as other documents were purchased from endowment funds. Further, his presidential terms were still so near to us as history that letters and diaries and memoirs kept appearing on library shelves. Also enriching history now was documentation surfacing on-line and accessed by my computer, making travel to some sources possible by keyboard and screen. Even many newspapers were now on-line and searchable. In one case
A Writing Life

a library could send me, electronically, a unique collection of seven scrapbooks of clippings and cartoons, with a due date like a book. I had thirty days to use the borrowed pages, after which they would vanish from my screen. I printed out text and images that were useful. A month later the originals vanished.

The writer’s labor has been efficiently abetted by technology. I no longer needed to type out copies with carbon paper and onion-skin sheets, or photocopy by glossy, fading photostats, all of which burdened producing *Private Shaw and Public Shaw* in the early 1960s. Nor did I have a heavy postage bill and time-consuming delays when e-mail could transmit hundreds of pages thousands of miles at the flick of a key. In *Private Shaw* days, to elicit a response I even had to send some overseas correspondents return postage in their country’s stamps.

*Pearl Harbor Christmas. A World at War, December 1941* (2011) closed on New Year’s Day, 1942, with the seldom-churchgoing Churchill and the Roosevelts visiting venerable Christ Church in Alexandria, perched in George Washington’s pew, then going to Mount Vernon, where, in the cold rain, the prime minister placed a wreath at the tomb of the general who had led the separation from the parent country which Churchill flamboyantly represented. Newsmen gathered about the prime minister hoping for a quotable remark that could go into their papers and then into the history books. “A very wet day,” Churchill remarked to Eleanor Roosevelt. “Yes, it is, isn’t it,” Eleanor agreed from under her umbrella.

I didn’t expect to write a sixth wartime Christmas book, but a reader and military aficionado in upstate New York, Phil Zimmer, knowing that I was a Korean War vet, wrote to suggest that I consider the Red Chinese thrust into Korea and the fighting retreat of the hard-pressed Marines to the sea, where they were evacuated on ninety-three ships by Christmas Eve 1950. The costly, stupid, gut-wrenching episode beyond the Marines’ control, initiated by General Douglas MacArthur 700 miles away in Tokyo, repeated one of the axioms of war. Unintended consequences result from command overreach. So the British lost the thirteen colonies, the American South the Civil War, the arrogant European empires World War I, and Nazi Germany the next war.

Having reoccupied South Korea and reversed the Communist occupation, General MacArthur, who believed in the reality of his fantasies,
anticipated unifying Korea and concluding the campaign, he boasted, in time to send troops home for Christmas. Warnings of Chinese intervention were ignored. After all, Mao Zedong’s troops were presumed illiterate, ill-equipped, ill-clad, and indifferent. MacArthur and his intelligence staff knew that their estimates could not be wrong. Yet he had not spent a night on the ground in Korea during the war, before or since, flying in for photo ops and grand announcements, and returning to Japan for dinner.3

Ethnicity can encourage zealotry. In too many societies, religious fervor rather than political brainwashing substitutes for a soldier’s fear of death in battle—an ecstatic desire for martyrdom and posthumous exaltation. Americans faced that phenomenon in fighting the Japanese, and would experience it again and again in new wars in Asia. Christmas at home with family meant nothing in other cultures. I would have to deal with that as I wrote about December 1950.

The book was enriched by translations from Chinese by Wan-Kay Li, which furnished colorful insights and perspectives from the other side. I had met Kay in Hong Kong in the late 1980s, and had been asked to be a reader for her M.A. thesis. When she relocated with her family to Canada, I became a member of her doctoral committee at York University in Toronto. Her Chinese dimension afforded me that, once removed. Input from colleagues, students, friends and fans has always enriched my writing.

At question time after one talk I was asked, “Do you know about the Tootsie Rolls?” I knew of the rolled-up treats when a kid, but could make no connection to Korea. The questioner, a retired Foreign Service officer colleague of my former Ph.D. student, Martin Quinn, filled me in, and that led to more than his explanation in the book. Toward the end of the withdrawal from the north an exhausted Marine discovered a stockpile of the familiar cocoa-flavored candy under a canvas covering at the Sudong railhead and shouted for takers. Lt. Col. Raymond Davis of the Marine 7th Regiment sent men to distribute boxes down the crowded, dilapidated carriages. Cases of Tootsie Rolls were quickly emptied as hungry men grabbed them and filled their pockets. Walking down an aisle, an officer admonished, “You don’t have to steal that. It’s all yours. Just help yourselves.” Tootsie Rolls had been doubly valuable since the Marines had departed Yudam-ni in the far north.
When softened by body heat the chewy candy had plugged holes in engine blocks and vehicle radiators.

That was only the end of the story. “Do you know how the Tootsie Rolls got there?” I was asked. It seems that when Marine weapons companies were running out of 60mm mortar rounds, radiomen began requesting urgent air drops of ammo under the code name Tootsie Rolls. (The confection was indeed round.) They did not want to alert the Chinese nearby, who might have been listening in, that depleted Marine mortar sections were at risk. Crates by the dozens were duly airlifted, but their loaders in Japan may have been local warehousemen unaware of supply specialist codes. Rather than 60mm shells, to the bafflement of mortar crews the emergency air-dropped containers were filled with actual Tootsie Rolls. Those parachuted out of Marine reach must have also puzzled the enemy. Their Russian-made mortars could have fired American shells, but not the thousands of frozen Tootsie Rolls. So research gets enhanced.

Winter weather and mountainous terrain in North Korea were as much the enemy as the oncoming Chinese from Manchuria. The crucial pages of my story would be the bridging, under enemy fire while enduring icy winds, of the 4,000-foot Funchilin chasm, as the temperature plunged many degrees below zero. The span was the only escape route for the First Marine Division and the remnants of tattered army units. Erected from parachuted Treadway sections, it was the first air-dropped bridge in history. Its construction, and its dramatic crossing—literally inching—by thousands of troops and hundreds of vehicles, much of it in thirty-below, blustery darkness, was a piece of suspenseful research I pieced together that almost guaranteed effective writing.

Combat engineers had to bolster the subsurface of the Treadway bridge by “dead men.” Many marchers, when hearing that, thought that the “dead men”—an engineering term—were the frozen, rigid corpses of Chinese soldiers and were dismayed at what they imagined to be underfoot. A tanker, gingerly crossing the narrow span at two miles an hour, “recalled” that since “there wasn’t enough loose rock for the bulldozers to scrape up … there were enough dead enemy soldiers frozen hard as rocks stacked up alongside the road, so they bulldozed them in and covered them with dirt and we started to move.”
The “dead men” were, in actuality, abandoned and retrieved railway timbers buried under the snow, but rumor metamorphoses into fact.

The withdrawal from the icy Chosin Reservoir area—“frozen Chosin”—had been marked by longing for the homeward Christmas that was promised but never came. Much that occurred en route was visualized imaginatively in Christmas metaphor. A Marine recalled that “the place looked like one gigantic Christmas card, except that it was on fire.” Another noted about the wintry mountainscape, with gunfire from every direction: “Man, the hills all around on both sides are lit up like Christmas trees.” As midnight approached on December 9, 1950 troops, including the walking wounded, crunched south, slowly, on the slippery Treadway surface. According to a reporter in an open, overburdened jeep, each man

looked like a walking arsenal. Aside from the rifles they carried, hand grenades were strung over their chests, around their waistlines, and even upon the sleeves of their snow-whitened parkas. Someone in the column remarked that [thus ornamented] they looked “like a walking army of Christmas trees.”

At three in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, the last of ninety-three ships, some overloaded with panicky refugees who had followed the troops and furnished hiding places for enemy riflemen, pulled away from Hungnam Harbor. Equipment and supplies that could not be loaded aboard were blown up in pyrotechnic pre-Christmas fireworks. That was almost the end of the book. But another ending emerged when Jim Zobel, the curator of the MacArthur Memorial and Museum in Norfolk, wrote to me that he had interviewed a ninety-three-year-old retired general who, as a lieutenant colonel in 1950, was the last man to leave the beach. Command blunders had persisted to the end, abandoning him and his two-man squad onshore. He sent me the interview about their clever means of rescue and I rewrote the final pages.

The book had been contracted for as *Escape into Christmas*, which was crisp and literally true. When it was in production I was informed that once again, to my frustration, a counter-productive new title was being imposed, as supposedly more marketable. The book, instead, would be *A Christmas Far from Home. An epic tale of courage and survival during the Korean War* (2014). But for a few pages of epilogue, the book closes before Christmas. But sales people at publishing houses read only catalog copy and are obviously better informed than the hapless author.
I did not expect to write another book in which Christmas is a factor. I thought I had run out of appropriate wars, yet World War I again intervened. The centenary of the rescue of Palestine from the decaying Ottoman Empire, however bolstered by Germany, would arise in 2017, as would the issuing of the Balfour Declaration offering cautious British support for a Jewish “homeland” in the biblically promised land. When the mid-war prime minister, David Lloyd George, assigned the operation to Sir Edmund Allenby in the summer of 1917, he tasked the general with seizing Jerusalem “before Christmas” as a gift for the British people increasingly disillusioned by three years of bloody and even embarrassing reverses. Allenby’s desert campaign, abetted by T. E. Lawrence’s third front of Arab irregulars inspired less by tribal nationalism than by booty from Turkish train derailments and bribes of golden sovereigns, would reach Jerusalem in early December, in advance of Christmas but on the first day of Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of liberation of the first Temple from the Hellenistic Seleucids by Judah Maccabee in 165 BCE. I had begun writing about war with Lawrence of Arabia nearly sixty years earlier.

I was now eighty-eight and in *The Recovery of Palestine, 1917. Jerusalem for Christmas* the improbable adventurer emerged once more.

**Endnotes**

1. Titles cannot be copyrighted.

2. Washington’s horse, Nelson, I would find, was named for its donor, the governor of South Carolina. Having survived the war, Nelson was returned to Governor Thomas Nelson.

3. The exception was Inchon in September 1950, when he spent several days on his command ship, debarking for a few hours with his cadre of toadies and photographers.