

Christmas in Belgium

The young girl stirred and realized it was time to get up. She looked out. It was still dark and she could see no lights except the faint slowly moving headlights on a distant road. It was very cold and there had been a light dusting of snow overnight which she noticed on the car's windows. There was still plenty of snow on the ground, but as she got out to the small road there was no snow just the churned and thickened mud and occasional ice covered mud puddles. There was a wisp of a wood fire on the crisp air.

She straightened her long blue dress, pulled her greenish-gray jacket tighter, and tried to avoid the deepest puddles in a vain attempt to protect her prized black riding boots. She was 18 years old, blond, tall, and particularly stunning in her blue dress and cap. As she deliberately stepped among the holes, trying not to fall, she heard the thunder coming from the west and saw the intermittent flashes on the horizon. There would be no rain today, just a cold overcast and misty day with occasional heavy fog. She had traveled more than half way across Europe to be in this small town arriving on December 15th, but in all the recent bedlam she had almost forgotten what day this was.

It was December 25, 1944. The small town was Prun in far western Germany three miles from the Belgium border and about nine miles from a small Belgian town called St. Vith, some eight miles farther to the north was another village called Malmedy. Now she heard the low grumble and clanking of the Panzer tanks and half-tracks moving along the road with their partially blacked out headlights. As she reached the door of the town hall, which was now occupied by the Wehrmacht Advance Field Hospital 0127, "Sister" Heima stopped, straightened her spine, and braced herself for the day.

“Sister” is a universal term in Europe and the British Isles for nurse, and Sister Heima Mikkelsaar had graduated from Nursing School at University Hospital in Tartu, Estonia in January of that year, shortly after her 18th birthday. Estonia had been invaded by their eternally hated enemies the Russians in 1940. Several of young Heima’s relatives were arrested and transported to Siberia never be heard from again. An Uncle had committed suicide when the KGB arrived to take him away. It is estimated that 20% of Estonia’s population was lost to executions, forced transport to Russian work camps, or outright murder. In 1941, after the failure of the Russo-German Nonaggression Pact, Germany immediately occupied Estonia and the other Baltic Countries and was met with “somewhat” open arms. Estonian military forces and volunteers joined up with German units to fight the Russians. At age 16, Heima lost her 20 year old boyfriend Uno Suit when he was killed on the Eastern Front.

Heima’s plan was to become a doctor, not an unreasonable choice for women at that time and place, and if not a lawyer. Unfortunately, the prerequisite to apply to the University was a one year “Farm Service” in Germany. This did not apply to Nursing School, so, since she didn’t want to pick potatoes in Germany, she applied to Nursing School without her parent’s knowledge. At 16, she was two years younger than the required 18, but several of the physicians on the Nursing Application Board knew her parents, assumed she had their permission, knew she was a brilliant student, and allowed her to take the qualifying exam which she easily passed.

At graduation in 1944, a Wehrmacht Medical Officer came to the school to recruit nurses for the German Army. As Heima would readily admit she was always looking for an adventure, so she volunteered, was accepted, and somewhat knowing what she was

getting into, sent to Pihkva (now Pskov in Russia) in eastern Estonia on the Russian Front. The fighting on the Russian Front was brutal, and captured women were not treated kindly. Early in the war, two Estonian nurses were captured by Russian Partisans, raped and tortured, they were then tied naked to birch trees and had cold water slowly poured over them until they froze to death and literally became icicles. After that nurses could be issued a side arm and a cyanide capsule if they requested it. Growing up on a 500 Hectare farm with a strong family history of horsemanship and hunting, Heima was a prize winning equestrian and a good shot with both pistol and rifle. She asked for and was issued a Walther 38 and a cyanide capsule when she arrived in the battle zone.

The operating rooms were in a large tent, but the nurses quarters were in the hayloft of a nearby barn. Heima worked where ever she was needed – triage, post-op, or in the operating room. The injuries were horrific – blast, burns, high energy amputations, chest and abdominal wounds, and of course countless head injuries. German medicine and surgery knowledge and technique were superior. Before the war and even afterwards knowledge of the German medical and surgical literature was essential even for Americans. In the '20's and 30's the truly well educated American surgeon or internist took a fellowship in a German hospital or university. Their surgical instruments were of the highest quality and up to date design; but even with that advantage the death rate was appalling.

One afternoon, with the fighting only a mile away, the unit commander gathered the crew and informed them they were pulling back as he said “before the Russians put their feet under the operating tables”. This precipitated two more moves, first into southern Estonia and then to western Latvia to avoid the advancing Russian army. At that point

there was a lull in the fighting. Heima learned that her parents had escaped the Russian advance by leaving Tartu, their home and Heima's birthplace, and going to Tallinn on the Baltic Sea. Her father worked for Siemens and the company was evacuating employees to Germany via ship, hardly a pleasant sea journey. Unbelievably, they made into what was then considered safe territory – Berlin. Heima got a pass, and traveled to Voldi north of Tartu to make sure her grand parents were alright. Despite the fighting the Germans still had the trains running on time. On arrival, she found that her grandmother had fallen the day before and had an obviously fractured wrist. Over protests, she dragged her to a locally based German field hospital, used their fluoroscopy machine and set and casted the wrist.

On return to her unit in Latvia in the fall of 1944, the chief of the hospital, Col. vonBloomberg, an older and very handsome fellow according to her, told them that he was going to refuse to do the required rotation of female nurses to another unit. Each field hospital had 4 RN's and 8-10 MD's, along with enlisted staff of trained medics, orderlies, and other support personnel. It was the tradition that the females were transferred every 4-6 months so things wouldn't get too "friendly" as Heima put it. He said they were almost in East Prussia, German territory, and the war would be over soon. Even though the Colonel's brother was a high ranking German General, she felt he would be shot for disobeying. Ever the adventuress, Heima raised her hand and volunteered to go anyway, as did one of her girl friends. The Colonel was not happy, and pouted until they left, but that "silly" move saved her life and the life of her friend. The unit they left was eventually overrun by the Russians, captured, and shipped off to POW camps in Siberia. None of them were ever heard of again.

The girls were transferred to Advance Field Hospital 0127, commanded by Major Peter Seidengranz. Heima made sure to bring her gas mask in which she hid a bottle of Cognac. Major Seidengranz was not fond of female nurses, and was very spit and polish. Heima felt that she couldn't go wrong with a few well timed Heil Hitlers, and pretty soon there was a truce. By this time they were in East Prussia in Koeingberg now Kallingrad. The Russian juggernaut continued to roll on, and finally in late November the unit was ordered to board a train, but there was no mention of their destination. They "went like hell, day and night "with hardly a stop, across Prussia, present day Poland, and through Germany to Bonn. It must have been the weather because there were no strafing attacks by "American Stukas" along the way.

The arrival in Bonn was a revelation. There were enormous amounts of armor – tanks, half-tracks, and armored personnel carriers. They were on trains in the yards and on adjoining roads – all heading west. She commented to a friend her surprise that "they have no camouflage netting". Their train proceeded through the yards to a small village south of Bonn to await orders. This was the Rhineland area of Germany. The Rhine and Mosel wine growing regions. Some got off the train looking for apple juice and came back with pitchers of refreshing white wine given by the villagers. They were to be here for a week before receiving their next orders, so as she said "I always managed a side trip" Heima requested transit orders to go to Berlin and a four day pass to try to find her parents. Taking a local train back to Bonn she found the platform crowded with people. The train to Berlin was jammed. People were literally being pushed through the windows. She thought she would never make it, when she noticed a young SS officer with a brief case handcuffed to his wrist. She was in uniform, a nurse lieutenant, and she began to

chat him up and flirt a bit. She made sure he saw her Estonian arm patches and very he soon he said “don’t worry you will make the train”. With that he escorted her to the Post Waggon or mail car. They were admitted and had a comfortable ride to Berlin sitting on the mail bags. Arriving in Berlin on December 1st she immediately went to the world headquarters of Siemens and asked the whereabouts of her family. Without hesitation the woman opened a file, copied down an address in Funsterwalde and what local train to take there. The trip of 75 miles to the south east got her there late at night in pitch blackness. She found the house, knocked on the door, which was opened by her very frightened parents and 15 year old brother. It was a delightful if short lived Christmas reunion. Two days later she left for Berlin and Bonn to rejoin her unit. A few weeks before Berlin fell to the Russians, her family walked to Dresden which would temporarily become part of the American zone.

Back in Bonn she was again amazed by German efficiency in the face of impending doom. She went to a central communications station, asked the whereabouts of her unit, and then hitched hiked via truck to rejoin them. Shortly there after they packed up and trucked to Prun on the southern edge of the Schnee Eifel or Snow Mountains. To the west was the Ardennes. It was 2015 square miles of rugged forest absolutely miserable in rain, snow and sleet. (3). It is ironic that the Christmas tree, now a universal symbol of the season, likely had its origins just south of the Ardennes. Napoleon’s armies brought the brightly decorated trees from Alsatia into the duchies and principalities of Germany and later German immigrants brought the trees and the tradition with them to America. (3).

By December 15th the Germans had unloaded 1,500 troop trains and almost 500 supply trains in the Schnee Eifel region, and were assembling with little allied notice. (2,3) It

should be noted that early on December 16th one of General Bradley's aides in Luxembourg City had a copy of General von Rundstedt's Order of the Day, taken from a prisoner, outlining the planned attack but like Lee's lost order before Antietam, it was dismissed as misinformation. (1,3).

At 5:30 am on December 16th the troops on the quiet Ardennes front awakened to the "shock and awe" of German artillery and mortars. In the St. Vith area the Fuehrer Begleit armored division and 18th and 62nd Volksgrenadier divisions drove back the exhausted men of the 424th Infantry and the 9th Armored (2). The German 0127th Field Hospital took the bulk of the casualties from the St. Vith and Malmedy areas, treating both German and American wounded. As Heima said the casualties were almost falling in the door.

As Sister Heima opened the field hospital door on that Christmas morning, she immediately smelled gasoline and diesel fuel. Oh god she thought, more tank burns. They were the worst. The unlucky survivors of a flaming Panther, Tiger, or Sherman tank were usually brought in severe pain, reeking of diesel or gasoline fumes, and with huge swollen arms and legs due to fluid loss. The nurses and medics did their best to ease their pain, but frequently could not find veins in the charred flesh. In those cases the morphine would be injected as deep as possible in to what they hoped was muscle. She tried to find the coffee. They all lived on it. Hospitals got real coffee not the ersatz or chicory that most units were getting. Yesterday was a 20 hour day, and exhausted she had fallen asleep in the back of a staff car at two that morning. Looking for the pot she slipped on accumulated blood on the floor and almost fell onto a stretcher. Most people don't know that blood has an odor. If there is enough of it pooled about, it is a somewhat sweet

cloying smell and the fluid soon becomes sticky but remains very slippery. Where was the peace on earth good will to men this day?

The unit had long ago given up triaging the wounded with colored tags. The soldiers soon figured out which colors would be immediately treated and which would be put to the edges of the room with a blanket and a double morphine shot. They at least wanted the conscious ones to still have some hope before they died, so they used special hash marks or three digit numbers to indicate priority on the plain white tags attached to a toe, button or taped on a forehead.

Many war movies or books of the era depicted crudely decorated Christmas Trees or boughs of evergreens decorating field hospitals or saintly looking wounded singing carols as Christmas Day came and went. There was no singing here just groaning, crying, and an occasional scream. These were the sounds heard between shouted orders from doctors or nurses for more IV fluids, morphine, or bandages, and the frantic arrival of stretcher bearers. Of course, there was the ever present 60 cycle noise of grinding heavy armor and vehicles passing near by. Small arms fire and gut wrenching explosions were only heard when you were really in trouble, but what was amazing to this 18 year old battle hardened veteran was that they never seemed to run out of morphine. Thank god for that.

After a bowl of porridge, coffee, and a cigarette, she wiped the mud off her riding boots, she wore them on duty to prevent the lice from crawling up her legs, and the day began. Surgery was very busy with the nights wounded and Heima was an excellent assistant and was very skilled at suturing. Later on this Christmas Day she was asked to help in the triage area since the casualties kept flowing in despite the Holyday. There was no Christmas truce real or imaginary. The other nurses knew that she understood English

and one of them called her over to try to make sense of what a young American boy was trying to say. Although she could understand most English she wasn't good in conversation, and besides it was the King's English not Brooklynese. It had been stifling hot in the OR and she had unbuttoned the top of her blue nurse's dress and had forgotten to button it up when she came to the ward area. As she bent over to hear what he was saying, her cyanide capsule in its small stainless steel tube on the stainless steel chain around her neck, fell out and dangled from her throat. The 19 year old boy's eyes suddenly brightened and he smiled broadly. He reached inside his tunic with a bloody hand and pulled out a similar tube from around his neck. She held it in her hand and in panic saw the Hebrew written on it and quickly pushed it back inside his shirt. In her best Estonian accented English she tried to tell him to hide it or throw it away because the SS were very close. At first he didn't seem to understand and tried to show her again, but finally her obvious fright must have convinced him and he stopped. Fortunately, he was walking wounded and after bandaging him she had him moved to the other American prisoners who were to be moved later that day.

And that was Christmas 1944, another 20 hour day of pain, death, and sorrow. Surely the **Prince of Peace** would consider this place the inner most circle of hell. A place to lose your faith or gain it. To curse your God or pray to him. Perhaps as General Patton had done December 23rd, 65 years ago, at a small chapel in Luxembourg **"Sir this is Patton talkingYou have just got to make up your mind whose side you're on. You must come to my assistance, so that I may dispatch the entire German Army as a birthday present to your Prince of Peace"**(3) or more probably like so many men in the snowy foxholes of the Ardennes "God, please just let me live to go home".

Heima Mikkelsaar Aras is 83 years of age. She lives in Indiana and she is my mother-in-law. Merry Christmas.

John J. McDonough, M.D.
December 21, 2009

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