



The War to End All Wars

The Toy Soldier Museum's James H. Hillestad reflects on the fateful end of World War I

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD



Figure of German Kaiser Wilhelm II by W. Britain.

Often referred to, with painful irony, as "the war to end all wars," World War I ended with the Armistice Nov. 11, 1918. On that very morning 100 years ago, with peace only a few hours away, 11,000 casualties were suffered.

Almost 10 million men were killed in the fighting of WWI. Another 6 million lost limbs, eyesight and hearing.

The Great War swept aside monarchies of Europe, including Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, Kaiser Franz Josef I of Austria-Hungary and Czar Nicholas II of Russia. Along with them went Sultan Mehmed V and his Ottoman Empire.

In Britain, the royal family shed its German name of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and became the House of Windsor.

On the 100th anniversary of the armistice, it is fitting to reflect on a period of history that, though remote in years, still has echoes today.

Rather than producing a long, battle-

by-battle narrative, I offer here five vignettes using artifacts from my Toy Soldier Museum, along with images of military miniatures. These seem to me emblematic of the times.

THE KAISER'S CHAIR

Starting in the 1950s and still today, my family has vacationed at Kviknes Hotel in Balestrand, Norway. The largest wooden hotel in Europe, it is located on the Sognefjord, the country's longest and deepest fjord. In the coffee parlor of this historic hotel, is a living page from history.

The room is furnished with many antique and elaborately hand-carved wooden chairs. Kaiser Wilhelm II, a frequent visitor, was sitting in one of them July 25, 1914, when he received the news that Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia was about to expire, setting in motion widespread mobilization and initiating WWI.

Eager to get back to Germany before the anticipated outbreak of war, the Kaiser quickly bid his hosts farewell and set sail on his yacht The Hohenzollern. The time was 5:30 p.m. The ultimatum expired at 6 p.m.

The "Kaiser's Chair" is still in use. Its history is noted in a simple document affixed to the bottom of the chair.

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE

The "Christmas Truce" was a series of widespread but unofficial ceasefires along the Western Front around Christmastime 1914.

The truces occurred in the early days of the war. Hostilities had entered something of a lull. Following the stalemate of the Race to the Sea and the indecisive result of the First Battle of Ypres, leaders on both sides were reconsidering their strategies.

During the week before Christmas Day, French, German and British sol-



The “Kaiser’s Chair” (right) is still in use at Norway’s historic Kviknes Hotel.



Melvin Aria Miniatures depiction of German troops being cheered and blessed as they head off to war.



Imperial Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II aboard his yacht The Hohenzollern.



An appeal to the British public is issued by the 1914 “Lord Kitchener Wants You” recruiting poster. Tommy waving cap by W. Britain.



Toy soldiers play a role in a war poster from the writer’s collection.

diers emerged from their trenches to exchange seasonal greetings and talk. In some areas, men from both sides ventured into no-man’s-land on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to mingle and exchange food, cigarettes and souvenirs. Men from warring countries played games of soccer with one another — creating a memorable image of the time.

The unofficial ceasefires reflected a growing mood of “live and let live.”

The following year, Yuletide truces were not nearly as widespread due to strongly worded orders from the high commands of both sides prohibiting fraternization.

THE WITNESS TREE

It was a bloody, messy war. Among countless macabre and horrifying events, one stands out.

It was September 1915, outside the town of Loos in Northern France, near the border with Belgium. British and German forces were separated by a no-man’s-land where every feature had been obliterated by artillery — except for one cherry tree.

A bold and defiant young lieutenant became determined to hang the British Union Jack from what became known as the “Lone Tree” or “Witness Tree” of the Battle of Loos. Under cover of night, he did the job. But before he could descend and escape to safety, he was illuminated by German flares and machine-gunned.

In the morning, there he hung. Try as they might to retrieve the body, his comrades were turned back again and again by German fire.

Finally, the order came to destroy the Witness Tree and bring down the demoralizing sight. Artillery pummeled the tree and accomplished the goal. But the old cherry tree still stood, stripped of its branches. Five years later, the story goes, it bloomed again.

In 1933, one of the participants in the fighting, Stuart Dolden, returned to the battlefield. He sawed off a piece of the Lone Tree and found that though it had grown over its wounds, a bullet protruded from the wood.

ROYAL GIFTS

In 1914, Princess Mary, daughter of British King George V, sponsored the production of thousands of brass tins



W. Britain portrayal of British and German troops joining forces for "A Friendly Game" of soccer in no-man's-land during the unofficial Christmas truce of 1914.



German and British foes (from left) share gifts of tobacco during the spontaneous ceasefire at Christmastime 1914.



A British officer orders "Move up!" in a set by W. Britain.



W. Britain figures depict a German accordion player serenading a comrade with "music to peel by."

to be given to soldiers fighting on the Continent at Christmastime. Around the borders of the tin were the names of the countries fighting alongside Great Britain.

Inside the tin was a pouch of tobacco, a pipe and a greeting card from Princess Mary. For those in the British Indian Army, religious considerations dictated that the tobacco was replaced with hard candy.

This brass tin received secondary service as a means of conveying sympathy to families of those who had fallen in the war. These condolence tins contained a sterling silver bullet inset with a pencil and a brass shell casing bearing the cypher of Princess Mary. The cartridge was held in place by a cardboard sleeve.

At the same time, Queen Alexandra, the widow of King Edward VII

and grandmother of Princess Mary, produced another tobacco tin. It carried her image and was signed with greetings for Christmas 1914. The tin was filled with cigarettes, each one bearing the Queen's name.

THE LAST BATTLE

On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the Armistice that ended WWI took effect. However, one more battle was yet to be fought – in a distant and primitive place.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Imperial Germany had four colonies in Africa: Togo, the Cameroons, German South-West Africa and German East Africa. The first three fell quickly to British and South African forces. German East Africa proved, however, to be quite a different story.

The German forces conducted a

protracted, 4-year guerrilla campaign. German East Africa was twice the size of Spain, and the Germans enjoyed superior mobility operating on interior lines.

Leading the German forces was a gifted military leader, Lt. Col. Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, who was age 44 when the war started. He commanded a force of fewer than 15,000 men (chiefly African askaris). Yet such was his skill that with this small force he was able to keep busy more than 372,000 troops of the British Empire.

The British forces were largely made up of the King's African Rifles, formed in 1901. The 4th (Uganda) Battalion was commanded by Capt. Edwin Brian Barkley Hawkins, who was detached from the West Yorkshire Regiment and eventually rose to the rank of major general. For four years, E.B.B. Hawkins



The Lone Tree, also known as the Witness Tree, still stood despite the Battle of Loos raging around it.



A bullet protrudes from a salvaged section of the Lone Tree (Toy Soldier Museum Collection).



A salute to the British Royal Navy by W. Britain.



A Princess Mary Christmas tobacco tin with a Trophy figure of a British Tommy enjoying her gift.



The Toy Soldier Museum collection includes a Princess Mary condolence tin containing a sterling silver bullet.

chased after Lettow-Vorbeck's troops, covering about 4,000 miles in the process.

On Nov. 12, 1918, Hawkins fought a pitched battle with the German rearguard at Kasama, just south of Lake Tanganyika, putting them to flight. It was not until the following day that a bicycle messenger pedaled up a jungle trail with the news that the war had ended two days earlier on Nov. 11.

Hawkins received Lettow-Vorbeck's acceptance of the surrender terms. His Uganda Battal-



An example of a Queen Alexandra's Christmas cigarette tin from Jim Hillestad's collection.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Treaty of Versailles not only outlawed the German production of tanks, submarines and military aircraft, but also prohibited the manufacture of toy soldiers!



Mignot figures made in France illustrate a clash between German and Russian troops.



Serbians versus Bulgarians by Mignot.



French "poilus" (hairy ones) on the march by Mignot.

TRULY GLOBAL WAR

The Great War spanned the globe, encompassing North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.



Mignot figures of German and Japanese troops are pitted against each other.



Military miniatures by Somerset Ltd. depict British Army Gen. Edmund Allenby (left), Arab Prince Faisal and British intelligence officer T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) in Damascus, Syria.



British War Medal which belonged to Cpl. J.T. McCartney, 4th Australian Light Horse, with a dramatic figure by Robin Yates. (Toy Soldier Museum Collection)



A note from British King George V welcoming the arrival of U.S. troops along with a doughboy by W. Britain. (Toy Soldier Museum Collection)



A patriotic song sheet and W. Britain doughboys from Jim Hillestad's collection.



Doughboy statue in the Courthouse Square of Stroudsburg, Pa.



U.S. bond drive poster with a W. Britain portrayal of American Expeditionary Force Gen. John J. Pershing.



A 1917 U.S. Army strategy meeting between Gen. John J. Pershing, Brig. Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Col. Charles W. Nimon (from left) by W. Britain.



Left: British Maj. Gen. E.B.B. Hawkins (left) greets veterans in Africa.

Right: Home Service helmet and helmet tin of E.B.B. Hawkins. (Toy Soldier Museum Collection)





New set by Tradition depicting the signing of the Armistice with French Marshal Ferdinand Foch, supreme allied commander, presiding.

ion formed half of the Guard of Honour at the formal surrender Nov. 25.

AFTERMATH OF WAR

The Treaty of Versailles was signed June 28, 1919, marking the formal end of WWI.

When the draft of the treaty was presented to the German cabinet in May, its terms had caused outrage. The bitterest pill of all was Article 231 of the treaty which stated, "Germany and her allies accept responsibility for causing all the damage to which the Allied governments and their nationals have been subjected."

The "war guilt" clause came to symbolize to Germans all that they believed was unfair about the settlement. It is popularly believed that Versailles made the rise of Nazi Germany's dictator Adolf Hitler and World War II inevitable.

On the day of the Armistice, war correspondent Philip Gibbs wrote, "There was no light of gunfire in the sky, no sudden stabs of flame through the darkness, where for four long years human beings were being smashed to death.

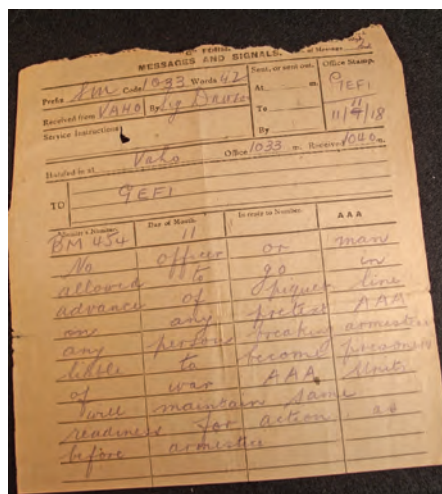
It was silent all along the front with the beautiful silence of the nights of peace."

Yet, prophetically, U.S. Army Gen. Tasker H. Bliss, who was involved in peace negotiations, offered, "We are in for a high period followed by a low period. Then there will be the devil to pay all around the world."

And, Geoffrey Keynes, commanding a British surgical unit near Cambrai in

France, recalled, "We all thought we had seen the last of war." ■

Note: Figures enlisted to illustrate this article were produced by W. Britain, Somerset Ltd., CBG Mignot, Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd., Robin Yates, Tradition of London Ltd. and Melvin Aria Miniatures.



A 1918 Armistice telegram from the writer's collection.



U.S. postage stamps commemorating the end of WWI with doughboys on bicycles by Mignot.



ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.