

Whereas in prior centuries wars were often on the battlefield, one of the things that occurred in the 20th century starting with World War I was a concept called “total war.” The point was that for both soldiers and civilians of the country at war, there was an attempt to dehumanize the enemy; in part, this is what led to harassment at times of people of German and Italian backgrounds here in America, and also internment of Japanese Americans in World War II.

However, deep inside human beings, we know better. Patriotism is a good thing; but we also know that just because someone is from another country it does not mean they subscribe to all their government does, or that they want to be fighting in a foreign land. Hence the famous Christmas Truce of 1914, when German and British soldiers sang carols, and a German soldier with a Christmas tree walked into No Man’s Land above the trenches, and fighting subsided for a moment, men seeing one another as men, not the enemy.

Indeed, we are all children of God, which is what this feast of Epiphany celebrates: God coming to love us all. And when we begin to think that way, what good things can happen.

Clarence Smoyer was a World War II veteran, who passed on in October of 2022 at the age of 99. But later in life, he came to meet one of his enemies and what developed was a friendship.

In his own words, it was March 2013. He'd come Germany to heal the wounds of a long-ago war, revisiting the city of his nightmares to meet Gustav Schaefer, hoping he might answer a question that haunted him still. Clarence stood with his back to Cologne Cathedral, scanning the crowd for anyone old enough. He couldn't find Gustav. He wondered if he changed his mind.

Sixty-eight years before, in 1945, Clarence was a tank gunner in the Third Armored Division when they rumbled into Cologne, a city spanning the Rhine. They were nicknamed Spearhead—a title they'd earned. Clarence's crew was among the first to battle its way into Germany. He says they froze their tails off during the Battle of the Bulge.

Looking back, Clarence reflects that he supposes they handled themselves well, which is why they got a Pershing tank, the U.S. Army's answer to the

more heavily armed and armored German Panther and Tiger. They had one of only 20 in the entire European Theater. It was presented to us them an award, but Clarence says it was a curse. As the heaviest tank, they were always first in line, first around the corner, first over the hill. It skinned their nerves raw, but what could you do he asks? Someone had to go first.

Cologne was particularly dangerous. American bombs had created a labyrinth of blocked streets and ambush points. They worried about German tanks and watched for bazooka teams in the buildings. People, he says, think tanks are safe, but that's an illusion. If your tank gets penetrated, all that armor around you turns into shrapnel. The ammo and fuel you're sitting on can erupt into a volcano of fire. They particularly feared the German Panzerfaust, a bazooka round that turned to boiling metal when it hit, burning through tank armor and spraying molten steel inside.

All you could do was shoot first and hope to get them before they got you, he says. That and pray. Clarence says he never really learned to pray. Instead, he just talked to God—asking that they make it through each city block, make it to nightfall. Touching the Bible in his breast pocket. As they

neared the cathedral square that day in 1945, Clarence knew German tanks were waiting. He would be meeting Gustav for the first time, though he didn't know it was him, not then. All he saw was a German tank peeking out from behind a building. When they pulled up to the intersection, it spotted them and backed into an alley. Suddenly, a black blur crossed his gunner's scope. It was low, with gray camouflage. An Opel sedan.

"Staff car!" his tank commander yelled, and Clarence fired. The officers had told them anything on wheels was German military. Orange machine gun tracers chased the car down the street. The Opel turned toward the hidden tank, and a stream of green tracers—the German tank's machine gun—crossed their orange ones.

The Opel slowed to a stop. Clarence dismissed it. His concern was the tank. He fired again and again into the building that sheltered it. The building leaned backward like a dazed boxer, then collapsed, burying the tank. They crossed the intersection and passed the Opel. Clarence saw no camouflage, no official markings or insignia—just a black car covered with dust. Medics huddled around the exploded windows, treating someone beside the passenger door. Clarence glimpsed curly brown hair. A woman.

Who was she? A Nazi fanatic? They'd encountered those. Some general's mistress? Whoever she was, they left her behind and continued patrolling the area.

An hour later, Clarence's crew and him outdueled another tank, a Panther, in the cathedral square. An Army cameraman who had been following them that afternoon got it on film and cut a newsreel, making them the most famous tank crew in the European Theater. He never saw the newsreel during the war. He says he's been told it was called the greatest tank duel in history. But not the greatest day in his life.

He went home, married and got a job managing a cinder block factory. He tried to forget that day, the worry that he'd fired on a civilian. They won, he told himself. That was the important thing.

But in 1996, when he was 72, Cologne came back. A war buddy told Clarence he'd seen their duel with the Panther in a documentary called *Scenes of War*. He ordered a copy. After all those years, part of him was curious to relive the battle.

Clarence slipped the VHS into the machine and hit play. There was the four-way intersection. He expected to see the confrontation with the Panther, but instead, the Opel swerved into view. He watched in horror as tracers from the Pershing's machine gun—his machine gun—puffed dust from the car's trunk, a sign of a hit. He didn't see the driver, but medics clustered around a young woman who spilled from the passenger door. They pulled up her sweater, probed her wounds and gave up. They covered her with a jacket.

Clarence prayed it wasn't he who had fired the shot that had killed her. Yet he'd watched just that. He didn't want her to die, but she did. On every viewing.

He searched for the woman's identity. With the help of a German journalist friend, he discovered she wasn't some officer's mistress or a fanatic; she was Katharina Esser, a 26-year-old grocery employee. Friends called her Kathi. Her boss, Michael Delling, had offered to drive her to safety, and Clarence found out he'd been killed as well.

He never imagined that in his eighties he would fear the dark, but now he would lay awake, afraid to sleep. When he did, he dreamed of stumbling on Kathi's body in the blighted streets of Cologne. During the day, he sat listless and depressed. He couldn't share his terrible thoughts with his wife, Melba. She was in the grip of Alzheimer's and, after 61 years of marriage, couldn't remember his name. He'd promised Melba he would never put her in a nursing home, but her care consumed what little energy he had. To be there for her, he knew he had to fix himself somehow.

The VA psychiatrist had diagnosed his demons as post-traumatic stress disorder and prescribed antidepressants and anti-anxiety pills. The medications masked his pain but couldn't erase his guilt. This wasn't some dusty memory from 1945. This guilt was fresh, taking root the moment he'd seen Kathi's face on his TV screen. It was a moral injury, an injury to his soul. He tried going to group therapy for veterans, but was embarrassed at the idea of venting his sorrows to these younger men, mostly Vietnam vets, whose pain was so raw.

In a last-ditch attempt to find answers to the questions that tormented him, he acquired the original uncut footage from the National Archives. He

played the film in slow motion, tracking the movements of the infantrymen from frame to frame, looking for clues to prove someone else fired the fatal shot. Clarence remembered that stream of green tracers and hoped the German gunner—the one he'd brought the building down on—had seen what happened.

Had he even survived Clarence wondered? His journalist friend unearthed evidence he was alive. Clarence arranged a meeting, wondering if he was as haunted as he was about Kathi. Now here he was in Cologne, looking for his old enemy. At last, he saw him—a small man neatly dressed in a tie and black jacket, his nervous eyes sheltered behind transition lenses. Clarence stretched out his hand and smiled. He leaned close and said, "The war is over. We can be friends now."

"Ja. Ja," he replied.

They retired to a hotel and sipped beer, speaking through a translator. Clarence never met a German soldier before, but Gustav had experience with Americans. After Cologne, he'd spent the rest of the war as a POW, serving food to GIs. Upon release, he returned to his childhood farm in Northern Germany and worked driving bulldozers. Retired and a widower,



he enjoyed touring foreign cities on Google Earth. As the conversation eased, they found common ground—in humor.

“Did your tank have a bathroom?” Clarence asked. “They forgot to put one in mine.”

“Yes, we did,” Gustav retorted. “Empty shells!”

He told Clarence about his tight-knit farm family. How the Nazis took his Jewish neighbors and rampaged through his village. Gustav hadn’t wanted to be in Cologne any more than Clarence had. After his tank got buried in bricks, he and one crewman surrendered. The others kept fighting; he never saw them again.

Finally, Clarence found the courage to say it: “I still see her in my dreams...the woman in the car.” Clarence says he didn’t have to explain. Gustav had seen the footage too. Ever since, he’d had nightmares in which he was trapped in his tank, watching Kathi bleed to death. He’d never talked about it either. “Who would understand?”

The next morning, they walked to the intersection. It was time to confront the past.

New buildings made it difficult to get oriented, but when they arrived, they knew they were at the right spot. Standing there, he confessed. "It happened so fast, and I was afraid."

Gustav nodded. That's why he'd fired too, he admitted. He'd thought the car was American until the shattered vehicle stopped in front of him and he saw his doomed countrymen.

Stunned, Clarence looked at the street. It had been crossfire. Could they both bear responsibility?

They never should have been there, Gustav continued. They drove right into a battle. If they'd holed up in a basement, they would have survived. "It's war," he said. "It's in the nature of it. It can't be undone."

He was right, Clarence reflected. None of them should've been there. Not him, not Gustav, not Kathi Esser. Not any of the others who died in that terrible and terrifying war.

The graves lay nearby, at St. Gereon's Basilica. First, Gustav and Clarence each laid a yellow rose before a cross labeled MICHAEL JOHANNES DELLING, 1905–1945. Then they found a common plot marked THE UNKNOWN DEAD, where they'd been told Kathi Esser was buried because she'd been found without her ID papers. The vase at the foot of the triangular eave with the cross was empty. Gustav slid a yellow rose into the vase, but as Clarence leaned forward to do the same, he teetered. His former enemy reached out and kept him from falling.

Instead of wishing to forget, they swore to remember...and something within him let go. By facing his fears, he found peace, there at his enemy's side. By accepting his role in something he could not prevent, he found forgiveness. He still dreams of Kathi, but dreams and nightmares are different things. He'd since met her family—gracious people who offered forgiveness. Sleep came more easily. He talked to God. He felt the comfort only he can give.

Gustav became his war buddy—from the other side. They exchanged Christmas cards and spoke on Skype. There were times he saw him on his computer, this little man surrounded by atlases, and thought how he might have killed him. Thank God he didn't he thinks to himself. The first time they met, they were encased in steel, peering through their sights, seeing each other only as war machines. The second time, they met as themselves, unarmored, as two human beings.

Gustav died a few years before Clarence, who wrote his article about 10 years ago, but each year on March 6, the day they truly became friends, until his death, Clarence arranged for two yellow roses to be placed on Kathi Esser's grave, one from each of them. Clarence towards the end of his life visited again and was able to one year put them there himself, and he had planned to go again. Some things, he says, must be remembered.

And perhaps now more than ever, what we need to remember is God's love for all people.

Today as we celebrate Epiphany, we look at the wise men from the East; Chaldeans, who were stargazers. And as they gazed at the stars, isn't it

interesting that they recognized that there was a new king of the Jews and they wanted to pay homage to him. These are men from a different culture; yet they recognize there is something significant in that this king is not just coming for the Jewish people, but for all people. And as such, they set out on this long journey until they find him. It's a bit of a foreshadow of the sign that is on the cross, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews; written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew; the major languages at the time; meant to mock Jesus, but speaking to the truth as well that Jesus is King of Kings.

As the infant grows up and begins His ministry, what we will see is how He truly is this King for all people. Saint Paul will say it best in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

We as humans however have a hard time with that. One the one hand, there are divisions and that is not a bad thing. But sometimes we lose sight of the fact that we are all loved by God, no matter our race, our country or ethnicity, our sex, our status, our political affiliation. And this is so important as a starting point. To strive to see others through the eyes of Christ. Doing that, we can develop a mentality of loving our neighbor; of trying to

recognize when there may be prejudice or bias in our hearts or hatred; to show patience and tolerance; to strive to forgive those who have wronged us, and to remember there is always so much more to a person than meets the eye. When we treat one another with true love, the goodness can emerge, but it takes work and commitment and a dedication to our faith, seeing others as Jesus does.

As we do this, what we can then do is to make a journey like Clarence did. He did nothing wrong; he was a soldier in combat. But he was also hurting, and needed to make his own journey to peace, but also through that journey, he brought that peace to Gustav. How do we help others facilitate their own journey to peace and to God? Sometimes it's by showing them love and patience; but it also entails talking about our faith with them; praying with them; talking about what our faith teaches and why having a relationship with God and His Church will bring true happiness. This is a main goal of the upcoming synod, so we can do exactly that; for as our Christmas Season winds down, we are to go forth and change the world by being fishers of men, bringing people to Christ.

Indeed at times we can be torn apart by hate and our differences; yet when we gaze upon our Lord, we gaze upon a love given to us all, a King who came to save all peoples. What a gift we are given in our Lord. As the saying goes, wise men still seek Him; so may we like the Magi journey deeper into coming to know who God is, giving ourselves the gift of knowing we are loved and forgiven like Clarence, but also may we seek out those who are hurting and lost, and also bring them to God by not being afraid to love, to forgive, to seek reconciliation, to evangelize, to challenge, knowing that at times it may be hard to see God in others who seem so different but that we have such power to give not gold, frankincense or myrrh but the gift of love, peace and mercy to a needy world.