

Christmas in Korea, 1951

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For the Canadians serving in Korea at the close of 1951, it had been a long and difficult year. Beginning in February, Canadians had left the relative safety of rear training positions to enter the front lines as part of large-scale United Nations offensives, following close on the heels of retreating Chinese soldiers heading North. In April, the soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), along with the Royal Australian Regiment, the guns of the 16th Field Regiment, New Zealand Artillery, and the tanks of A Company, 72nd US Tank Battalion faced off against a major Chinese offensive at Kap'yong. The remainder of the Canadians arrived in Korea in May 1951, and were soon engaged in other pitched battles. The Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) began their deployment with a battle in Chail-li in May and the Song-gok Spur battle in November, and the Royal 22e Régiment (R22eR), backed by the 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery's guns, survived a massive enemy assault at Hill 355 in November. As the seesaw offensives in Korea gave way to what would become prolonged armistice talks, the Canadians and Chinese alike settled into a dangerous but steady defensive rhythm of night patrolling and daily bombardments across the no-mans-land separating their hills. The men of 2 PPCLI, relieved by 1 PPCLI in November, returned for a Christmas in Canada. The remaining Canadians were due a rest by December 1951, but they could not let down their guard.

For their part, the Chinese were eager to capitalize on the Canadians' Christmas season away from home with a series of overtures designed to undermine morale and encourage soldiers to defect. Beginning on 18 December 1951, Canadian soldiers out beyond their forward defensive lines began to see indications of the enemy's Christmas charm offensive. Under cover of night, or during foggy, overcast days, teams of Chinese soldiers had approached Canadian lines unseen to leave behind large signposts with appeals to their enemy, including one with the label "Come Home Darling," showing a woman lamenting an absent soldier. Soldiers of the R22eR and RCR reported that at the signs' bases were packages of Christmas cards, some of which are reproduced below. In the words of the RCR's war diarist, "Numerous greeting cards were found all from the Chinese Peoples Volunteer Forces wishing the UN soldiers a Merry Xmas and asking them to surrender and enjoy their Xmas out of the battle. It has become quite a joke and the men get a great laugh out of them anxiously awaiting each new dawn to see if there is more. The enemy has certainly made a mistake if he thinks his childish attempts at psychological warfare is having any effect on the morale of the men." The cards were duly forwarded to the Brigade headquarters, but some found their way into kit bags as souvenirs.

On Christmas Eve, Chinese soldiers installed a decorated Christmas trees topped with white flags and strewn with similar greetings and solicitations of surrender

in one of the abandoned villages in the valley between UN and enemy lines. The tanks of C Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) engaged it with their main guns. The RCR also reported a young Korean boy approaching the Canadian lines from across enemy lines. Begging the Chinese for food, he had instead been given a package of Christmas gifts and sent across no-mans-land and several minefields to deliver the propaganda to waiting Canadian hands. The boy was safely escorted south for processing as a refugee, while the cards received the same bemused attention they had elsewhere.

When Christmas arrived, the efforts of the cooks across the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade in Korea produced a feast of turkey with fixings that were hugely appreciated by the soldiers who took shifts to stop off at mess tents decorated with cheer. Santa was among the injured reported in Canadian lines when one of the RCR's Company Quartermasters, dressed as Saint Nick, fell from the turret of the commanding officer's heavily-decorated armoured car as it accelerated through Canadian lines. According to the unit's war diary, Santa survived the tumble with a mild bruising.

But unlike the unofficial truce struck during the first Christmas of the First World War in 1914, there was no reprieve from the war in Korea 70 years ago on Christmas night. Standing patrols continued to go out, forward defence lines were manned and monitored, and all stood ready for an attack, all through the night. Happily, the Korean winter settled in in earnest overnight on Christmas Day, making the roads and paths slippery and obscured by gusts of snow, and an uneventful night was reported by all. The war would resume in earnest when the snow cleared, and a new year brought new challenges to those serving in Korea.



One of the propaganda Christmas cards left for Canadian soldiers in no-mans-land. This is the reverse. The front reads "Dear Soldiers, It is Christmas and you are far from home, suffering from cold and not knowing when you will die. The big shots are at home, enjoying themselves, eating good food, drinking good liquor, why should you be here risking your life for their profits? The Koreans and Chinese don't want to be your enemies. Our enemies and yours are the ones who sent you here and destroyed your happiness. Soldiers! Let's join hands! You belong with those who love you and want you back, safe and sound. So we wish you..."

Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20030310-002



Mr. Moneybags is in Florida this Christmas.



Where are you? In Korea!

You risk your life, Big Business rakes in the dough.

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A Christmas card for an American audience.

Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 19840049-088

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