

We don't normally run fiction in CQ, but this story spoke so much to who we are and what we do as hams that we decided to make an exception. And ... FW, OM.

## Christmas Cheer

BY KIMBERLY L. ELMORE,\* N5OP

**C**old. Cold, windy, snowy, tired, and far, far from home. That's all Lt. Gene Nielson could think of that Christmas Eve in 1944. How he hated this crummy war and the crummy Germans. Oh, for some hot chocolate, the glow of the family's Christmas tree back in Oklahoma, and his cat, Peter, in his lap.

Medium height and bordering on skinny, Gene found the relentless cold bone-chilling. As he took his comms shift, he thought, *one of the best things about being a signalman is that the equipment always keeps the room*

*warm in winter.* He'd just finished the last exchange with "MX" when, as if on cue, the door flew open and with it, a blast of cold and snow.

"Criminy! Close the door! Ya born in a barn, ya stupid sonofa..." He turned to glare angrily at the intruder. "Oh. Sorry, Reverend." Chaplain Skaggs was older than even the CO, gentle, fit, and gray around the temples. The men loved him because he *listened*.

"That's alright. And, as a matter of fact, I was born in a barn." The chaplain's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Well, it's a barn *now*, anyway... Stayin' warm, Lieutenant?"

"Barely. More equipment would help. What brings you by, Reverend?"

"Oh, well, I came by because you've got about the only warm place in camp."

The chaplain smiled again. Gene pulled his coat closer and resettled the ear-phones so one ear was uncovered.

"If I'm bothering you..."

"No, no. I can talk with you and copy at the same time. I'll catch anything for us. I was just thinkin' about radio and Christmas Eve."

"Do you really like these radios, or is this your way of staying warm?"

"Both! I'm from Oklahoma, so I hate the cold. But I've loved radios ever since I can remember. Call it a passion."

"A *passion!* Really?" Skaggs chided.

"Oh, yeah. When the war broke out, I was the chief engineer at KOME, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I filled a 'necessary' role at home and had a draft deferment. The station manager offered to extend it, but I refused and volunteered."

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The story is fiction, but the photos are real. Here, tankmen of the U.S. First Army's 5th Armored Regiment gather around a fire on the snow-covered ground near Eupen, Belgium on December 26, 1944, opening their Christmas packages. (All photos courtesy the U.S. Army)



"A job like that must have been tough to give up."

"You bet! My family was pretty bad off during the Depression, so a good job is a treasure. Times were hard, so I went off to the NYA when I was 16 and..."

"NYA?"

"Yeah. National Youth Administration, part of the WPA. They offered to teach me radio, and I jumped at it. Earned my ham radio license and became W5JHJ. After I studied some more, Dad drove me to the FCC office in Dallas where I passed the First Class Radiotelephone and Second Class Radiotelegraph exams and... Say, do you really want to hear this?"

"Sure! Go on," urged Skaggs.

"Well, when I volunteered for the Signal Corps, I was commissioned as a 2nd 'louie right off 'cause of my experience. I skipped basic radio training, and went straight to the final test: tuning one of these babies," he patted the huge BC-610 cabinet to his left, "at 18 mc, the top of its frequency range, into a light bulb. It's not easy 'cause the load is reactive. Most guys fumble with it, but I'd done it before." Gene chuckled at the memory. "Anyway, the light bulb was too small and it lit up almost blue-white. The sergeant watching me wasn't ready. I can still hear him yell: 'OK! OK! Knock it off, already!' Must've been the only bulb they had. Anyway, I shipped out in Spring '43."

Chaplain Skaggs thought. "And you were assigned here?"

"I'm lucky; it beats stringin' wire on a battlefield. I'm good at Morse code—CW—and fast, so they assigned me to company command."

"Hmmm. So, what is it about radio and Christmas Eve?"

"I was just thinking that on Christmas Eve, I'd wish everyone Merry Christmas, 'MX' in CW. Haven't managed that for awhile..." Gene sighed and trailed off.

Chaplain Skaggs regarded the young man carefully. "Well, it's Christmas Eve again. You'll find gifts in the unlikeliest places." Skaggs got up and stretched his legs. "I'm warm enough now. Guess I'd better turn in. Good night, Gene. And, Merry Christmas."

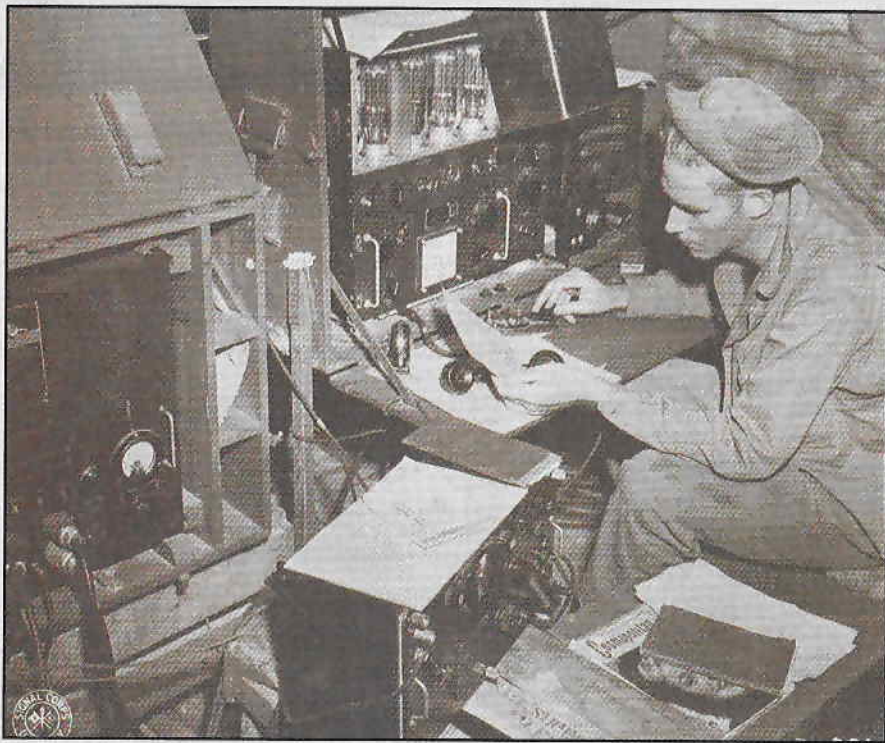
"Thanks, Reverend. Merry Christmas to you, too." He readjusted his headphones and thought briefly about the Allied forces desperately fighting to close "the Bulge" in a Belgian forest called the Ardennes. He'd heard enough to be grateful he wasn't there.

Around 2300 local time, Gene finished copying General Eisenhower's Christmas greeting to the troops. Gene knew the operator at division HQ, another ham, so they both chatted briefly about home and family, ending the exchange with a sincere "MX OM." It wasn't quite the same, but it lifted their spirits. As Gene opened the latest available issue of "Stars and Stripes," dated November 12, 1944, for the third complete read-through, he heard a faint, slightly chirpy signal a bit off frequency.

Hmmm... It was a fast, crisp fist, but the signal was weak. He closed the TRANSMIT switch and sent a quick "?"

It sounded like "FWMK," or perhaps "FWOK." That was no Allied ID he knew. Again: "?"

The QSB worked in his favor this time because he copied, quite clearly: "FW OM K"



His mind raced. What's this? The signal characteristics sounded... *German*. FW OM? If it was a German operator harassing him (a common occurrence), he wouldn't bother with such decorum. His curiosity was piqued. "Let's find out," he thought.

"QRZ?" Might as well; he sent "OM," after all.

"DE D4BVI FW OM K"

Call letters?! *German ham call letters?* Ham radio had become legal in Germany sometime in the 1930s and, to his delight, he'd worked a couple of Germans early one morning on 20 meters. Sadly, the war soon broke out and all European DX vanished. Shortly after, all DX was prohibited; then came Pearl Harbor and ham radio was silenced "for the duration."

What about the "FW OM" business? His high-school German came dimly back to him: FW could mean *Fröhliche Weihnachten*, German for "Merry Christmas." But why would a *German* wish an *American* Merry Christmas?

"D4BVI DE W5JHJ FB OM — QTH? K" *Why not? Might as well use my own call.*

"GERMANY," was the appropriately useless reply. But, there was more: "NAME HR THEO — QTH? K"

"TNX — OP GENE — QTH FRANCE," equally useless information to humor the guy. For no good reason, Gene added "WX HR COLD K"

"WX HR COLD — AGE 26 — THGS GO BDLY K"

What kind of ruse is this? But then again, maybe it wasn't a ruse at all. Maybe it's simply another homesick soldier. Or rather, *ham*. A cold, scared, lonely *ham* who wants to be home for Christmas.

"HW BDLY? K" was all he could think of.

"DEFEAT IS ONLY A MTTT OF TIME K"

Gene was mystified. While this could still be a con game, Gene had serious doubts. Nevertheless, he couldn't continue the QSO, as he had to change frequency.

"KEEP UR HEAD DOWN ES GL — MX THEO SK"

"TNX — ONE DAY WE WILL BE FRIENDS — FW DR GENE SK"



That was it, over in a couple of minutes. This brief exchange—a Christmas Eve QSO?—disturbed and touched him deeply. For the briefest moment, the enemy wasn't a faceless monstrosity; the enemy was a *ham*, just like him. He decided that strange things happen in war. Maybe this was his gift—his Christmas Eve QSO. It was a busy night and he had little time to dwell on it. As the Battle of the Bulge and the Rhineland campaign ground on, the event was pushed from Gene's mind.

VE Day came and went and Gene volunteered to be part of the occupation force stationed near Stuttgart, or at least what was left of it. As they progressed across Germany, he was amazed at the destruction. *If I were on the receiving end of this, I'd sure take any help I could get.* Now a Captain, he was in charge of division HQ communications. With the war over, his division was in relatively permanent digs, so most traffic was on landline and radio became secondary. As a Signalman, he had to handle all of it and as a Captain, he had to *administer* all of it.

Many Germans, some ex-military, volunteered as civilians to assist in the rebuilding. Americans and Germans weren't supposed to fraternize, but they had to work together and naturally became acquainted. Gene was asked one day in early June to help assess some surrendered German communications equipment with the help of a German ex-Signalman.

Relaxed and cordial, the German was heavier and taller than Gene, with sandy hair and brown eyes. To Gene's surprise, he spoke impeccable English. The surrendered equipment had unusually intricate design, making it hard to repair in the field, but was otherwise routine.

"I'm sorry; no one introduced us. I'm Captain Gene Nielson."

The German signalman paused and seemed oddly attentive. "*Gene?* Excuse me for asking, but are you, by any chance, a radio amateur?"

"Yes," said Gene slowly, "I am. Why?"

"Are your call letters W5JHJ?"

"Yes. How did you...?"



"I am Theo! D4BVI! I was Lieutenant Theo Blaufeld, a signal officer with my command staff. The Christmas Eve QSO!" said Theo, nodding excitedly. "You are Gene!"

"Well, I'll be...!" They shook hands as old friends might. After a pause, Gene admitted, "You know, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for that QSO."

"Good! I'm pleased!"

"Really? Well..." Gene stumbled for the words. "I know it sounds corny, but all of a sudden, I knew that there were *people*, like me, on *your* side. I guess maybe I thought that I could help undo some of the war somehow if I stayed around a bit."

Theo thought a moment. "And I am truly grateful."

"Yeah, well, here we are." After another awkward silence, Gene couldn't restrain his curiosity. "But, why did you contact me and then wish me a Merry Christmas?"

"A personal ritual," said Theo, eyes twinkling. "Before the war, I used to make contacts every Christmas Eve and wish everyone *Fröhliche Weihnachten*. This was one of my favorite things to do. I even did it before amateur radio was legal in Germany."

"That's amazing! I used to do the same thing! In fact, I'd been thinking about it when I heard you. Still, why did you tell me that things were going badly?"

"Well," chuckled Theo, "they were!" Then, more seriously, "We are not all Nazis, you see? Strangely, I began to see in my country's defeat its only hope for a future. It was the only way we could be rid of the Nazis. They were ... terrible. I know this especially because..." He stopped short, and winced. "I handled the messages. Even so, I did my job and served my comrades and my country."

"Besides," and Theo smiled, "I was taught that whenever I transmit, I represent Germany because radio has no boundaries. Even in war, I must consider appearances."

Gene was quiet for a moment. "It's funny you say that, because I was taught the same thing. But, I have to admit that I; um... expected a trick. I'd certainly been taunted and jammed by you guys."

"Yes, and I may have done some of it," laughed Theo. "To be honest, I was nervous, too. You are the only American I've done that with. But it was Christmas Eve, a special time. I heard you and the other American send each other MX and well..." Theo trailed off. "Did you know that once, during the Great War, on Christmas the fighting stopped and there were no enemies, only soccer teams? The men even exchanged gifts across the trenches. If we cannot set aside our differences for a single day, we are truly doomed."

Through pleasant small talk, Gene learned Theo's family was northeast of the small village of Fellbach, famous for its winemaking, and that Theo's parents owned a small vineyard and winery there. Theo finished with "And then I volunteered for the *Wehrmacht*. It was the safest thing to do."

"What? How could *volunteering to fight* be safe?"

"Well... Another time, perhaps." Theo abruptly changed the subject: "Some day, I would like to be on the air again, but it will be difficult because the Nazis took all the equipment when the war started."

"Most of ours went to the war effort, too. We got paid a little for it, but I'll have to rebuild my station. There will probably be tons of war surplus equipment that should work, though. A lot of the stuff the Army uses is patterned after ham gear."

Theo smiled ruefully, looking at the ruined German equipment. "I think there will be little surplus German equipment. But, I will manage." The small talk continued, forging their friendship.



August brought VJ Day, and with the war now completely over, Gene learned that the amateur 2 1/2-meter band had already reopened. In November, Gene quietly learned that some of the HF ham bands might be open by Christmas. *It's not even Thanksgiving and 10 meters is already open*, he thought. He missed ham radio and so began working on a way to get back on the air. There were no guarantees, but it looked like 20 meters would be available before Christmas. With a little effort, Gene was granted authority to operate with his own call, signed with a /D at the end. He got a five-day pass centered on Christmas and put his plans into motion.

Already, time was short. On the 18th, over a beer with Theo, he idly said, "Y'know, I can't go home for Christmas. I know that times are hard, but do you think maybe I could visit the Blaufeld estate instead? I could help out with anything that needed to be done..."

"Times are difficult, but the little region around my parent's estate seems to have escaped the worst of it. We are not on any main roads and so anyone wanting to find the area must look for it. We, and a few of the neighboring estates, refused to use any of the Nazi's slave labor. We helped a few as much as was safe, and so suffered little from retribution when Germany collapsed. I'm sure my parents would happily welcome you," replied Theo, smiling. Plans were made on the spot.

Gene's mind was now racing: All the equipment had to fit in a jeep, and it had to be manageable by only two men. The receiver was easy, as the Army's BC-312 was heavy, but a fine piece of gear that also tuned to 18 MHz. The transmitter was a problem. While wonderfully tough and reliable, at over 500 lbs, the BC-610 was too big and bulky. The Army had little of equivalent quality that tuned above 13 MHz. Digging through equipment listings, he came across a new transmitter, an ART-13 used by the Army Air Force. A small 100-watt transmitter tuning 2-18 mc powered by a 12-volt dynamotor, it had but one drawback: it was used on B-29s, and there were none in Europe nor would there be in the near future. Now what?

"Yeah, I got ten of 'em back in, ah," Sgt. Roy Inman, a gruff Boston "southie," paused, chomping his trademark un-lit cigar to check a fat clipboard. "Yeah, October. Outta the blue. Never ordered 'em." Then he brightened: "Here's the deal: You take whatever you want. And keep it. I know nuttin' about it, see? I already got enough surplus to supply another war." As the cigar wan-

dered to the other side of his mouth, he added, "But that don't go for the jeep!"

One last check verified that everything worked flawlessly. On Saturday the 22nd, he carefully loaded the equipment into the back of a jeep, covering it with a tarp. In the passenger seat, he cushioned a J-44 straight key and a J-36 "bug" in a towel. He barely slept that night. He was a kid at Christmas again!

Greeted warmly at the modest Blaufeld estate, Gene was served a meal as he hadn't had in ... well, he couldn't remember. The Blaufelds obviously dug deep for such a lavish meal. The wine and Christmas decorations were right out of a fairy tale, along with the marzipan and chocolate dessert. To show he was truly welcome, their spoiled cat, Rudy, curled up in Gene's lap as they sat before the fire, sipping an estate-bottled *Eiswein*.

Unfolding with the evening was the Blaufeld story. Theo's great grandmother was from a well-to-do Jewish family, while his great-grandfather was from landed nobility. The two met and fell desperately in love. But, as she was forbidden to marry outside her faith, and he to marry outside his class, they eloped to the tiny town of Fellbach. While penniless, their love was sincere and so they were married by the local priest.

Lightning ignited the town hall a few nights later, destroying all official records. Reconstructing what they could, neither the priest nor the burgo-meister saw fit to replace *all* the details of the Blaufelds' marriage. They put in a few good words with a kind, old vintner, childless and long-since a widower. He took them in to help with his small estate and came to love them as his own children. Upon his death, all was bequeathed to them, thus founding the Blaufeld Estate.

When the Nazis rose to power, Theo's family hid all evidence of their

past in the cellar, yet lived in constant fear of discovery. Now Gene understood why Theo considered volunteering for the *Wehrmacht* safer than remaining with his family. As a patriotic German soldier with no officially-traceable Jewish ties, no one would question his, or his family's, heritage.

After dinner had settled, Gene was certain he'd made the proper choice. "Theo? I need your help with something outside."

The night was clear and cold. Snow sparkled on the ground and in tree branches like diamonds in the moonlight. At the jeep, Gene pulled back the canvas tarp, stiff with cold, and turned a flashlight on the contents.

"What...?"

"Well, Theo, you remember all that surplus radio gear I said I'd get? I got some. Ham radio is legal again in the U.S., and I have permission to operate in Germany using my call with a /D at the end. Twenty meters officially opened a couple of weeks ago and I thought you might like to try it with me. It should be no problem to get all this set up tomorrow, in time for Christmas Eve. We can power it from the jeep until something better is worked out.

"But, there's one other thing," he said, reaching inside the jeep, unwrapping the keys and handing them to Theo. "I've been told, in no uncertain terms, not to bring any of this stuff back. Since I don't want to get in trouble with my supply sergeant, I guess it'll have to stay with you, if that's OK. *Fröhliche Weihnachten*, Theo."

(This story is dedicated to the memory of the author's father, Bob Elmore, the real W5JHJ, a World War II Army Air Force veteran who became a Silent Key this past summer, and to all of those who served in World War II.)

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