

New Year's In Civil War, Other Conflicts, Brought Little Celebration

by Tom Emery
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New Year's Eve and Day mark the traditional end of the holiday season and are celebrated by millions of Americans. But in the Civil War and other American conflicts, there was little cause for celebration as the calendar changed from one year to the next.

On the last day of 1862, thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers clashed in the first day of battle at Stones River, Tenn., one of the bloodiest engagements of the western theater. After a successful effort on December 31, southern commander Braxton Bragg sent a telegraph during a respite on the following day proclaiming “God has granted us a Happy New Year.”

Bragg’s declaration proved premature, as the Federals responded on January 2 to end the battle in a draw. Some 12,900 Yankees and 11,700 Confederates were lost in the two-day fight. Elsewhere in Tennessee that December 31, a small army of Federals handed a rare defeat to notorious Southern raider Nathan Bedford Forrest at the Battle of Parkers Cross Roads.

Though the Union enjoyed crucial victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in 1863, the end of that year brought scant pleasure. Near Vicksburg on Jan. 2, 1864, Stephen Rollins of the 95th Illinois Infantry lamented that “my heart sickens at the thought of our once happy country, now wrenched by civil feuds, and weltering in the blood of brothers.”

Those on the homefront also struggled for comfort. In North Carolina, Catherine Edmondston wrote in her diary on Jan. 1, 1863, of New Year’s dinner and “a quiet chat over glove knitting.” The menu included “goose, wild ducks (and the)...luxury of a Pudding.” With a nod to food shortages, Edmondston added that “a dinner of four courses is...a rarity now-a-days, but New Year must have a face to welcome it.”

Edmondston’s celebration reflected the Southern cause. “We wound up the old year with all the customary honors, had our Egg Nog, and the attendant good wishes,” she wrote as the man of the house wished the servants “Happy New Year, Good Luck, and death to the Yankees.”

The press reflected the concerns of the day. Eight months into the conflict, the New York Times declared on Jan. 1, 1862, that “the darkest and gloomiest year in our country’s history has passed away.” As 1862 drew to a close, the Illinois State Register, in President Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, reported that “not a hearth in the land will be exempt from emotions the most sickening in reviewing this closing year 1862. Its record is blood red.”

The final day of 1862 resulted in anticipation for some. On the eve of the Emancipation Proclamation, which became effective on Jan. 1, 1863, many blacks spent the day and evening awaiting their freedom. In their honor, Watch Night is still celebrated by some African-Americans across the country.

As the next year concluded and with the fortunes of the war turning, the Richmond Examiner in the Confederate capital sadly reported that “today closes the gloomiest year of our struggle.” The tide of the war never turned back in the South’s favor, and as 1865 dawned, the men of William T. Sherman’s army relaxed in Savannah in the glow of their wildly successful March to the Sea that fall.

The Civil War was hardly the only American conflict that brought suffering at the turn of the calendar. On the last day of 1944, tens of thousands of American soldiers struggled with frigid conditions at the Battle of the Bulge in France and Belgium. A few years later, American troops similarly grappled with bitter cold during the Korean War.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of Americans marked the New Year in the jungles of Vietnam.

New Year’s celebrations – or lack thereof – in American conflicts reach as far back as the Revolutionary War. On Dec. 31, 1775, an American assault on the stronghold of Quebec was turned back, resulting in heavy losses including the death of an American general, Richard Montgomery. In south-central Illinois, Montgomery County is named in that fallen general’s honor.

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