THE WW1 CHRISTMAS TRUCE

WHAT HAPPENED ON DECEMBER 25, 1914?

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IT HAS BECOME A GREAT LEGEND OF WW1 – BUT WHAT HAPPENED WHEN BRITISH AND GERMAN TROOPS EMERGED FROM THEIR TRENCHES THAT CHRISTMAS DAY 100+ YEARS AGO?

Even at the distance of a century, no war seems more terrible than World War I. *In the four years between 1914 and 1918, it killed or wounded more than 25 million people-peculiarly horribly, and (in popular opinion, at least) for less apparent purpose than did any other war before or since*. Yet there were still odd moments of joy and hope in the trenches of Flanders and France, and one of the most remarkable came during the first Christmas of the war, a few brief hours during which men from both sides on the Western Front laid down their arms, emerged from their trenches and shared food, carols, games, and comradeship.

Although the Christmas Truce of 1914 may seem like a distant myth to those now at arms in parts of the world where vast cultural differences between combatants make such an occurrence impossible, it remains a symbol of hope to those who believe that a recognition of our common humanity may someday reverse the maxim that *"Peace is harder to make than war."*

THE STORY

Their truce-the famous Christmas Truce-was unofficial and illicit. Many officers disapproved, and headquarters on both sides took strong steps to ensure that it could never happen again. While it lasted, though, the truce was magical, leading even the sober Wall Street Journal to observe: "What appears from the winter fog and misery is a Christmas story, a fine Christmas story that is, in truth, the most faded and tattered of adjectives: inspiring.

The first signs that something strange was happening occurred on Christmas Eve. At 8:30 p.m. an officer of the Royal Irish Rifles reported to headquarters: "Germans have illuminated their trenches, are singing songs and wishing us a Happy Xmas. Compliments are being exchanged but am nevertheless taking all military precautions." Further along the line, the two sides serenaded each other with carols—the German "Silent Night" being met with a British chorus of "The First Noel"—and scouts met, cautiously, in no man's land, the shell-blasted waste between the trenches. The war diary of the Scots Guards records that a certain Private Murker "met a German Patrol and was given a glass of whisky and some cigars, *and a message was sent back saying that if we didn't fire at them, they would not fire at us.*

The same basic understanding seems to have sprung up spontaneously at other spots. For another British soldier, Private Frederick Heath, the truce began late that same night when "all down our line of trenches there came to our ears a greeting unique in war.

'English soldier, English soldier, a merry Christmas, a merry Christmas!'" Then-as Heath wrote in a letter home-the voices added:

'Come out, English soldier; come out here to us.' For some little time, we were cautious and did not even answer. Officers, fearing treachery, ordered the men to be silent. But up and down our line one heard the men answering that Christmas greeting from the enemy. How could we resist wishing each other a Merry Christmas, even though we might be at each other's throats immediately afterward? So we kept up a running conversation with the Germans, all the while our hands ready on our rifles. Blood and peace, enmity and fraternity—war's most amazing paradox. The night wore on to dawn—a night made easier by songs from the German trenches, the pipings of piccolos, and our broad lines of laughter and Christmas carols. *Not a shot was fired.*

A German trench in December 1914. The workmanship was far less sophisticated than it became later in the war, and the muddy conditions were terrible.

Several factors combined to produce the conditions for this Christmas Truce. By December 1914, the men in the trenches were veterans, familiar enough with the realities of combat to have lost much of the idealism that they had carried into war in August, and most longed for an end to bloodshed. *The war, they had believed, would be over by Christmas, yet there they were in Christmas week still muddied, cold, and in battle*. Then, on Christmas Eve itself, several weeks of mild but miserably soaking weather gave way to a sudden, hard frost, creating a dusting of ice and snow along the front that made the men on both sides feel that something spiritual was taking place.

Just how widespread the truce was is hard to say. It was certainly not general—there are plenty of accounts of fighting continuing through the Christmas season in some sectors, and others of men fraternizing to the sound of guns firing nearby. One common factor seems to have been that Saxon troops—universally regarded as easygoing—were the most likely to be involved, and to have made the first approaches to their British counterparts. "We are Saxons, you are Anglo-Saxons," one shouted across no man's land. "What is there for us to fight about?" *The most detailed estimate, made by Malcolm Brown of Britain's Imperial War Museums, is that the truce extended along at least two-thirds of the British-held trench line that scarred southern Belgium.*

Men from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers meet their German counterparts in no man's land somewhere in the deadly Ypres Salient, on December 26, 1914.

Even so, accounts of a Christmas Truce refer to a suspension of hostilities only between the British and the Germans. The Russians, on the Eastern Front, still adhered to the old Julian calendar in 1914, and hence did not celebrate Christmas until January 7, while the French were far more sensitive than their allies to the fact that the Germans were occupying about a third of France—and ruling French civilians with some harshness.

It was only in the British sector, then, that troops noticed at dawn the Germans had placed small Christmas trees along the parapets of their trenches. Slowly, parties of men from both sides began to venture toward the barbed wire that separated them, until—Rifleman Oswald Tilley told his parents in a letter home—" literally hundreds of each side were out in no man's land shaking hands."

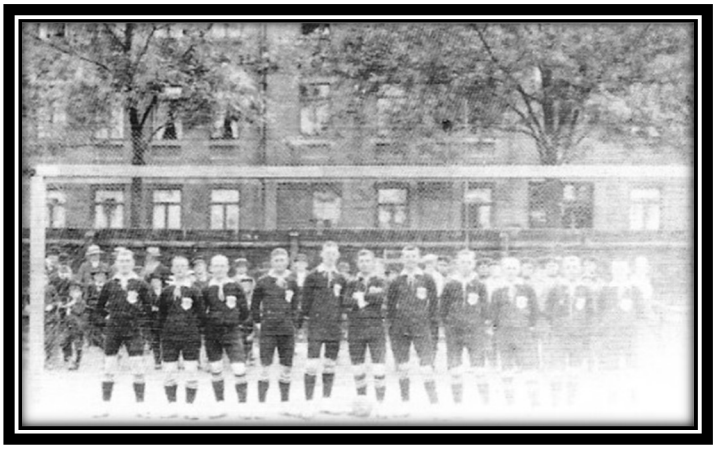
Communication could be difficult. German-speaking British troops were scarce, but many Germans had been employed in Britain before the war, frequently in restaurants. Captain Clifton Stockwell, an officer with the Royal Welch Fusiliers who found himself occupying a trench opposite the ruins of a heavily shelled brewery, wrote in his diary of "one Saxon, who spoke excellent English" and who "used to climb in some eyrie in the brewery and spend his time asking 'How is London getting on?', 'How was Gertie Millar and the Gaiety?', and so on. Lots of our men had blind shots at him in the dark, at which he laughed, one night I came out and called, 'Who the hell are you?' At once came back the answer, 'Ah—the officer—I expect I know you—I used to be head waiter at the Great Central Hotel."

Of course, only a few men involved in the truce could share reminiscences of London. Far more common was an interest in "football"—soccer—which by then had been played professionally in Britain for a quarter-century and in Germany since the 1890s. Perhaps it was inevitable that some men on both sides would produce a ball and—freed briefly from the confines of the trenches—take pleasure in kicking it about. What followed, though, was something more than that, for if the story of the Christmas Truce has its jewel, it is the legend of the match played between the British and the Germans—which the Germans claimed to have won, 3-2.

The first reports of such a contest surfaced a few days afterward; on January 1, 1915, The Times published a letter written from a doctor attached to the Rifle Brigade, who reported "a football match… played between them and us in front of the trench." *The brigade's official history insisted that no match took place because "it would have been most unwise to allow the Germans to know how weakly the British trenches were held*." But there is plenty of evidence that soccer was played that Christmas Day—mostly by men of the same nationality, but in at least three or four places between troops from the opposing armies.

The most detailed of these stories comes from the German side and reports that the 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment played a game against Scottish troops. According to the 133rd War History, this match emerged from the "droll scene of Tommy und Fritz" chasing hares that emerged from under cabbages between the lines and then producing a ball to kick about. Eventually, this "developed into a regulation football match with caps casually laid out as goals.

The frozen *ground was no great matter. Then we organized each side into teams, lining up in motley rows, the football in the center. The game ended 3-2 for Fritz."*



A faded photo of the 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment's pre-war football team was one of the souvenirs presented to Lieutenant Ian Stewart of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. Stewart remembered that the Saxons were "very proud" of their team's quality.

Exactly what happened between the Saxons and the Scots is difficult to say. Some accounts of the game bring in elements that were dreamed up by Robert Graves, a renowned British poet, writer, and war veteran, who reconstructed the encounter in a story published in 1962. In Graves's version, the score remains 3-2 to the Germans, but the writer adds a sardonic fictional flourish: "The Reverend Jolly, our padre, acted as ref too much Christian charity—their outside left shot the deciding goal, but he was miles offside and admitted it as soon as the whistle went."

The real game was far from a regulated fixture with 11 players a side and 90 minutes of play. In the one detailed eyewitness account that survives—albeit in an interview not given until the 1960s—Lieutenant Johannes Niemann, a Saxon who served with the 133rd, recalled that on Christmas morning: the mist was slow to clear and suddenly my orderly threw himself into my dugout to say that both the German and Scottish soldiers had come out of their trenches and were fraternizing along the front. I grabbed my binoculars and looking cautiously over the parapet saw the incredible sight of our soldiers exchanging cigarettes, schnapps, and chocolate with the enemy.

Later a Scottish soldier appeared with a football which seemed to come from nowhere and a few minutes later a real football match got underway. The Scots marked their goal mouth with their strange caps and we did the same with ours. It was far from easy to play on the frozen ground, but we continued, keeping rigorously to the rules, even though it only lasted an hour and we had no referee. A great many of the passes went wide, but all the amateur footballers, although they must have been very tired, played with huge enthusiasm.

For Niemann, the novelty of getting to know their kilted opposition matched the novelty of playing soccer in no man's land:

Us Germans roared when a gust of wind revealed that the Scots wore no drawers under their kilts—and hooted and whistled every time they caught an impudent glimpse of one posterior belonging to one of "yesterday's enemies." But after an hour's play, when our Commanding Officer heard about it, he sent an order that we must put a stop to it. A little later we drifted back to our trenches and the fraternization ended.

The game that Niemann recalled was only one of many that took place up and down the Front. Attempts were made in several spots to involve the Germans—the Queen's Westminsters, one private soldier wrote home, "had a football out in front of the trenches and asked the Germans to send a team to play us, but either they considered the ground too hard, as it had been freezing all night and was a plowed field, or their officers put the bar up." But at least three, and perhaps four, other matches took place between the armies. A sergeant in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders recorded that a game was played in his sector "between the lines and the trenches," and according to a letter home published by the Glasgow News on January 2, the Scots "won easily by 4-1." Meanwhile Lieutenant Albert Wynn of the Royal Field Artillery wrote of a match against a German team of "Prussians and Hanovers" that was played near Ypres. That game "ended in a draw," but the Lancashire Fusiliers, occupying trenches close to the coast near Le Touquet and using a ration-tin "ball," played their own game against the Germans, and-according to their regimental history-lost by the same score as the Scots who encountered the 133rd, 3-2.

It is left to a fourth recollection, given in 1983 by Ernie Williams of the Cheshire Regiment, to supply a real idea of what soccer played between the trenches meant. Although Williams was recalling a game played on New Year's Eve, after there had been a thaw and plenty of rain, his description chimes with the little that is known for sure about the games played on Christmas Day: A ball appeared from somewhere, I don't know where, but it came from their side… They made up some goals and then it was just a general kick about. I should think there were a couple of hundred taking part. I had a go at the ball. I was pretty good then, at 19. Everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was no sort of ill-will between us…. There was no referee and no score, no tally at all. It was simply a mêlee—nothing like the soccer that you see on television. The boots we wore were a menace—those great big boots we had on—and in those days the balls were made of leather and they soon got very soggy.

Friday, January 8, 1915

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AN HISTORIC GROUP: BRITISH AND GERMAN SOLDIERS PHOTOGRAPHED TOGETHER.

Foes became friends on Christmas Day, when the British and Germans arranged an unofficial truce. The men left the trenches to exchange cigars and cigarettes, and were even photographed together. This is the historic picture, and shows the soldiers of the opposing Armies standing side by side.

Of course, not every man on either side was thrilled by the Christmas Truce, and official opposition squelched at least one proposed Anglo-German soccer match.

Lieutenant C.E.M. Richards, a young officer serving with the East Lancashire Regiment, had been greatly disturbed by reports of fraternization between the men of his regiment and the enemy and had welcomed the "return of good old sniping" late on Christmas Day—" just to make sure that the war was still on." That evening, however, Richards "received a signal from Battalion Headquarters telling him to make a football pitch in no man's land, by filling up shell holes, etc., and to challenge the enemy to a football match on 1st January." Richards recalled that "I was furious and took no action at all," but over time his view did mellow. "I wish I had kept that signal," he wrote years later. "Stupidly I destroyed it—I was so angry. It would now have been a good souvenir."

In most places, up and down the line, it was accepted that the truce would be purely temporary. Men returned to their trenches at dusk, in some cases summoned back by flares, but for the most part, determined to preserve the peace at least until midnight.

There was more singing, and in at least one spot presents were exchanged. George Eade, of the Rifles, had become friends with a German artilleryman who spoke good English, and as he left, this new acquaintance said to him: “Today we have peace. Tomorrow, you fight for your country, I fight for mine. Good luck.”

Fighting erupted again the next day, though there were reports from some sectors of hostilities remaining suspended into the New Year. And it does not seem to have been uncommon for the resumption of the war to be marked with further displays of mutual respect between enemies. In the trenches occupied by the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Captain Stockwell “climbed up on the parapet, fired three shots in the air and put up a flag with ‘Merry Christmas’ on it.” At this, his opposite number, Hauptmann von Sinner, “appeared on the German parapet and both officers bowed and saluted. Von Sinner then also fired two shots in the air and went back into his trench.”

The war was on again, and there would be no further truce until the general armistice of November 1918. Many, perhaps close to the majority, of the thousands of men who celebrated Christmas 1914 together would not live to see the return of peace. But for those who did survive, the truce was something that would never be forgotten.

However much the momentary peace of 1914 evidenced the desire of the combatants to live in amity with one another, it was doomed from the start by the realities beyond the trenches. As the English rock band The Farm, decades later, summed up the results after the enemies *“joined together and decided not to fight,” but failed, there was “nothing learned and nothing gained.”*

A celebration of the human spirit, the Christmas Truce remains a moving manifestation of the absurdities of war. A very minor Scottish poet of Great War vintage, Frederick Niven, may have got it right in his “A Carol from Flanders,” which closed:

O ye who read this truthful rime
From Flanders, kneel and say:
Godspeed the time when every day
Shall be as Christmas Day.

During a House of Commons debate on March 31, 1930, Sir H. Kingsley Wood, a Cabinet Minister during the next war, and a Major “In the front trenches” at Christmas 1914, recalled that he “took part in what was well known at the time as a truce. We went over in front of the trenches and shook hands with many of our German enemies. A great number of people [now] think we did something degrading.” Refusing to presume that, he went on, “*The fact is that we did it, and I then came to the conclusion that I have held very firmly ever since, that if we had been left to ourselves there would never have been another shot fired.* For a fortnight the truce went on. *We were on the most friendly terms, and it was only the fact that we were being controlled by others that made it necessary for us to start trying to shoot one another again.”* He blamed the resumption of the war on “the grip of the political system which was bad, and I and others who were there at the time determined there and then never to rest. … Until we had seen whether we could change it.” But they could not.

Read more: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-story-of-the-wwi-christmas-truce-11972213/#Apk0iGmoHSXsz8pT.9

A cross, left in Comines-Warneton in Belgium in 1999 to celebrate the site of the Christmas Truce.

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