

= Christmas truce =

The Christmas truce (German : Weihnachtsfrieden ; French : Trêve de Noël) was a series of widespread but unofficial ceasefires along the Western Front around Christmas 1914 . In the week leading up to the holiday , German and British soldiers crossed trenches to exchange seasonal greetings and talk . In areas , men from both sides ventured into no man 's land on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to mingle and exchange food and souvenirs . There were joint burial ceremonies and prisoner swaps , while several meetings ended in carol @-@ singing . Men played games of football with one another , giving one of the most memorable images of the truce . Peaceful behaviour was not ubiquitous ; fighting continued in some sectors , while in others the sides settled on little more than arrangements to recover bodies .

The following year , a few units arranged ceasefires but the truces were not nearly as widespread as in 1914 ; this was , in part , due to strongly worded orders from the high commands of both sides prohibiting fraternisation . Soldiers were no longer amenable to truce by 1916 . The war had become increasingly bitter after devastating human losses suffered during the battles of the Somme and Verdun , and the incorporation of poison gas .

The truces were not unique to the Christmas period , and reflected a growing mood of " live and let live " , where infantry close together would stop overtly aggressive behaviour and often engage in small @-@ scale fraternisation , engaging in conversation or bartering for cigarettes . In some sectors , there would be occasional ceasefires to allow soldiers to go between the lines and recover wounded or dead comrades , while in others , there would be a tacit agreement not to shoot while men rested , exercised or worked in full view of the enemy . The Christmas truces were particularly significant due to the number of men involved and the level of their participation ? even in very peaceful sectors , dozens of men openly congregating in daylight was remarkable ? and are often seen as a symbolic moment of peace and humanity amidst one of the most violent events of human history .

= = Background = =

The first five months of World War I had seen an initial German attack through Belgium into France , which had been repulsed outside Paris by French and British troops at the Battle of the Marne in early September 1914 . The Germans fell back to the Aisne valley , where they prepared defensive positions . In the subsequent Battle of the Aisne , the Allied forces were unable to push through the German line , and the fighting quickly degenerated into a stalemate ; neither side was willing to give ground , and both started to develop fortified systems of trenches . To the north , on the right of the German army , there had been no defined front line , and both sides quickly began to try to use this gap to outflank one another . In the ensuing " Race to the Sea " , the two sides repeatedly clashed , each trying to push forward and threaten the end of the other 's line . After several months of fighting , during which the British forces were withdrawn from the Aisne and sent north into Flanders , the northern flank had developed into a similar stalemate . By November , there was a continuous front line running from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier , occupied on both sides by armies in prepared defensive positions .

In the lead up to Christmas 1914 , there were several peace initiatives . The Open Christmas Letter was a public message for peace addressed " To the Women of Germany and Austria " , signed by a group of 101 British women suffragettes at the end of 1914 as the first Christmas of World War I approached . Pope Benedict XV , on 7 December 1914 , had begged for an official truce between the warring governments . He asked " that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang . " This attempt was officially rebuffed .

= = Fraternisation = =

Fraternisation ? peaceful and sometimes friendly interactions between opposing forces ? was a regular feature in quiet front @-@ line sectors of the Western Front . In some areas , it manifested

simply as a passive inactivity , where both sides would refrain from overtly aggressive or threatening behaviour , while in other cases it extended to regular conversation or even visits from one trench to another .

Truces between British and German units can be dated to early November 1914 , around the time opposing armies had begun static trench warfare . At this time , both sides ' rations were brought up to the front line after dusk , and soldiers on both sides noted a period of peace while they collected their food . By 1 December , a British soldier could record a friendly visit from a German sergeant one morning " to see how we were getting on " . Relations between French and German units were generally more tense , but the same phenomenon began to emerge . In early December , a German surgeon recorded a regular half @-@ hourly truce each evening to recover dead soldiers for burial , during which French and German soldiers exchanged newspapers . This behaviour was often challenged by both junior and senior officers ; the young Charles de Gaulle wrote on 7 December of the " lamentable " desire of French infantrymen to leave the enemy in peace , while the commander of 10th Army , Victor d 'Urbal , wrote of the " unfortunate consequences " when men " become familiar with their neighbours opposite " . Other truces could be enforced on both sides by weather conditions , especially when trench lines flooded in low @-@ lying areas , though these often lasted after the weather had cleared .

The proximity of trench lines made it easy for soldiers to shout greetings to each other , and this may have been the most common method of arranging informal truces during 1914 . Men would frequently exchange news or greetings , helped by a common language ; many German soldiers had lived in England , particularly London , and were familiar with the language and the culture . Several British soldiers recorded instances of Germans asking about news from the football leagues , while other conversations could be as banal as discussions of the weather or as plaintive as messages for a sweetheart . One unusual phenomenon that grew in intensity was music ; in peaceful sectors , it was not uncommon for units to sing in the evenings , sometimes deliberately with an eye towards entertaining or gently taunting their opposite numbers . This shaded gently into more festive activity ; in early December , Sir Edward Hulse of the Scots Guards wrote that he was planning to organise a concert party for Christmas Day , which would " give the enemy every conceivable form of song in harmony " in response to frequent choruses of Deutschland Über Alles .

= = Christmas 1914 = =

Roughly 100 @,@ 000 British and German troops were involved in the unofficial cessations of hostility along the Western Front . The first truce started on Christmas Eve 1914 , when German troops decorated the area around their trenches in the region of Ypres , Belgium and particularly in Saint @-@ Yvon (called Saint @-@ Yves , in Plugstreet / Ploegsteert ? Comines @-@ Warneton) , where Capt. Bruce Bairnsfather described the truce .

The Germans placed candles on their trenches and on Christmas trees , then continued the celebration by singing Christmas carols . The British responded by singing carols of their own . The two sides continued by shouting Christmas greetings to each other . Soon thereafter , there were excursions across No Man 's Land , where small gifts were exchanged , such as food , tobacco and alcohol , and souvenirs such as buttons and hats . The artillery in the region fell silent . The truce also allowed a breathing spell where recently killed soldiers could be brought back behind their lines by burial parties . Joint services were held . In many sectors , the truce lasted through Christmas night , continuing until New Year 's Day in others .

On the day itself , Brigadier @-@ General Walter Congreve , then commanding 18 Infantry Brigade , stationed near Neuve Chapelle , wrote a letter recalling the Germans initiated by calling a truce for the day . One of his brigade 's men bravely lifted his head above the parapet and others from both sides walked onto no man 's land . Officers and men shook hands and exchanged cigarettes and cigars , one of his Captains " smoked a cigar with the best shot in the German army " , the latter no more than 18 years old . Congreve admitted he was reluctant to personally witness the scene of the truce for fear he would be a prime target for German snipers .

Bruce Bairnsfather , who served throughout the war , wrote :

I wouldn't have missed that unique and weird Christmas Day for anything I spotted a German officer , some sort of lieutenant I should think , and being a bit of a collector , I intimated to him that I had taken a fancy to some of his buttons I brought out my wire clippers and , with a few deft snips , removed a couple of his buttons and put them in my pocket . I then gave him two of mine in exchange The last I saw was one of my machine gunners , who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life , cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile Boche , who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck .

Future nature writer Henry Williamson , then a nineteen @-@ year @-@ old private in the London Rifle Brigade , wrote to his mother on Boxing Day : " Dear Mother , I am writing from the trenches . It is 11 o'clock in the morning . Beside me is a coke fire , opposite me a ' dug @-@ out ' (wet) with straw in it . The ground is sloppy in the actual trench , but frozen elsewhere . In my mouth is a pipe presented by the Princess Mary . In the pipe is tobacco . Of course , you say . But wait . In the pipe is German tobacco . Haha , you say , from a prisoner or found in a captured trench . Oh dear , no ! From a German soldier . Yes a live German soldier from his own trench . Yesterday the British & Germans met & shook hands in the Ground between the trenches , & exchanged souvenirs , & shook hands . Yes , all day Xmas day , & as I write . Marvellous , isn't it ? "

Captain Sir Edward Hulse reported how the first interpreter he met from the German lines was from Suffolk where he had left his girlfriend and a 3 @.@ 5 hp motorcycle . Hulse went on to describe a sing @-@ song which " ended up with ' Auld lang syne ' which we all , English , Scots , Irish , Prussians , Wurttenbergers , etc , joined in . It was absolutely astounding , and if I had seen it on a cinematograph film I should have sworn that it was faked ! "

Captain Robert Patrick Miles , King 's Shropshire Light Infantry , who was attached to the Royal Irish Rifles recalled in an edited letter that was published in both the Daily Mail and the Wellington Journal & Shrewsbury News in January 1915 , following his death in action on 30 December 1914 :

Friday (Christmas Day) . We are having the most extraordinary Christmas Day imaginable . A sort of unarranged and quite unauthorized but perfectly understood and scrupulously observed truce exists between us and our friends in front . The funny thing is it only seems to exist in this part of the battle line ? on our right and left we can all hear them firing away as cheerfully as ever . The thing started last night ? a bitter cold night , with white frost ? soon after dusk when the Germans started shouting ' Merry Christmas , Englishmen ' to us . Of course our fellows shouted back and presently large numbers of both sides had left their trenches , unarmed , and met in the debatable , shot @-@ riddled , no man 's land between the lines . Here the agreement ? all on their own ? came to be made that we should not fire at each other until after midnight tonight . The men were all fraternizing in the middle (we naturally did not allow them too close to our line) and swapped cigarettes and lies in the utmost good fellowship . Not a shot was fired all night .

Of the Germans he wrote : " They are distinctly bored with the war ... In fact , one of them wanted to know what on earth we were doing here fighting them . " The truce in that sector continued into Boxing Day ; he commented about the Germans , " The beggars simply disregard all our warnings to get down from off their parapet , so things are at a deadlock . We can't shoot them in cold blood ... I cannot see how we can get them to return to business . "

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (24 and 25 December) 1914 , Alfred Anderson ? s unit of the 1st / 5th Battalion of the Black Watch was billeted in a farmhouse away from the front line . In a later interview (2003) , Anderson , the last known surviving Scottish veteran of the war , vividly recalled Christmas Day and said :

I remember the silence , the eerie sound of silence . Only the guards were on duty . We all went outside the farm buildings and just stood listening . And , of course , thinking of people back home . All I ? d heard for two months in the trenches was the hissing , cracking and whining of bullets in flight , machinegun fire and distant German voices . But there was a dead silence that morning , right across the land as far as you could see . We shouted ? Merry Christmas ? , even though nobody felt merry . The silence ended early in the afternoon and the killing started again . It was a short peace in a terrible war .

Nor were the observations confined to the British . French Leutnant Johannes Niemann wrote : "

grabbed my binoculars and looking cautiously over the parapet saw the incredible sight of our soldiers exchanging cigarettes , schnapps and chocolate with the enemy . "

General Sir Horace Smith @-@ Dorrien , commander of the British II Corps , issued orders forbidding friendly communication with the opposing German troops . Adolf Hitler , then a young corporal of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry , was also an opponent of the truce .

In the Comines sector of the front there was an early fraternisation between German and French soldiers in December 1914 , during a short truce , and there are at least two other testimonials , from French soldiers , of similar behaviours in sectors where German and French companies opposed each other . Gervais Morillon wrote to his parents : " The Boches waved a white flag and shouted " Kamarades , Kamarades , rendez @-@ vous . " When we didn ' t move they came towards us unarmed , led by an officer . Although we are not clean they are disgustingly filthy . I am telling you this but don ' t speak of it to anyone . We must not mention it even to other soldiers . " Gustave Berthier wrote : " On Christmas day the Boches made a sign showing they wished to speak to us . They said they didn ' t want to shoot ... They were tired of making war , they were married like me , they didn ' t have any differences with the French but with the English . "

In sections of the front where German and Belgian troops faced each other in December 1914 , there was at least one such instance when a truce was achieved at the request of Belgian soldiers who wished to send letters back to their families , over the German @-@ occupied parts of their own country .

Richard Schirrmann , who was in a German regiment holding a position on the Bernhardstein , one of the mountains of the Vosges , wrote an account of events in December 1915 : " When the Christmas bells sounded in the villages of the Vosges behind the lines something fantastically unmilitary occurred . German and French troops spontaneously made peace and ceased hostilities ; they visited each other through disused trench tunnels , and exchanged wine , cognac and cigarettes for Westphalian black bread , biscuits and ham . This suited them so well that they remained good friends even after Christmas was over . " He was separated from the French troops by a narrow No Man 's Land and described the landscape as : " Strewn with shattered trees , the ground ploughed up by shellfire , a wilderness of earth , tree @-@ roots and tattered uniforms . " Military discipline was soon restored , but Schirrmann pondered over the incident , and whether " thoughtful young people of all countries could be provided with suitable meeting places where they could get to know each other . " He went on to found the German Youth Hostel Association in 1919 .

= = = Football matches = = =

Many accounts of the truce involve one or more football matches played in no @-@ man 's land . This was mentioned in some of the earliest reports , with a letter written by a doctor attached to the Rifle Brigade , published in The Times on 1 January 1915 , reported " a football match ... played between them and us in front of the trench . " A wide range of similar stories have been told over the years , often naming specific units or a precise score . Some accounts of the game bring in elements of fiction by Robert Graves , a British poet and writer who reconstructed the encounter in a story published in 1962 ; in Graves 's version , the score was 3 ? 2 to the Germans .

However , the truth of the accounts has been disputed by some historians ; in 1984 , Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton concluded that there were probably attempts to play organised matches which failed due to the state of the ground , but that the contemporary reports were either hearsay or refer to ' kick @-@ about ' matches with ' made @-@ up footballs ' such as a bully @-@ beef tin . Chris Baker , former chairman of The Western Front Association and author of The Truce : The Day the War Stopped is also skeptical , but says that although there is little hard evidence , the most likely place that an organised match could have taken place was near the village of Messines : " There are two references to a game being played on the British side , but nothing from the Germans . If somebody one day found a letter from a German soldier who was in that area , then we would have something credible . " In fact , there is a German reference . Leutnant Kurt Zehmisch of Germany 's 134th Saxons Infantry Regiment said that the English " brought a soccer ball from their

trenches , and pretty soon a lively game ensued . How marvelously wonderful , yet how strange it was . " In 2011 , Mike Dash concluded that " there is plenty of evidence that football 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 " .

A wide variety of units were reported in contemporary accounts to have taken part in games ; Dash listed the 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment pitched against " Scottish troops " ; the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders against unidentified Germans (with the Scots reported to have won 4 ? 1) ; the Royal Field Artillery against " Prussians and Hanovers " near Ypres ; and the Lancashire Fusiliers , based near Le Touquet , with the specific detail of a bully beef ration tin as the " ball " . One recent writer has identified 29 separate reports of football , though does not give substantive details .

= = = Eastern Front = = =

A separate manifestation of the Christmas truce in December 1914 occurred on the Eastern front , where the first move originated from the Austrian commanders , at some uncertain level of the military hierarchy . The Russians responded positively and soldiers eventually met in no man ? s land .

= = Public awareness = =

The events of the truce were not reported for a week , in an unofficial press embargo which was eventually broken by the New York Times , published in the then @-@ neutral United States , on 31 December . The British papers quickly followed , printing numerous first @-@ hand accounts from soldiers in the field , taken from letters home to their families , and editorials on " one of the greatest surprises of a surprising war " . By 8 January pictures had made their way to the press , and both the Mirror and Sketch printed front @-@ page photographs of British and German troops mingling and singing between the lines . The tone of the reporting was strongly positive , with the Times endorsing the " lack of malice " felt by both sides and the Mirror regretting that the " absurdity and the tragedy " would begin again .

Coverage in Germany was more muted , with some newspapers strongly criticising those who had taken part , and no pictures published . In France , meanwhile , the greater level of press censorship ensured that the only word that spread of the truce came from soldiers at the front or first @-@ hand accounts told by wounded men in hospitals . The press was eventually forced to respond to the growing rumours by reprinting a government notice that fraternising with the enemy constituted treason , and in early January an official statement on the truce was published , claiming it had happened on restricted sectors of the British front , and amounted to little more than an exchange of songs which quickly degenerated into shooting .

= = Later truces = =

After Christmas 1914 , sporadic attempts were made at seasonal truces ; a German unit attempted to leave their trenches under a flag of truce on Easter Sunday 1915 , but were warned off by the British opposite them , and later in the year , in November , a Saxon unit briefly fraternised with a Liverpool battalion . In December 1915 , there were explicit orders by the Allied commanders to forestall any repeat of the previous Christmas truce . Individual units were encouraged to mount raids and harass the enemy line , whilst communicating with the enemy was discouraged by artillery barrages along the front line throughout the day . The prohibition was not completely effective , however , and a small number of brief truces occurred .

An eyewitness account of one truce , by Llewelyn Wyn Griffith , recorded that after a night of exchanging carols , dawn on Christmas Day saw a " rush of men from both sides ... [and] a feverish exchange of souvenirs " before the men were quickly called back by their officers , with offers to hold a ceasefire for the day and to play a football match . It came to nothing , as the

brigade commander threatened repercussions for the lack of discipline , and insisted on a resumption of firing in the afternoon . Another member of Griffith 's battalion , Bertie Felstead , later recalled that one man had produced a football , resulting in " a free @-@ for @-@ all ; there could have been 50 on each side " , before they were ordered back .

In an adjacent sector , a short truce to bury the dead between the lines led to official repercussions ; a company commander , Sir Iain Colquhoun of the Scots Guards , was court @-@ martialled for defying standing orders to the contrary . While he was found guilty and reprimanded , the punishment was annulled by General Haig and Colquhoun remained in his position ; the official leniency may perhaps have been because he was related to H. H. Asquith , the Prime Minister .

In the Decembers of 1916 and 1917 , German overtures to the British for truces were recorded without any success . In some French sectors , singing and an exchange of thrown gifts was occasionally recorded , though these may simply have reflected a seasonal extension of the live @-@ and @-@ let @-@ live approach common in the trenches .

At Easter 1915 there were recorded instances of truces between Orthodox troops of opposing sides on the Eastern front . The Bulgarian writer Yordan Yovkov , serving as an officer near the Greek border at the Mesta river , witnessed one such truce . It inspired his short story ' Holy Night ' , translated into English in 2013 by Krastu Banaev .

= = Legacy and historical significance = =

Although the popular tendency has been to see the December 1914 Christmas Truces as unique and therefore of romantic rather than political significance , they have also been interpreted as part of the widespread non @-@ cooperation with the war spirit and conduct by serving soldiers . In his book on trench warfare , historian Tony Ashworth describes what he calls the ' live and let live system . ' Complicated local truces and agreements not to fire at each other were developed by men along the front throughout the war . These often began with agreement not to attack each other at tea , meal or washing times , and in some places became so developed that whole sections of the front would see few casualties for extended periods of time . This system , Ashworth argues , ' gave soldiers some control over the conditions of their existence . ' The December 1914 Christmas Truces then can be seen as not unique , but as the most dramatic example of non @-@ cooperation with the war spirit that included refusal to fight , unofficial truces , mutinies , strikes , and peace protests .

In the 1933 play *Petermann schließt Frieden oder Das Gleichnis vom deutschen Opfer* (Petermann makes peace : or , the parable of German sacrifice) , written by Nazi writer and World War I veteran Heinz Steguweit (German) , a German soldier , accompanied by Christmas carols sung by his comrades , erects an illuminated Christmas tree between the trenches , but is shot dead by the enemy . Later , when the fellow soldiers find his body , they notice in horror that enemy snipers have shot down every single Christmas light from the tree .

The 1967 song " Snoopy 's Christmas " by the Royal Guardsmen was based on the Christmas truce . As in real life , it is the Red Baron , Germany 's ace pilot and war hero , who initiates the truce with the fictitious Snoopy .

The 1969 film *Oh ! What a Lovely War* includes a scene of a Christmas truce with British and German soldiers sharing jokes , alcohol and songs .

The video for the 1983 song " Pipes of Peace " by Paul McCartney depicts a fictionalized version of the Christmas truce .

The final episode of the BBC television series *Blackadder Goes Forth* references the Christmas truce , with the main character Edmund Blackadder having played in a football match . He is also seen being annoyed at having had a goal disallowed for offside .

The song " All Together Now " by Liverpool band The Farm took its inspiration from the Christmas Day Truce of 1914 . The song has been re @-@ recorded by The Peace Collective for release in December 2014 to mark the centenary of the event .

The truce is dramatized in the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noël* (English : Merry Christmas) , depicted through the eyes of French , British and German soldiers . The film , written and directed

by Christian Carion , was screened out of competition at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival .

In 2008 , the truce was depicted on stage at the Pantages Theater in Minneapolis , in the radio musical drama All Is Calm : The Christmas Truce of 1914 . It was created and directed by Peter Rothstein , and co @-@ produced by Theater Latté Da and the vocal ensemble Cantus , both Minneapolis @-@ based organizations . It has continued to play at the Pantages Theater each December since its premiere .

Ahead of the centenary of the truce (December 2014) , English composer Chris Eaton and singer Abby Scott produced the song , 1914 ? The Carol of Christmas , to benefit British armed forces charities . At 5 December 2014 , it had reached top of the iTunes Christmas chart .

In 2014 , the Northumbria and Newcastle Universities Martin Luther King Peace Committee produced resources to enable schools and churches to mark the December 1914 Christmas Truces . These included lesson plans , hand @-@ outs , worksheets , PowerPoint slide shows , and full plans for assemblies , and carol services / Christmas productions . The authors explained that their purpose was both to enable schoolteachers to help children learn about the remarkable events of December 1914 , but also to use the theme of Christmas to provide a counterpoint to the UK government 's glorification of the First World War as heroic . As the Peace Committee argues , " These spontaneous acts of festive goodwill directly contradicted orders from high command , and offered an evocative and hopeful ? albeit brief ? recognition of shared humanity " ? and thereby , they argue , give a rereading of the traditional Christmas message of " on earth peace , good will toward men . "

The grocery chain Sainsbury 's produced a short film for the 2014 Christmas season as an advertisement re @-@ enacting the events of the Christmas truce , primarily following a young English soldier in the trenches .

= = = Monuments = = =

A Christmas truce memorial was unveiled in Frelinghien , France , on 11 November 2008 . Also on that day , at the spot where , on Christmas Day 1914 , their regimental ancestors came out from their trenches to play football , men from the 1st Battalion , The Royal Welch Fusiliers played a football match with the German Battalion 371 . The Germans won 2 ? 1 .

On 12 December 2014 , a memorial was unveiled at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire , England by Prince William , Duke of Cambridge and the England national football team manager Roy Hodgson . The Football Remembers memorial was designed by ten @-@ year @-@ old schoolboy Spencer Turner after a UK @-@ wide competition .

= = = Annual reenactments = = =

The Midway Village in Rockford , Illinois has hosted reenactments of the Christmas Truce .