

The Famous Christmas Truce of 1914

In the midst of heated battle during World War I, there was a brief moment of true “Peace on earth and good will toward men”. What follows is an incredible story of how the Spirit of Christmas overpowered, albeit temporarily, the hostilities of war.



During World War I, in the winter of 1914, on the battlefields of Flanders, one of the most unusual events in all of human history took place. The Germans had been in a fierce battle with the British and French. Both sides were dug in, safe in muddy, man-made trenches six to eight feet deep that seemed to stretch forever.



On Christmas Eve, German troops began decorating the area around their trenches in the region of Ypres, Belgium, for Christmas. They began by placing candles on trees, and then continued the celebration by singing Christmas carols, most notably “*Stille Nacht*” (Silent Night).

*“Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright...”*

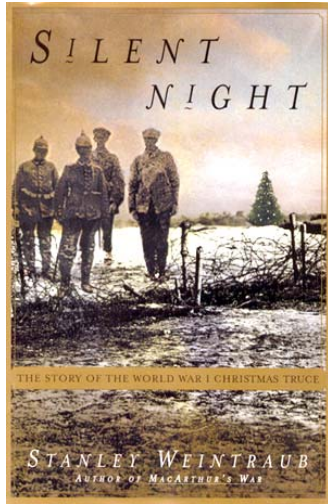
The Scottish troops in the trenches across from them responded by singing English carols.

The Germans then asked the British to join in. At this point, one very defiant Tommy shouted: “We’d rather die than sing German.” To which a German joked aloud: “It would kill us if you did.”

According to Stanley Weintraub, who wrote about this event in his book, *Silent Night*:

“Signboards arose up and down the trenches in a variety of shapes. They were usually in English, or - from the Germans - in fractured English. Rightly, the Germans assumed that the other side could not read their traditional gothic lettering, and that few English understood spoken German. ‘YOU

***NO FIGHT, WE NO FIGHT'* was the most frequently employed German message. Some British units improvised 'MERRY CHRISTMAS' banners and waited for a response. More placards on both sides popped up."**



A spontaneous truce resulted. Soldiers left their trenches, meeting in the middle to shake hands.

Along many parts of the line the truce was spurred on with the arrival of more Christmas trees – *Tannenbaum* on the German side. The sight these small pines, decorated with candles and strung

along the German parapets, captured the Tommies' imagination and prompted them to reciprocate with expressions of goodwill.

The two sides continued by shouting Christmas greetings to each other. Soon thereafter, there were calls for visits across the "No Man's Land" where small gifts were exchanged — whisky, jam, cigars, chocolate, and the like. The artillery fell silent as the soldiers exchanged their gifts, and sometimes addresses, as they drank together.

The truce also allowed a breathing spell where recently-fallen soldiers could be brought back behind their lines by burial parties. Proper burials took place as soldiers from both sides mourned the dead together and paid their respects. At one funeral in No Man's Land, soldiers from both sides gathered and read a passage from the 23rd Psalm:

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

In describing the following Christmas Day, a German soldier recorded in his diary:

"The English brought a soccer ball from the trenches, and pretty soon a lively game ensued. How marvelously wonderful, yet how strange it was. The English officers felt the same way about it. Thus Christmas, the celebration of Love, managed to bring mortal enemies together as friends for a time."



The truce spread to other areas of the lines, and there are many stories of spontaneous football matches between the opposing forces.

In many sectors, the truce lasted through Christmas night, but in some areas, it continued until New Year's Day.



The truce occurred in spite of opposition at the higher levels of the military. Earlier in the autumn, a call by Pope Benedict XV for an official truce between the warring governments had been ignored.

Unfortunately, the truce could not last. A British medical officer, who had received two barrels of beer from the opposing Saxon troops, wrote the following:

“At 8:30pm I fired three shots in the air and put up a flag with "Merry Christmas" on it, and I climbed on the parapet. He [the Germans] put up a sheet with "Thank you" on it, and the German Captain appeared on the parapet. We both bowed and saluted and got down into our respective trenches, and he fired two shots in the air, and the War was on again.”

Another British soldier wrote in his diary:

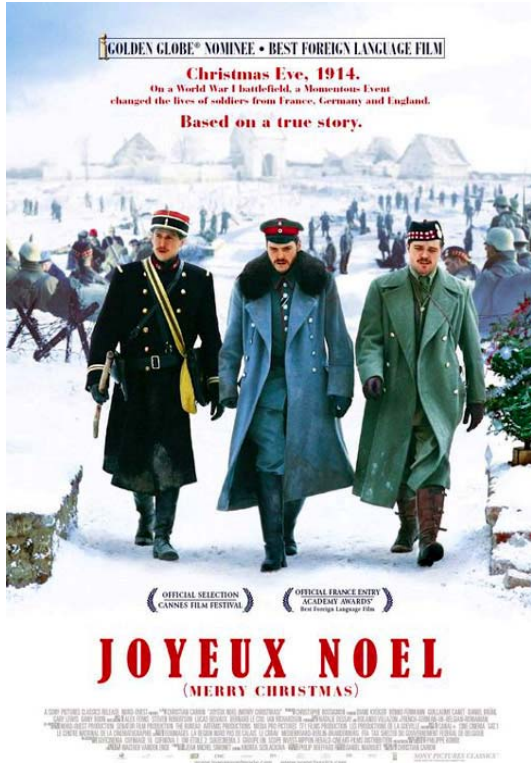
This will be the most memorable Christmas I've ever spent or likely to spend: since about tea time yesterday I don't think there's been a shot fired on either side up to now. Last night turned a very clear frost moonlight night, so soon after dusk we had some decent fires going and had a few carols and songs. The Germans commenced by placing lights all along the edge of their trenches and coming over to us—wishing us a Happy Christmas etc.

They also gave us a few songs etc. so we had quite a social party. Several of them can speak English very well so we had a few conversations. Some of our chaps went to over to their lines. I think they've all come back bar one from 'E' Co. They no doubt kept him as a souvenir. In spite of our fires etc. it was terribly cold and a job to sleep between look out duties, which are two hours in every six.



There must be something in the spirit of Christmas as today we are all on top of our trenches running about. Whereas other days we have to keep our heads well down. After breakfast we had a game of football at the back of our

trenches! We've had a few Germans over to see us this morning. They also sent a party over to bury a sniper we shot in the week. He was about a 100 yds from our trench. A few of our fellows went out and helped to bury him.



A movie, based on this true story, was made in 2005, which was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film of 2006.

Just before dinner I had the pleasure of shaking hands with several Germans: a party of them came halfway over to us so several of us went out to them. I exchanged one of my balaclavas for a hat. I've also got a button off one of their tunics. We also exchanged smokes etc. and had a decent chat. They say they won't fire tomorrow if we don't, so I suppose we shall get a bit of a holiday—perhaps. After exchanging autographs and them wishing us a Happy New Year we departed and came back and had our dinner.

We can hardly believe that we've been firing at them for the last week or two—it all seems so strange. At present it's freezing hard and everything is covered with ice...

The letter ends:

There are plenty of huge shell holes in front of our trenches, also pieces of shrapnel to be found. I never expected to shake hands with Germans between the firing lines on Christmas Day and I don't suppose you thought of us doing so. So after a fashion we've enjoyed(?) our Christmas.



British commanders eventually ordered their troops to resume firing at the enemy and vowed that no such truce would be allowed in the future. After all they were supposed to be at war. In the subsequent years of World War I, artillery bombardments were ordered on Christmas Eve to ensure that there were no further lulls in the combat. Troops were also rotated through various sectors of the front to prevent them from becoming overly familiar with the

enemy. Despite those measures, there were a few friendly encounters between enemy soldiers, but on a much smaller scale than in 1914.

The soldiers did resume shooting at each other; but only after, in a number of cases, a few days of wasting rounds of ammunition shooting at stars in the sky instead of at their new found friends in the opposing trenches.

For those few precious moments there was “peace on earth good will toward men” on that battlefield. There’s something about Christmas that changes people. As impressive as that event was, it can all be traced back to an even more powerful event that occurred 2,000 years ago in the town of Bethlehem. If we could find it in our hearts to celebrate the Spirit of Christmas every day of the year, rather than just one, the world would be a far better place.

*Jay Hardy
Christmas, 2008*



A memorial in Belgium marks the spot of the famous Christmas Truce. The inscription reads “1914, The Khaki Chums Christmas Truce, 1999, 85 years, Lest We Forget”