



During WWI, the bloodiest and most deadly and terrifying war that humanity had ever fought (at that point) included many new lows – the weaponry, the devastation, the drawn-out battles, with their trench-foot, shell shock, mustard gas, and despair. However, in such a “dark” moment of humanity also comes a shining bright light.

OBJECTIVES

- Identify the key events of the “Christmas Truce of 1914”
- Discuss what made this event both unique and powerful
- Share thoughts on the event
- *Terms:*
 - No Man’s Land
 - Stille Nacht
 - Soldier’s Truce
 - “Christmas Truce of 1914”
 - Peace on Earth, Goodwill toward Men



REMINDE ME...

- What made WWI particularly awful?
- Where was most of the “fighting” and how did that affect those who fought?
- How do you think the everyday Soldiers in the trenches felt about the war?
- What things unite *all* humanity?





A short WWI Christmas Truce Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWkBIAr0J94&t=1s>



December 1914 The British and German trenches were often so close that enemy soldiers could see each other and hear each other shout messages across. Often death meant merely raising one's head above the burm at the wrong spot or wrong moment. However, on a frosty Christmas Eve 1914, when soldiers were thinking of family at home, something amazing happened. It is described by a soldier from Gateshead, writing a letter on Christmas Day to a friend in Low Fell:

“Last night the Germans lit up their trenches and started calling across merry Christmas. We responded in the same way and then we started singing songs to one another, carols etc. All shooting had stopped. We walked about the tops of the trenches and called out to one another. Then some of our chaps walked out and met some of the Germans half way, wishing each other a merry Christmas, shook hands and said they would not fight today.”



This slide shows men of the German 134th Saxon Regiment and the British Royal Warwickshire Regiment in No Man's Land, on the Western Front. Soldiers met, gave each other presents, and shared food and drink. Before the war many Germans had worked in Britain as butchers and hairdressers, and there are accounts of Germans giving British soldiers haircuts in no-man's land!

In greater depth: "After the 19th December attack, we were back in the same trenches when Christmas Day came along. It was a terrible winter, everything was covered in snow, everything was white. The devastated landscape looked terrible in its true colours -clay and mud and broken brick- but when it was covered in snow it was beautiful. Then we heard the Germans singing 'Silent night, Holy night', and they put up a notice saying 'Merry Christmas', and so we put one up too.

While they were singing our boys said, 'Let's join in,' so we joined in and when we started singing, they stopped. And when we stopped, they started again. So we were easing the way. Then one German took a chance and jumped up on top of the trench and shouted out, 'Happy Christmas, Tommy!' So of course our boys said, 'If he can do it, we can do it,' and we all jumped up. A sergeant-major shouted 'Get down!' But we said, 'Shut up Sergeant, it's Christmas time!' And we all went forward to the barbed wire.

We could barely reach through the wire, because the barbed wire was not just one fence,

it was two or three fences together, with a wire in between. And so we just shook hands and I had the experience of talking to one German who said to me, 'Do you know where the Essex Road in London is?' I replied, 'Yes, my uncles had a shoe repairing shop there.' He said, 'That's funny. There's a barber shop on the other side where I used to work.'

They could all speak very good English because before the war, Britain was invaded by Germans. Every pork butcher was German, every barber's shop was German, and they were all over here getting the low-down on the country. It's ironic when you think about it, that he must have shaved my uncle at times and yet my bullet might have found him and his bullet might have found me.

Private Frank Sumter, London Rifle Brigade."



Over the previous months no-man's land had become scattered with the decaying corpses that it was unsafe to recover. Men used the truces to bury their friends, and also to mark Christmas as a joint religious festival with prayers, carols and Bible readings in both languages.

19 year-old Arthur Pelham-Burn, a lieutenant in the 6th Gordons who was planning to study to become a church minister after the war, took part in a joint service on Christmas Eve, and wrote home that:

The mass burial of the dead was 'awful, too awful to describe so I won't attempt it,' but the joint burial service was 'most wonderful. Chaplain Adams arranged the prayers and the twenty-third psalm etc and an interpreter wrote them out in German. They were read first by our Padre and then in German by a boy who was studying for the ministry. It was an extraordinary and most wonderful sight. The Germans formed up on one side, the English on the other, the officers standing in front, every head bared. Yes, I think it was a sight one will never see again.



Some letters written home by British and German soldiers claim that games of football were played in no-man's land.

Company-Sergeant Major Frank Naden wrote that after making friends:

“The Scotsmen started the bagpipes and we had a rare old jollification, which included football in which the Germans took part. The Germans expressed themselves as being tired of the war and wished it was over.”



British and German soldiers took photographs of each other, showed each other pictures of their families, and promised to stay in touch. A German soldier asked a British soldier to post a letter to his girlfriend in Manchester, which he later did. The Gateshead soldier wrote:

“One [German soldier] has given me his address to write to him after the war. They were quite a decent lot of fellows I can tell you. I know this seems an unbelievable story but it is fact. I am sure if it was left to the men there would be no war. “



However it wasn't left to the men: the heads of the British and German armies were angry that their men had stopped fighting and ordered them to start again. Many soldiers on both sides were reluctant to fight again. In some cases they pretended to fight, shooting at the 'enemy' when officers came to inspect them but missing on purpose or warning them in advance to keep a down. Some soldiers who didn't obey orders were punished and new soldiers sent to the trenches to fight.

Frank Naden wrote:

"Next day we got an order that all communication and friendliness with the enemy must stop but we did not fire at all that day, and the Germans did not fire at us."

Sergeant George Ashurst, 2nd Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, wrote:

Eventually, we got orders to come back down into the trench, 'Get back in your trenches, every man!' The order came round by word of mouth down each trench. Some people took no damn notice.

A soldier from Jarrow wrote a letter on Boxing Day about stopping fighting to celebrate Christmas with the Germans, but finished by adding:

"Now today it is different. Where we were at peace with them yesterday, we are at war today and the guns are roaring as usual and the rifles are being fired. It is a

queer time right enough!”

It was certainly strange to be fighting again: and the armies continued fighting until 1918, by which time around 10 million soldiers had died. High command sought to prevent future similar fraternisation by soldiers in future Christmases by issuing orders expressly forbidding it, and order attacks instead. Lance-Corporal George Dyce, who participated in the truces, said of the Germans,

‘They don’t want to fight any more than we do; they are as fed up of this game as we are fit to be. They told us that they would not shoot if we did not, so we have had a holiday for the last two days we were in the trenches... I thought peace was proclaimed, but no such luck.’

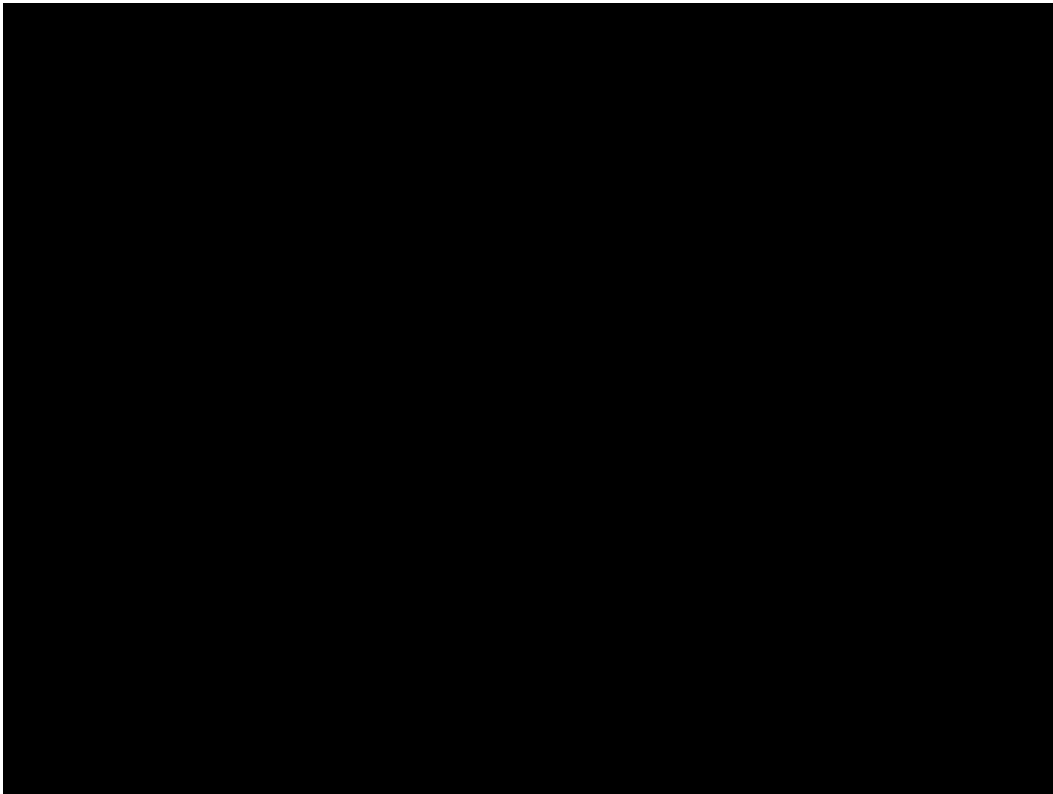


A short Christmas Ad that shows the comradery between two Soldiers – one German, one British, and the British soldier sacrifices the Christmas chocolate he's been given to his new German "friend"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KHoVBK2EVE>



The Christmas Truce of 1914 is a powerful and beautiful reminder that some issues go beyond wars, and cross political borders, and unite all of humankind. It may be like Francis Toliver wrote, “The ones who call the shots won’t be among the dead and lame and on each end of the rifle we’re the same.” Now, there are many, many noble reasons to go to war, and it is understandable that we may need to take up arms to defend all that we hold dear, but it is also vital that we remember that every war fought in human history was also fought BY humans, and that which unites us is more powerful than that which divides us, whether it be belief in a holy babe that has come to save and redeem, a belief that God cares so much about his people that we won’t allow their oil to burn out, or that a jolly fat man can fight diabetes and consumerism to bring gifts. The belief that humans can be better, do better, and live “better,” may be the biggest “miracle” of all. And the Truce of 1914 reminds me that when hands and shoulders touch, we get a glimpse at what “peace on earth” would truly mean – and we get a reminder that it can only come when we have good will towards men.



*This final slide is video footage from “Joyeux Noel” with a
song called “Christmas 1915” sung by CPT Curtis
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JG3l-OBdcPI>*