

Voices of the First World War: The Christmas Truce

A podcast from the Imperial War Museum

At Christmas 1914, an event occurred that was not repeated again during the First World War. An unofficial, spontaneous truce took place along some parts of the Western Front. It often started with a ceasefire as Christmas Day approached. German Army officer Walther Stennes recalled how, initially, this caused some concern.

On Christmas Eve at noon, fire ceased completely – on both fronts. Of course it was unusual that the opposite side also ceased fire. Then my officer controlling the sentries came in and said ‘Do you expect a surprise attack? Because it’s very unusual the situation.’ I said, ‘No I don’t think so. But anyhow everyone is awake, no one is sleeping and the sentries are still on duty. So I think it’s alright.’

British private Marmaduke Walkinton explained how the close proximity of the enemy led to increased communication between the two sides.

We were in the front line; we were about 300 yards from the Germans. And we had, I think on Christmas Eve, we’d been singing carols and this that and the other, and the Germans had been doing the same. And we’d been shouting to each other, sometimes rude remarks more often just joking remarks. Anyway, eventually a German said, ‘Tomorrow you no shoot, we no shoot.’ And the morning came and we didn’t shoot and they didn’t shoot. So then we began to pop our heads over the side and jump down quickly in case they shot but they didn’t shoot. And then we saw a German standing up, waving his arms and we didn’t shoot and so on, and so it gradually grew.



For Colin Wilson of the Grenadier Guards, the truce also started with carols. This was then followed by an invitation from the German troops opposite.

We heard a German singing Holy Night of course in German, naturally. Then after he'd finished singing there were all sorts of Christmas greetings being shouted across no man's land at us. These Germans shouted out, 'What about you singing Holy Night?' Well we had a go but of course we weren't very good at that. Anyway they said, 'Meet us and come over in no man's land.' Well after a time we were allowed – a limited number of us – our officers allowed a limited number of us to go into no man's land.

The attempts at fraternisation by German soldiers did not always meet with success. Clifford Lane remembered how he and his battalion, the 1st Hertfordshire Regiment, ignored such overtures.

Later on in the night there was a great deal of commotion going on in the German front line which was about 100, 150 yards away I suppose. And after a few moments there were lighted objects raised above the German parapet looking like Chinese lanterns to us. The Germans were shouting over to our trench, there's no doubt about that at all, and before we could take any action or do anything we were ordered to open rapid fire you see. Which we did. The Germans did not reply to our rapid fire they simply carried on with their celebrations, ignored us completely and were having a very fine time indeed. We never did anything else but simply continue in our wet trenches trying to make the most of a bad job.

On Christmas Day, Allied and German troops met in no man's land. German artillery officer Mr Rickner described celebrating with French soldiers.

I remember very well Christmas, I remember the Christmas Day when the German and the French soldiers left their trenches, went to the barbed wire between them with champagne and cigarettes in their hands and had feelings of fraternisation and shouted they wanted to finish the war and that lasted only 2 days 1 and a half really and then strict order came that no fraternisation was allowed and we had to stay back in our trenches.

The 6th Gordon Highlanders also took part in the truce, J Reid among them.

When we were on the line at Sailly, Christmas 1914, there was a bit of a truce there you know and the Germans stopped firing, we stopped firing. And we came out of the line and they came out of the line. And we were swapping tins of bully for their tins of meat and the padre was out having a talk with them, they were burying any dead that was there and we were burying any dead – this carried on for about a couple of days.

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When the two sides met, they often exchanged gifts and souvenirs. George Jameson recalled what his men returned with.

Keith and Philip Ridley, two of my section, came dashing into the billet during the morning and said, 'What do you know, the Jerries are out on the top; they're walking about, they're dishing out drinks and cigarettes – there's no fighting going on!' Well we'd noticed the place was very quiet. I said I don't believe it. I said well I can't go I'm duty bloke for the morning but hop off and see what you can find. So Keith and Philip and Lesley Wood went off and they arrived back around about lunchtime, Keith with one of the Landwehr hats on – the grey thing with the red band round the button – Philip had a water bottle. They'd had drinks, they'd had smokes and they'd been walking about. He said, 'You just wouldn't believe it!'

British soldiers who took part in the truce often remembered their conversations with the Germans. Archibald Stanley enjoyed speaking to them.

I tell you what happened on Christmas Day 1914, and people don't believe it. We had this unofficial truce. We met in no man's land on Christmas Day 1914. We shook hands – they were Saxons – and I heard one fellow talking English. I said to him, 'You speak English?' You know what he said? 'Cor blimey mate,' he said, 'I was in a London hotel when the war broke out!' I thought that topped it. He'd got the London accent...

Others had more serious exchanges, such as Henry Williamson of the London Regiment.

I talked to an officer the next day – because the truce went on for several days – and he said, 'You know, we could not have gone on in the First Battle of Ypres because you had so many reserves in your woods and so many automatischer pistol.' I said, 'Were your machine guns gone, all knocked out?' He said, 'Oh no, automatischer pistol' – it was our 15 rounds rapid. We also learned that many of the German mass attacks were made by boys, German students of 16/17, arm in arm with one rifle among three.



The high commands on both sides ordered an end to the truce when they heard of it. George Ashurst described how unpopular this made them.

We got orders come down the trench, 'Get back in your trenches every man,' by word of mouth down each trench; 'Everybody back in your trenches,' shouting. The generals behind must've seen it and got a bit suspicious so what they did, they gave orders for a battery of guns behind us to fire, and a machine gun to open out and officers to fire their revolvers at the Jerries. 'Course that started the war again. Ooh we were cursing them to hell, cursing the generals and that, you want to get up here in this stuff never mind your giving orders, in your big chateaux and driving about in your big cars. We hated the sight of the bloody generals.

The legend that built up around the truce over the years made some sceptical about it, including Harold Lewis of the Royal Field Artillery, stationed in Britain at Christmas 1914.

Although it would be arrogant to say that the thing didn't actually take place, I very much doubt whether anything of the nature or magnitude that have been claimed for it took place at all. And particularly because the two armies concerned, the German with that rigid discipline and our own with the finest discipline of a fighting force there was, are not likely to break that tradition. And if anybody tried, what were the NCOs doing? What were the officers doing? I think the whole thing borders on the fairytale and may be classed with the Russians with snow on their boots and the Angels of Mons.

Although the truce faded out after Boxing Day, on New Year's Eve H. Williams of the London Regiment encountered one German soldier still unwilling to return to a state of war.

This runner came along when I was on this fatigue job and said, 'You're wanted again to interpret.' I said, 'What is it this time?' He said, 'There's a drunk German in our trenches and he won't go back!' So I went up and saw our platoon officer there and he said, 'Williams, there's this chap here, he's drunk. I don't mind it's all very well to meet them in no man's land, but he's actually in our trenches.' Anyway this chap was standing there with a couple of bottles of beer wanting us to drink the health of the New Year and all the rest of it. He said, 'Tell him he's got to go back.' So I told him. He wouldn't take any notice he didn't want to go back. And this officer said, 'Well if he stops here, he's got to be made prisoner, ask him if he wants to be made prisoner!' So I did. 'Oh, was, Gott nein!' he said. He understood that, but he wouldn't go back. Eventually, the officer detailed another chap and me to take him back, so he was escorted there – one on each side and this chap staggering about and singing at the top of his voice. Well we got up to the German wire and I thought, 'Well I don't think I'll go right into their trenches, they might not be as lenient as we are.' Anyway we found a gap in the wire, headed him in the right direction and left him to it!

Voices of the First World War is a podcast series that reveals the impact the war had on everyone who lived through it through the stories of the men and women who were there.