

# The Christmas Truce

On the eve of the Truce, the British Army (still a relatively small presence on the Western Front) was manning a stretch of the line running south from the infamous Ypres salient for 27 miles to the La Basse Canal.

Along the front the enemy was sometimes no more than 70, 50 or even 30 yards away. Both the British and Germans could quite easily hurl greetings and insults to one another, and, importantly, come to tacit agreements not to fire. Incidents of temporary truces and outright fraternisation were more common at this stage in the war than many people today realise - even units that had just taken part in a series of futile and costly assaults, were still willing to talk and come to arrangements with their opponents.



As Christmas approached the festive mood and the desire for a lull in the fighting increased as parcels packed with goodies from home started to arrive. On top of this came gifts care of the state. The British received plum puddings and 'Princess Mary boxes'; a metal case engraved with an outline of George V's daughter and filled with chocolates and butterscotch, cigarettes and tobacco, a picture card of Princess Mary and a facsimile of George V's greeting to the troops. 'May God protect you and bring you safe home,' it said.

Not to be outdone, the Germans received a present from the Kaiser, the Kaiserliche, a large meerschaum pipe for the troops and a box of cigars for NCOs and officers. Towns, villages and cities, and numerous support associations on both sides also flooded the front with gifts of food, warm clothes and letters of thanks.

The Belgians and French also received goods, although not in such an organised fashion as the British or Germans. For these nations the Christmas of 1914 was tinged with sadness - their countries were occupied. It is no wonder that the Truce, although it sprung up in some spots on French and Belgian lines, never really caught hold as it did in the British sector.

With their morale boosted by messages of thanks and their bellies fuller than normal, and with still so much Christmas booty to hand, the season of goodwill entered the trenches. A British Daily Telegraph correspondent wrote that on one part of the line the Germans had managed to slip a chocolate cake into British trenches.

Even more amazingly, it was accompanied with a message asking for a ceasefire later that evening so they could celebrate the festive season and their Captain's birthday. They proposed a concert at 7.30pm when candles, the British were told, would be placed on the parapets of their trenches.

The British accepted the invitation and offered some tobacco as a return present. That evening, at the stated time, German heads suddenly popped up and started to sing. Each number ended with a round of applause from both sides.

The Germans then asked the British to join in. At this point, one very mean-spirited British soldier shouted: 'We'd rather die than sing German.' To which a German joked aloud: 'It would kill us if you did'.

December 24 was a good day weather-wise: the rain had given way to clear skies.

On many stretches of the Front the crack of rifles and the dull thud of shells ploughing into the ground continued, but at a far lighter level than normal. In other sectors there was an unnerving silence that was broken by the singing and shouting drifting over, in the main, from the German trenches.

Along many parts of the line the Truce was spurred on with the arrival in the German trenches of miniature Christmas trees - Tannenbaum. The sight these small pines, decorated with candles and strung along the German parapets, captured the British soldiers' imagination, as well as the men of the Indian corps who were reminded of the sacred Hindu festival of light.

It was the perfect excuse for the opponents to start shouting to one another, to start singing and, in some areas, to pluck up the courage to meet one another in no-man's land.

By now, the British high command - comfortably 'entrenched' in a luxurious châteaux 27 miles behind the front - was beginning to hear of the fraternisation.

Stern orders were issued by the commander of the British, Sir John French against such behaviour.

However, there were many high-ranking officers who took a surprisingly relaxed view of the situation. If anything, they believed it would at least offer their men an opportunity to strengthen their trenches. This mixed stance meant that very few officers and men involved in the Christmas Truce were disciplined.

Interestingly, the German High Command's ambivalent attitude towards the Truce mirrored that of the British.

Christmas day began quietly but once the sun was up the fraternisation began. Again songs were sung and rations thrown to one another. It was not long before troops and officers started to take matters into their own hands and ventured forth. No-man's land became something of a playground.

Men exchanged gifts and buttons. In one or two places soldiers who had been barbers in civilian times gave free haircuts. One German, a juggler and a showman, gave an impromptu, and given the circumstances, somewhat surreal performance of his routine in the centre of no-man's land.

Captain Sir Edward Hulse of the Scots Guards, in his famous account, remembered the approach of four unarmed Germans at 08.30. He went out to meet them with one of his ensigns. 'Their spokesmen,' Hulse wrote, 'started off by saying that he thought it only right to come over and wish us a happy Christmas, and trusted us implicitly to keep the truce. He came from Suffolk where he had left his best girl and a 3 ½ h.p. motor-bike!'

Having raced off to file a report at headquarters, Hulse returned at 10.00 to find crowds of British soldiers and Germans out together chatting and larking about in no-man's land, in direct contradiction to his orders.

Not that Hulse seemed to care about the fraternisation in itself - the need to be seen to follow orders was his concern. Thus he sought out a German officer and arranged for both sides to return to their lines.

While this was going on he still managed to keep his ears and eyes open to the fantastic events that were unfolding.

'Scots and Huns were fraternizing in the most genuine possible manner. Every sort of souvenir was exchanged addresses given and received, photos of families shown, etc. One of our fellows offered a German a cigarette; the German said, "Virginian?" Our fellow said, "Aye, straight-cut", the German said "No thanks, I only smoke Turkish!"... It gave us all a good laugh.'

Hulse's account was in part a letter to his mother, who in turn sent it on to the newspapers for publication, as was the custom at the time. Tragically, Hulse was killed in March 1915.

On many parts of the line the Christmas Day truce was initiated through sadder means. Both sides saw the lull as a chance to get into no-man's land and seek out the bodies of their compatriots and give them a decent burial. Once this was done the opponents would inevitably begin talking to one another.

The 6th Gordon Highlanders, for example, organised a burial truce with the enemy. After the gruesome task of laying friends and comrades to rest was complete, the fraternisation began.

With the Truce in full swing up and down the line there were a number of recorded games of soccer, although these were really just 'kick-about' rather than a structured match.

On January 1, 1915, the London Times published a letter from a major in the Medical Corps reporting that in his sector the British played a game against the Germans opposite and were beaten 3-2.

The Truce lasted all day; in places it ended that night, but on other sections of the line it held over Boxing Day and in some areas, a few days more. In fact, there parts on the front where the absence of aggressive behaviour was conspicuous well into 1915.

Captain J C Dunn, the Medical Officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, whose unit had fraternised and received two barrels of beer from the Saxon troops opposite, recorded how hostilities re-started on his section of the front.

Dunn wrote: 'At 8.30 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.'

The war was indeed on again, for the Truce had no hope of being maintained. Despite being wildly reported in Britain and to a lesser extent in Germany, the troops and the populations of both countries were still keen to prosecute the conflict.

Today, pragmatists read the Truce as nothing more than a 'blip' - a temporary lull induced by the season of goodwill, but willingly exploited by both sides to better their defences and eye out one another's positions. Romantics assert that the Truce was an effort by normal men to bring about an end to the slaughter.

In the public's mind the facts have become mythologized, and perhaps this is the most important legacy of the Christmas Truce today. In our age of uncertainty, it comforting to believe, regardless of the real reasoning and motives, that soldiers and officers told to hate, loathe and kill, could still lower their guns and extend the hand of goodwill, peace, love and Christmas cheer.

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22 August 2009

