



PEACE DAY CELEBRATION **Cycling / CHRISTMAS TRUCES**

The Christmas Truce(s) of December 1914

Introduction

In the first Christmas of the First World War (1914-1918), soldiers fighting in the trenches around Ypres, Belgium, held a truce. They set aside their weapons and met in 'No Man's Land'. The Christmas Truce, as this has come to be known, was unplanned and unexpected. It happened many times and in many places. German, French, British, Belgian and Indian soldiers met each other, exchanging gifts, signing songs, and even played football. It was an example of 'fraternisation' – when enemies met, shared comforts and even became friends – which naturally met with disapproval from military commanders.

Football was a very popular sport in Britain and Germany in the years before 1914. In January 1900 representatives from 86 football clubs founded the German Football Association (*Deutscher Fußball-Bund* - DFB), and the German national football team had represented Germany in international football competitions from 1908. In England there were Division 1 and Division 2 Championships and an FA Challenge Cup competition. The FA was in charge of football in England then, as it is now. While Britain and its allies were at war in 1914, football was still played at home.

Fighting

In the days before Christmas 1914 there was fierce fighting. British people at home were also suffering casualties, particularly in the coastal towns of Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool which were heavily shelled by German battle cruisers. On the Western Front December saw a number of offensives which resulted in many deaths. One of these attacks took place at Ploegsteert Wood on the afternoon of 18th December 1914, and many British soldiers were killed by artillery fire and many dead and wounded were caught on barbed wire in No Man's Land. When the attacks had finished a British officer observed that German soldiers climbed out of their trenches, unarmed, with their hands in the air. They began to collect the wounded and the dead, and encouraged the British to do the same.

Lieutenant Sir Edward Hulse, 2/Scots Guards (quoted in Malcolm Brown & Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce*, (London: Pan, 2001), p.45

The morning after the attack, there was an almost tacit understand as to no firing, and about 6.15am I saw eight or nine German shoulders and heads appear, and then three crawled out a few feet in front of their parapet and began dragging in some of our fellows who were either dead or unconscious [...] I passed down the order that none of my men were to fire and this seems to have been done all down the line. I helped one of the men in myself, and was not fired on, at all.

Tacit – *unspoken*

Parapet - *An earthen or stone embankment protecting soldiers from enemy fire*

Not everyone in the trenches wanted to take part in the truce. Shortly before Christmas 1914, front line Belgian troops stopped the advancement of the German invasion of their country and held on to a small part of their land. This victory was a huge source of national pride as Germany had invaded Belgium and any victory against the occupying force was to be celebrated. Michel Toudy was a Belgian soldier who fought on the Western Front from 1914 until he was killed by a grenade in July 1917.

The Diary of Michel Toudy (In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium)

Evening in the trenches at Dixmude... During the night of 24 – 25. Unusually not a single rifle shot is heard. What's going on? Could it be the end of the war?! Around 23.00 we hear the Germans who are singing amid the ruins of Dixmude and in the trenches. They are celebrating Christmas in our ruins. Around midnight, to show them that we are not discouraged, some grenadiers sing patriotic songs and Christmas carols. This lasts the whole night. It should be said that there are those who find this disturbing. From the first hours one asks what's happening, gentlemen the Germans are taking the liberty of walking about in front of us out of their trenches. If I had my way they wouldn't be strolling about for long, I would give them a taste of the delights of some machine gun bullets. But what can you



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do? All these grenadiers are also coming out of their trenches and the party begins. They push friendship a long way, all sorts of exchanges begin. The 'boche' throw us pipes, oranges, chocolate etc. Stolen probably from us, there

are fools who quite stupidly accept and also send them souvenirs. What do our top brass do here? They do nothing to stop this scandal, this first step to 'germanisation'.

Dixmude (French) / Diksmuide (Flemish) – Belgian city in West Flanders that was occupied by the Germans after a fierce battle in 1914.

Ruins of Dixmude – The town was badly damaged by the fighting in October and November 1914

Boche – slang for German soldier

Nauseating – sickening

Company Sergeant Major Frank Naden was a British soldier in the Cheshire Regiment. He wrote about witnessing the truce in a letter home which was then published in the *Edinburgh Evening News*, 2 Jan 1915, Pg. 3.

25 Dec 1914 – Wulverghem/Messines Road

On Christmas Eve, as each fireball went up from the German lines, our men shouted 'Hurrah' and 'Let's have another'. They also sang 'Christians Awake' and other Christmas hymns. On Christmas Day one of the Germans came out of the trenches and held his hands up. Our fellows immediately got out of their trenches and the Germans got out of theirs, and we met in the middle, and for the rest of the day we fraternised, exchanging food, cigarettes and souvenirs. The Germans gave us some of their sausages, and we gave them some of our stuff. The Scotsman started the bagpipes and we had a rare old jollification, which involved football, in which the Germans took part. The Germans expressed themselves as being tired of the war and wished it was over. They greatly admired our equipment and wanted to exchange jack knives and other articles. Next day we got an order that all communication and friendly intercourse with the enemy must cease, but we did not fire at all that day, and the Germans did not fire at us.

Fraternised – behaved in a friendly, brotherly way

Jollification – having a fun time

Jack knives – pen knives

Friendly intercourse – socialising

Lieutenant Johannes Niemann was a German soldier. He also described the truce and football match after the war.

... Our people had placed a fir tree with burning lights above the trenches and the English started shooting under the impression it was a trick. Once they realised it was a Christmas tree they ceased firing. After that not a single shot was heard all night. They even started singing Christmas songs over their side as if the conflict were transforming itself miraculously into a singing competition ... The next day the whole war seemed to be drowning in civil harmony ... at about midday ... friend and foe were outside together moving between the trenches. ... Was peace suddenly supposed to have 'broken out'? What was to be done? After a brief pause for thought, I and everyone else ran to join in. ... People everywhere were shaking hands. Opposite us were Scotsmen. Everyone swapped anything they had: tobacco, chocolate, ... There were joyous scenes everywhere ... then one Scotsman dragged along a football ... a proper football match began to evolve with caps laid down for goals. On the frozen field it had come to this. One of us had a camera on him. Both sides quickly formed into an orderly group, neat rows, the football in the middle ... the game ended 3:2 to Fritz.

Lieutenant – a senior soldier in charge of a platoon

Fritz and Tommy – slang for German and British soldiers

Walther Stennes was a German infantry officer who in 1914 was opposite Indian army trenches fighting with the British.

Actually, the whole thing was spontaneous action. And when I rushed out of the dugout I saw so many of my company standing in the open ... and on the other side also some Indian [soldiers] standing up and waving. Then the men hesitated [and] advanced to the middle. ... the whole No Man's Land was covered with Indian and German



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soldiers who shook hands and later on returned and fetch[ed] some small presents. ... We also talked as much as we could. English and German, but anyhow we understood each other. And - very interesting - people warned each other for the places where mines were laid. No body stepped on the mine... And of course everybody was unarmed...

That was given out as a rule. ... But the sentries were standing on duty; ready on both sides. Later on my men were in the British trenches, were fed there and had to drink and returned about 10 o'clock at night... They stayed there the whole afternoon with Indian troops. First, they tried to court martial us but then it has never been confirmed who actually started this business. The war carried on as if it hadn't happened.

Spontaneous – unplanned

Mine – a bomb placed in the ground, it explodes when someone stands on it

Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Across the Black Waters* (1939) features a scene describing how Indian soldiers on the Western Front took part in one of the Christmas Truces:

'Ohe look! Ohe look! Dayahan Singh interrupted him.

'There's a truly strange phenomenon.'

'What is it?' Lalu asked panting.

'Look there, in no-man's land', Dayahan Singh said. Lalu turned his head.

'To be sure, it is a strange phenomenon!' he said and, shading his eyes against the glare of the snow, peered deeper, into no-man's land. There were two English Ghoras and two German soldiers, shaking hands and talking to each other with gestures, even as they laughed little nervous chuckles which could be distinctly heard ... And now ... they were offering each other cigarettes ... what had happened? ... There had been no shelling this morning and he had heard the sound of singing in the Connaught's trenches while he had been talking to the sepoys ...

'What is the matter?' Dayahan Singh asked him.

More groups of Tommies and German soldiers were scrambling up from their respective trenches and running, hesitatingly, towards each other. [...] there were ripples of laughter going across no-man's land in spasmodic bursts making a mockery of war, then jubilant shouts from the various trenches.

Lalu scratched his head [...] presently he heard a loud exchange between a German and an English soldier and then saw the German rush out of the opposite saps, with a cake in his hand as if he were taking an offering to the temple.

'Oh! It is a cake', said Lalu laughing [...] 'A Christmas cake! ... It is the Christmas festival today and both the enemies being Christian by religion they are wishing each other a happy Christmas... [...]

'I am going to get some sweets from the enemy', said Dayahan Singh struggling to scramble over the parapet with terrific alacrity.

'Ohe ohe, look out' the sepoys called out after him.

'Go ahead! Go ahead!' Lalu spurred him on and even gave a shove to his heavy buttocks so that Dhayan Singh was on top.

After months of shells and grenades, rifle and machine gun fire, this simple antic of fat Dhayan Singh made them laugh. [...] And for a moment they seem to have caught the contagion of innocent humanity hanging in the air.

Sepoy – soldier in the ranks of the Indian Army equivalent to British 'private'

Phenomenon – a remarkable event

Spasmodic – intermittent, fitful bursts

Sap - a covered trench or tunnel dug to a point near or within an enemy position

Antic – a funny act or gesture

Contagion – a disease passed on by direct or indirect contact

Marcel Bechu was a French army officer who fought on the Western Front and survived the war. He describes how the Germans in the trenches opposite them wanted a truce at Christmas in 1914 but his battalion refused. (Marcel Bechu, *En campagne 1914-15*)

Seven in the morning. A shot fired not far from us... makes me leave my shelter. It seems extraordinary after the complete calm of the night. ...I notice all my fighters who .. [are] gazing with interest on a sight which is unfolding in front of the trenches ...Two men leave their trench in full daylight and are advancing with hesitant steps in the direction of the enemy trenches. Behind them 100 curious heads rise up above the fortifications formed by sacks of



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earth... This is certainly a scene that I was hardly expecting. What is the officer in charge of that trench doing? But my astonishment turns into stupefaction in seeing that the enemy trenches are crowned by hundreds of silhouettes. Immediately I send a subordinate to carry an order to our fighters. Let no one show himself! Everyone remain at his

post, rifles at the ready! The Germans opposite are wary, seeing that our line remains silent and that no one appears. ...But along the rest of their front the number of men emerging from the trenches multiplies. They are unarmed and make joyful & friendly gestures. Anxiety seizes hold of me. ...I admit that it is disagreeable to me to order fire against these unarmed men. On the other hand, can we tolerate the slightest reconciliation ... Happily, the officer who ... has followed this scene through his binoculars spares me from taking a decision which is upsetting to me. Bang! Bang! Bang! Four shells pass whistling overhead and explode with admirable precision two hundred metres above the German trenches. ...The Germans have perfectly understood this graceful warning. With cries of anger and protest they run to regain shelter and our Frenchmen do the same... Our troops cry 'Bravo!' Each one feels that the best solution has been taken and is delighted that the transitory Christmas truce is ended thus.....

Stupefaction – to be overwhelmed with amazement or stunned

Subordinate – a lower ranked soldier

Shells - bombs

Singing

Music was an established part of both civilian and Army life. Soldiers of all nationalities would sing during long marches or when at rest to entertain themselves and maintain their morale. As British and German troops dug in to their trench lines in the autumn of 1914 they would sometimes hold singing competitions where each side would attempt to drown out their opponents with their own singing or reply with another song sung more loudly. This common experience of music would be a central feature of the Christmas Truce. German troops are said to have begun to sing "Silent Night" (*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*) in the front line trenches on Christmas Eve.

Silent Night – English	Silent Night - German
Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright, Round yon Virgin Mother and Child! Holy Infant, so tender and mild, Sleep in heavenly peace! Sleep in heavenly peace! Silent night! Holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight! Glories stream from Heaven afar, Heavenly Hosts sing Alleluia! Christ, the Saviour, is born! Christ, the Saviour, is born!	Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, Alles schläft; einsam wacht Nur das traute hochheilige Paar. Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar, Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh! Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh! Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, Hirten erst kundgemacht Durch der Engel Halleluja, Tönt es laut von fern und nah: Christ, der Retter ist da! Christ, der Retter ist da! Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht Lieb' aus deinem göttlichen Mund, Da uns schlägt die rettende Stund'. Christ, in deiner Geburt! Christ, in deiner Geburt!



IWM: HU 35801 - The Christmas Truce 1914: German soldiers of the 134th Saxon Regiment photographed with men of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in No Man's Land on the Western Front.



IWM: Q 11745 - British and German soldiers fraternising at Ploegsteert, Belgium, on Christmas Day 1914.



The Sphere, 9th January 1915, front page