



German and British troops celebrating Christmas together during a temporary cessation of WWI hostilities known as the Christmas Truce. Mansell-The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

TIME

Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce of 1914

By Naina Bajekal
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On a crisp, clear morning 100 years ago, thousands of British, Belgian and French soldiers put down their rifles, stepped out of their trenches and spent Christmas mingling with their German enemies along the Western front. In the hundred years since, the event has been seen as a kind of miracle, a rare moment of peace just a few months into a war that would eventually claim over 15 million lives. But what actually happened on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day of 1914 – and did they really play soccer on the battlefield?

Pope Benedict XV, who took office that September, had originally called for a Christmas truce, an idea that was officially rejected. Yet it seems the sheer misery of daily life in the cold, wet, dull trenches was enough to motivate troops to initiate the truce on their own – which means that it's hard to pin down exactly what happened. A huge range of differing oral accounts, diary entries and letters home from those who took part make it virtually impossible to speak of a "typical" Christmas truce as it took place across the Western front. To this day historians continue to disagree over the specifics: no one knows where it began or how it spread, or if, by some curious festive magic, it broke out simultaneously across the trenches. Nevertheless,

some two-thirds of troops – about 100,000 people – are believed to have participated in the legendary truce.

Most accounts suggest the truce began with carol singing from the trenches on Christmas Eve, “a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere”, as Pvt. Albert Moren of the Second Queens Regiment recalled, in a document later rounded up by the *New York Times*. Graham Williams of the Fifth London Rifle Brigade described it in even greater detail:

“First the Germans would sing on of their carols and then we would sing one of ours, until when we started up ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ the Germans immediately joined in signing the same hymn to the Latin words Adeste Fideles. And I thought, well, this is really a most extraordinary thing- two nations both signing the same carol in the middle of a war.”

The next morning, in some places, German soldiers emerged from their trenches, calling out “Merry Christmas” in English. Allied soldiers came out warily to greet them. In others, Germans held up signs reading “You no shoot, we no shoot.” Over the course of the day, troops exchanged gifts of cigarettes, food, buttons and hats. The Christmas truce also allowed both sides to finally bury their dead comrades, whose bodies had lain for weeks on “no man’s land,” the ground between opposing trenches.

The phenomenon took different forms across the Western front. One account mentions a British soldier having his hair cut by his pre-war German barber; another talks of a pig-roast. Several mention impromptu kick-about with makeshift soccer balls, although, contrary to popular legend, it seems unlikely that there were any organized matches.

The truce was widespread but not universal. Evidence that in many places firing continued – and in at least two a truce was attempted but soldiers attempting to fraternize were shot by opposing forces.

And of course, it was only ever a truce, not peace. Hostilities returned, in some places later that day and in others not until after New Year’s Day. “I remember the silence, the eerie sound of silence,” one veteran from the Fifth Battalion the Black Watch, Alfred Anderson, later recalled to *The Observer*. “It was a short peace in a terrible war.” As the Great War resumed, it wreaked such destruction and devastation that soldiers became hardened to the brutality of the war. While there were occasional moments of peace throughout the rest of World War I, they never again came on the scale of the Christmas truce of 1914.

Yet for many at the time, the story of the Christmas truce was not an example of chivalry in the depths of war, but rather a tale of subversion: when the men on the ground decided they were not fighting the same war as their superiors. With no man’s land sometimes spanning just 100 feet, enemy troops were so close that they could hear each other and even smell their cooking. The commander of the British Second Corps, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, believed this proximity posed “the greatest danger” to the morale of the soldiers and told Divisional Commanders to explicitly prohibit any “friendly intercourse with the enemy.” In a memo issued on Dec. 5, he warned that: “troops in trenches in close proximity to the enemy slide very easily, if permitted to do so, into a ‘live and let live’ theory of life.”

Indeed, one British soldier, Murdoch M. Wood, speaking in 1930, said: "I then came to the conclusion that I have held very firmly ever since, that if we had been left to ourselves there would never have been another shot fired." Adolf Hitler, then a Corporal of the 16th Bavarians, saw it differently: "Such a thing should not happen in wartime," he is said to have remarked. "Have you no German sense of honor?"

Still, a century later, the truce has been remembered as a testament to the power of hope and humanity in a truly dark hour of history. It has been immortalized and fictionalized in children's novels like Michael Foreman's *War Game*, in films such as *Joyeux Noel* and *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and even in a controversial Christmas ad this year from Sainsbury's, a British supermarket chain. To mark the centenary this year, Prince William unveiled a memorial on Dec. 12: a metal frame representing a soccer ball, with two hands clasped inside it, and a week later, inspired by the events of the truce, the British and German army soccer teams played a friendly match. And though the Christmas Truce may have been a one-off in the conflict, the fact that it remains so widely commemorated speaks to the fact that at its heart it symbolizes a very human desire for peace, no matter how fleeting.

