

99 Years Ago: A Pause in the War on Christmas

By [David Swanson](#)

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[War is a Crime](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Frank Richards recalled:

“On Christmas morning we stuck up a board with ‘A Merry Christmas’ on it. The enemy had stuck up a similar one. Platoons would sometimes go out for twenty-four hours’ rest — it was a day at least out of the trench and relieved the monotony a bit — and my platoon had gone out in this way the night before, but a few of us stayed behind to see what would happen. Two of our men then threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads. Two of the Germans done the same and commenced to walk up the river bank, our two men going to meet them. They met and shook hands and then we all got out of the trench.

“Buffalo Bill [the Company Commander] rushed into the trench and endeavoured to prevent it, but he was too late: the whole of the Company were now out, and so were the Germans. He had to accept the situation, so soon he and the other company officers climbed out too. We and the Germans met in the middle of no-man’s-land. Their officers was also now out. Our officers exchanged greetings with them. One of the German officers said that he wished he had a camera to take a snapshot, but they were not allowed to carry cameras. Neither were our officers.



“We mucked in all day with one another. They were Saxons and some of them could speak English. By the look of them their trenches were in as bad a state as our own. One of their men, speaking in English, mentioned that he had worked in Brighton for some years and that he was fed up to the neck with this damned war and would be glad when it was all over. We told him that he wasn’t the only one that was fed up with it. We did not allow them in our trench and they did not allow us in theirs.

“The German Company-Commander asked Buffalo Bill if he would accept a couple of barrels of beer and assured him that they would not make his men drunk. They had plenty of it in the brewery. He accepted the offer with thanks and a couple of their men rolled the barrels over and we took them into our trench. The German officer sent one of his men back to the trench, who appeared shortly after carrying a tray with bottles and glasses on it. Officers of both sides clinked glasses and drunk one another’s health. Buffalo Bill had presented them with a plum pudding just before. The officers came to an understanding that the unofficial truce would end at midnight. At dusk we went back to our respective trenches.”

Bruce Bairnsfather remembered:

"The dawn of the 24th brought a perfectly still, cold, frosty day. The spirit of Christmas began to permeate us all; we tried to plot ways and means of making the next day, Christmas, different in some way to others. Invitations from one dug-out to another for sundry meals were beginning to circulate. Christmas Eve was, in the way of weather, everything that Christmas Eve should be.

"I was billed to appear at a dug-out about a quarter of a mile to the left that evening to have rather a special thing in trench dinners—not quite so much bully and Maconochie about as usual. A bottle of red wine and a medley of tinned things from home deputized in their absence. The day had been entirely free from shelling, and somehow we all felt that the Boches, too, wanted to be quiet. There was a kind of an invisible, intangible feeling extending across the frozen swamp between the two lines, which said 'This is Christmas Eve for both of us—*something* in common.'

"About 10 p.m. I made my exit from the convivial dug-out on the left of our line and walked back to my own lair. On arriving at my own bit of trench I found several of the men standing about, and all very cheerful. There was a good bit of singing and talking going on, jokes and jibes on our curious Christmas Eve, as contrasted with any former one, were thick in the air. One of my men turned to me and said:

"'You can 'ear 'em quite plain, sir!'

"'Hear what?' I inquired.

"'The Germans over there, sir; 'ear 'em singin' and playin' on a band or somethin'.'

"I listened;—away out across the field, among the dark shadows beyond, I could hear the murmur of voices, and an occasional burst of some unintelligible song would come floating out on the frosty air. The singing seemed to be loudest and most distinct a bit to our right. I popped into my dug-out and found the platoon commander."

"'Do you hear the Boches kicking up that racket over there?' I said.

"'Yes,' he replied; 'they've been at it some time!'

"'Come on,' said I, 'let's go along the trench to the hedge there on the right—that's the nearest point to them, over there.'

"So we stumbled along our now hard, frosted ditch, and scrambling up on to the bank above, strode across the field to our next bit of trench on the right. Everyone was listening. An improvised Boche band was playing a precarious version of 'Deutschland, Deutschland, uber Alles,' at the conclusion of which, some of our mouth-organ experts retaliated with snatches of ragtime songs and imitations of the German tune. Suddenly we heard a confused shouting from the other side. We all stopped to listen. The shout came again. A voice in the darkness shouted in English, with a strong German accent, 'Come over here!' A ripple of mirth swept along our trench, followed by a rude outburst of mouth organs and laughter. Presently, in a lull, one of our sergeants repeated the request, 'Come over here!'

"'You come half-way—I come half-way,' floated out of the darkness.

"'Come on, then!' shouted the sergeant. 'I'm coming along the hedge!'

“Ah! but there are two of you,” came back the voice from the other side.

“Well, anyway, after much suspicious shouting and jocular derision from both sides, our sergeant went along the hedge which ran at right-angles to the two lines of trenches. He was quickly out of sight; but, as we all listened in breathless silence, we soon heard a spasmodic conversation taking place out there in the darkness.

“Presently, the sergeant returned. He had with him a few German cigars and cigarettes which he had exchanged for a couple of Maconochie’s and a tin of Capstan, which he had taken with him. The séance was over, but it had given just the requisite touch to our Christmas Eve—something a little human and out of the ordinary routine.

“After months of vindictive sniping and shelling, this little episode came as an invigorating tonic, and a welcome relief to the daily monotony of antagonism. It did not lessen our ardour or determination; but just put a little human punctuation mark in our lives of cold and humid hate. Just on the right day, too—Christmas Eve! But, as a curious episode, this was nothing in comparison to our experience on the following day.

“On Christmas morning I awoke very early, and emerged from my dug-out into the trench. It was a perfect day. A beautiful, cloudless blue sky. The ground hard and white, fading off towards the wood in a thin low-lying mist. It was such a day as is invariably depicted by artists on Christmas cards—the ideal Christmas Day of fiction.



“Fancy all this hate, war, and discomfort on a day like this!” I thought to myself. The whole spirit of Christmas seemed to be there, so much so that I remember thinking, ‘This indescribable something in the air, this Peace and Goodwill feeling, surely will have some

effect on the situation here to-day!' And I wasn't far wrong; it did around us, anyway, and I have always been so glad to think of my luck in, firstly, being actually in the trenches on Christmas Day, and, secondly, being on the spot where quite a unique little episode took place.

"Everything looked merry and bright that morning—the discomforts seemed to be less, somehow; they seemed to have epitomized themselves in intense, frosty cold. It was just the sort of day for Peace to be declared. It would have made such a good finale. I should like to have suddenly heard an immense siren blowing. Everybody to stop and say, 'What was that?' Siren blowing again: appearance of a small figure running across the frozen mud waving something. He gets closer—a telegraph boy with a wire! He hands it to me. With trembling fingers I open it: 'War off, return home.—George, R.I.' Cheers! But no, it was a nice, fine day, that was all.

"Walking about the trench a little later, discussing the curious affair of the night before, we suddenly became aware of the fact that we were seeing a lot of evidences of Germans. Heads were bobbing about and showing over their parapet in a most reckless way, and, as we looked, this phenomenon became more and more pronounced.

"A complete Boche figure suddenly appeared on the parapet, and looked about itself. This complaint became infectious. It didn't take 'Our Bert' long to be up on the skyline (it is one long grind to ever keep him off it). This was the signal for more Boche anatomy to be disclosed, and this was replied to by all our Alf's and Bill's, until, in less time than it takes to tell, half a dozen or so of each of the belligerents were outside their trenches and were advancing towards each other in no-man's land.

"A strange sight, truly!

"I clambered up and over our parapet, and moved out across the field to look. Clad in a muddy suit of khaki and wearing a sheepskin coat and Balaclava helmet, I joined the throng about half-way across to the German trenches.

"It all felt most curious: here were these sausage-eating wretches, who had elected to start this infernal European fracas, and in so doing had brought us all into the same muddy pickle as themselves.

"This was my first real sight of them at close quarters. Here they were—the actual, practical soldiers of the German army. There was not an atom of hate on either side that day."

John McCutcheon reimagined:

<http://youtu.be/s9coPzDx6tA>

Joe Henry and Garth Brooks rediscovered:

http://youtu.be/1lktY_pDauY

Even Snoopy was inspired:

<http://youtu.be/MbhzqoYYROA>

And now, after 99 years, [what will we do?](#)

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David Swanson's new book is [War No More: The Case for Abolition](#). He blogs at

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