

The 1914 World War I Christmas Truce. Trenches and “No Man’s Land”

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Theme: [History](#)

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One hundred and eight years ago this Christmas Eve, The Great War, the “War to End All Wars” was in its fourth month. It had already bogged down into trench warfare.

For those unfamiliar with the term, it consisted of many miles of trenches on either side of “No Man’s Land,” a strip of land of varying width, cratered with shell holes, filled with broken equipment, concertina wire, bodies, wounded and dying men. The men of both sides lived pretty much in misery, soaking wet, feet rotting, hunkered down in their trenches.

The “strategy” was pretty simple. A General on one side or the other would order his troops to attack. They would charge into a storm of shot and shell trying to take the trenches of their opponents.



Often, they were beaten back with terrible losses. Sometimes they took their objective. Then the General of the other side would order his reserves to the front to counterattack. Often the “victors” would be driven back to their original trench lines. If they kept the captured trenches, the other side would build another trench line and No Man’s Land would be moved a few yards or a few hundred yards one way or the other.

On Christmas Eve, 1914, the front was fairly quiet. In one sector, both sides were celebrating Christmas as best they could. The Germans were singing Christmas Carols and had small trees decorated with candles in their trenches. The British and French heard them and began singing their own carols.

After a while, a lone German soldier entered No Man’s land, singing Silent Night and

carrying a lit Christmas tree. He placed it on the stump of a shattered tree and finished the carol. Nobody fired at him. A British officer climbed out of his trench and walked toward the young man. A German officer came from his line and they met and talked. It was decided that, though they would be shooting at each other the next day, that Christmas was something they could share.

Soon, Germans, French and British troops all met together! They shared their various liquors, tobacco and rations, showed photos of loved ones and of home. A soccer field was set up and soccer games were played, Germans vs the Allies.

Both sides discovered they were not fighting monsters, they were fighting people just like themselves, people waiting for the end of the war so they could go back home to their jobs and families.

Then, the Generals on both sides found out about the truce and ordered their men back to their own trenches. They forbade any "fraternization" with the enemy under threat of Courts-martial and a firing squad, and so the war dragged on for four more years and the death toll was in the millions. The devastation was unthinkable. The maimed and crippled were everywhere.

Finally, at Versailles, the armistice was declared and the troops could go home. Two decades later, an even more horrible war broke out and enveloped the world again.

I have often wondered what might have happened had the two armies enjoyed the truce, met their enemies and found them to be just like they were and decided to throw down their guns and go home. The truce could have spread like wildfire up and down the trench lines, and the war could have been over.

I can almost hear them slapping each other on the backs and saying, "If the Generals want this war so much, let them get in the trenches and fight each other. We're going home!"

What a different world this could have been.

Written on Christmas Eve 2014

'Twas a century ago this Christmas Eve
Heaven seemed to give the soldiers leave
Even to set their guns aside, and in friendship believe.

Christmas carols rang out across that blasted earth
Hungry and tired, both sides dreamt of home and hearth.
Rising from his trench, a young German walked into that No Man's Land;
In his hands was a candle lit Christmas tree, his song was of a silent night.
Still, no shots from the West. The song done, the tree planted on a shell-blasted stump,
Then, from both sides, officers walked to the tree and talked, a decision was made.
Men decided that, though soon they must kill again, Christmas should be a time of peace.
Along the front a truce was set. Men met, shared songs, rations, liquor and, family photos.
Soccer was the only war that night, Allies versus Germans, and no one knows who

“won.”

The night was filled with love and brotherhood, food and schnapps, brandy, rum and song.

Realizing that they were fighting “themselves,” too bad they didn’t throw down their guns.

Up and down the front it could have spread, troops throwing down their guns, marching home.

Calling out to the generals, if they truly wanted a war, to fight it out between themselves.

Ending four years of horror, before it had hardly begun.

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