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# The Christmas Truce



## Christmas in the Trenches

This is a true story about an extraordinary game of football (soccer) that took place 101 years ago. It happened on 25 December 1914 – Christmas Day. A Christmas which many children in Europe were spending without their fathers or older brothers.

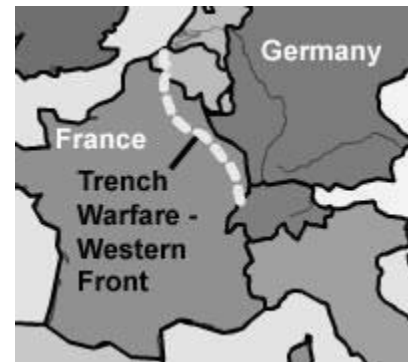
Earlier that year, in August, war had broken out right across Europe and around the world. Before long, all the most powerful countries of the world were involved in the war. At the time, people called it the Great War. Today, we know it as World War I.

Germany had invaded the country of Belgium. Britain (England) had agreed to help defend Belgium, and so hundreds of thousands of British soldiers had set sail for France.

The French and British stopped the Germans in September at the Battle of the Marne. But a counterattack failed. Soon, the two sides found themselves locked in a stalemate—neither side could defeat the other. Already, thousands of men had been killed, and hundreds of thousands more had been wounded. But neither side would give up.

Each side built a 400-mile long line of trenches, stretching from Switzerland to the English Channel. These deep trenches were dug to protect soldiers on both sides from the guns of the enemy.

Between the two armies was a barren stretch of ground called No Man's Land. It was not much wider than the length of a football field. In some places only thirty yards separated the troops. In these places, the opposing armies were so close to each other that soldiers of one side could hear their enemies on the other side talking.



At the start of the war, millions of men from all over Europe had responded enthusiastically to the calls of their leaders to enlist as soldiers. Most people thought it would be a short war, sure to be over by Christmas. Sadly, it went on for another three and a half years. By the war's end, millions of soldiers from around the world, and even more civilians, had died.

But, as that first war-time Christmas approached, the men stuck in the cold, muddy trenches must have been thinking about home and family, and wishing for peace.

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The British soldiers had been warned to stay alert on Christmas Eve. The army commanders were afraid that the Germans might launch a night-time attack. But, as the soldiers kept watch, they heard something which surprised them. It was not gunfire, but singing.



And then clusters of tiny lights appeared all along the German line. The German soldiers had placed Christmas trees, lit with candles, in front of their trenches.

Soon, the two sides were exchanging Christmas carols back and forth across No Man's Land.

As dawn broke, instead of the guns starting up once more there was a strange calm. Someone in the German trenches raised a board on which they had written the words, "You no fight, we no fight". Along the line, a German officer raised a white flag—a sign of truce (short pause in fighting).

Nervously, some British soldiers stood up above the trench—and nothing happened. Cautiously they began to advance, without their guns, towards German lines. The Germans, too, came forward and began to greet their enemies with warm handshakes. "Happy Christmas, Fritz!" and "Merry Christmas to you, too, Tommy."

By that afternoon, thousands of soldiers on both sides were talking and laughing and singing. Some showed their new friends' pictures of their loved ones. There was much swapping of small presents, such as cigarettes, tinned food, plum puddings, and even helmets!

Some Germans had been working in England just before the war, and one German soldier asked a British officer if he would take a letter back to his English girlfriend. Another German had been a barber in London and gave haircuts to several of the British soldiers.

Then, from somewhere, a ball bounced across the frozen mud. Soon, a fast and furious soccer match was underway. It was wonderfully disorganized. Goals were marked by soldier's caps. There was no referee and no score-keeping. But, everyone had a great time.

This truce had been started by ordinary soldiers not wishing to fight on Christmas Day. Many of the officers who were fighting with them joined in the truce, but the officers higher up were not at all pleased. They did not

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feel that being friendly with the enemy was a good idea—even at Christmas time. So, when the ball game came to an end, the soldiers on both sides were encouraged to go back to their trenches.

The next two days passed peacefully. Then a message was thrown over from the German side. The German soldiers had received orders to resume (start up again) the fighting.

That afternoon, the British were bombarded with heavy enemy fire for about an hour. At dawn the next day, the Germans mounted a full-scale attack.

The truce was over.

So, what did it all mean—this befriending of the enemy at Christmas time?

As for the fighting, of course, it meant very little. The German soldiers—although decent fellows—followed their orders and did as they were told.

And the British soldiers were there to stop them and send them home. This was their duty, and even after that remarkable Christmas, they remained determined to fight and win. [They did win. In April 1917, The United States entered the war on the side of the allies (Britain and France). The war ended in November of the following year.]

As for us today, this story of shared fellowship and goodwill should be a reminder that the best time for peacemaking is long before the fighting begins.