

The Great Christmas Truce of 1914

Peace on earth, goodwill toward men. This is the Christmas spirit, and it was never demonstrated more vividly than in the great Christmas truce of 1914. This is the tale of Christmas peace and goodwill that occurred in the most savage of settings -- the trenches of World War I.

The War

World War I was raging at a fevered pitch. At the time, it was the bloodiest war in human history. The Allied and German troops hunkered down in opposing trenches, living in filth and muck.

Periodically, one side would mount an offensive, and come swarming out of their trenches at the enemy. Thousands of men would die to advance the front a few feet. And then within days, thousands more would die as the other side mounted a counteroffensive to reclaim those few feet.

The brutality was unimaginable.

Much of the fighting was hand-to-hand with thrusting bayonets and point-blank rifle shots. Massive artillery barrages rained down death and destruction in deafening, terrifying volleys that lasted for hours on end. Poison gases were used indiscriminately, blistering the lungs and leaving men blind and helpless as they slowly died in agony.

The Story

One night in the winter of 1914, there was a lull in the fighting. The British and French troops were huddled in their trenches, and the Germans in theirs.

This night was Christmas Eve, and in the midst of the bloody carnage, the soldiers longed for some shred of normalcy. The German soldiers, risking death from snipers, began to scatter Christmas trees along the edges of their trenches. They lit the trees with candles, and began to sing Christmas carols. The British and French responded with their own carols.

The carols of cheer and peace drifted across No Man's Land, mingling in harmony where only hours before the blood of the men had mingled in savage violence.

Soon, the Germans began to propose a truce.

Shouts of "You no fight, we no fight!" arose from the German trenches in broken English. The same message was hastily scrawled upon signboards that were erected along the lines. Soon, shouts of "Truce" and "Merry Christmas" were echoing across No Man's Land from both sides.

And then it happened – the great Christmas truce.

Soldiers began to emerge from their trenches and advance toward each other, just as they'd done so many times before. But this time, they carried no rifles, no bayonets, no grenades, and no gas masks. This time, they advanced toward the enemy with messages of peace and joy replacing the hideous screams of rage and fear.

Gifts of tobacco, liquor, cakes and other precious commodities were exchanged, and spontaneous soccer games broke out. The Christmas truce lasted through the end of Christmas day, but the fighting soon resumed as commanders forced their troops to get back to the business of killing.

But it was a Christmas never to be forgotten by those who were there.

The Magic of Christmas

There really is something about Christmas. People seem a bit friendlier, a bit more tolerant. For an all-to-brief moment during that most wonderful time of the year, the world truly is a better place.

And no event in history more dramatically illustrated the magic of Christmas, and the longing in the soul of man for peace and goodwill, than the great Christmas truce of 1914.