

TRUCE

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The incident that triggered The Great War, later known as World War I, occurred on June 28, 1914 when Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip, a member of a group seeking to end Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia Herzegovina.

A month later on July 28 Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

Then, during the next three and one half months there were at least ten further declarations of war between European nations concluding on November 11 when Ottoman Turkish Sultan Mehmed V declared Jihad on the Allied powers.

As a result of these declarations of war the Central Powers consisting of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire battled the Allied Powers including, mainly, the United Kingdom and British Empire, Russia, France, Italy and, later, the United States.

The Great War resulted in some 38 million casualties including 17 million killed.

By fall 1914 the conflict had devolved into static trench warfare. The German and French and British 6'-8' deep trenches were separated by a distance ranging from 100' to 250 yards. The area between the trenches was called No Man's Land.

The trenches on the Western Front stretched some 466 miles from the English Channel through Belgium and France to the Swiss border. Neither side was yielding.

This static trench warfare continued until 1916 when the British and the French first utilized tanks which could cross 9' wide trenches and plow right through barbed wire.

In the meantime the British and the French on one side and the Germans on the other were forced to exist in fortified ditches described by German expressionist artist Otto Dix as:

"Lice, rats, barbed wire, fleas, shells, bombs, underground caves, corpses, blood, liquor, mice, cats, artillery, filth, bullets, mortars, fire, steel; that's what war is. It is the work of the devil."

Trench life was so miserable that British troops sang songs like:

"Send out my mother, my sister and my brother but for God's sake don't send me."

As the Holiday Season was approaching, Pope Benedict XV on December 7, 1914 pleaded for a Christmas truce: "That the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang," The warring nations rejected this plea.

However, on Christmas Eve a spontaneous truce between the battling troops in the trenches occurred. Some have labeled this event a miracle.

The truce was mainly between the Germans and the British. The French didn't participate so much as one third of their homeland was occupied by the German army.

There was no truce on the Eastern Front as the Russians still adhered to the old Julian Calendar in 1914 and didn't celebrate Christmas until January 7.

On Christmas Eve German soldiers started singing Stille Nacht (Silent Night); British troops responded with The First Noel.

The troops began shouting Christmas greetings across the No Man's Land between the trenches. German Saxon troops yelled: "We are Saxon, you are Anglo Saxon."

Not many Brits spoke German but a lot of Germans had jobs in the UK before the war and could speak English. One German soldier shouted: "Officer, I expect I know you- - I used to be the waiter at the Grand Central Hotel in London."

Scouts from each side met cautiously in No Man's Land and said: "If you do not fire on us, we will not fire on you."

At dawn on Christmas Day British troops noticed that the Germans had placed small Christmas trees along the parapets of their trenches.

In the trenches occupied by the Royal Welsh Fusiliers Captain Stockwell climbed up on the parapet, fired 3 shots in the air, and raised a flag with Merry Christmas on it. Then his opposite number Hauptmann von Sinner appeared on the German parapet and both officers bowed and saluted. Von Sinner also fired shots in the air.

During this spontaneous Christmas truce troops from both sides emerged from their trenches into No Man's Land and exchanged schnapps, food, cigars and souvenirs.

Pig roasts and singing occurred up and down the British/German front.

Soccer games broke out including one between the 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment and Scottish troops. Caps were laid out as goals. Sometimes a real soccer ball somehow appeared and in other instances any manner of things including sandbags were utilized.

There were boxing matches. A British soldier got a haircut from a pre-war German barber.

The higher up officers on both sides strongly disapproved of this fraternization. Even a lowly Corporal condemned it.

Corporal Adolph Hitler of the 16th Bavarians refused to join the Christmas celebrations. He stated: "Such a thing should not happen in war time. Have you no German sense of honor?"

Also, the young Charles de Gaulle wrote of the "lamentable" desire of French infantrymen to leave the enemy in peace at Christmas.

In most sectors of the Western Front the war resumed on December 26 although the truce lasted as long as New Year's Day in some places. Although there were a few sporadic truces at Christmas in 1915 for most troops there would be no further truce until the general armistice on November 11, 1918 when the Great War finally ended. Many, likely a majority of the thousands of troops who participated in the 1914 Christmas truce, would not survive to see the return of peace. But, for those who did live the truce would never be forgotten.

In 2017, over 100 years later, Prince William, grandson of British Queen Elizabeth II, unveiled a memorial to the Christmas Truce in Staffordshire, England. It consists of a metal frame representing a soccer ball with two hands clasped inside and one week later British and German soccer teams played a friendly match.

In 2014 the Cincinnati Opera performed the opera Silent Night to commemorate this, dare I say, miraculous 1914 truce.