

The Christmas Truce



The infamous Christmas Truce of 1914 was an impromptu and unofficial ceasefire that took place on a number of battlefields in the space between each side's trenches — known as 'No Man's Land' — during the First World War.

Background

The First World War began in July 1914 and lasted until November 1918. By December 1914 – which was the first Christmas during the war – hostilities between The Allies and Germany were showing no signs of stopping. When the war first began, many people in Britain believed that it would be 'over by Christmas'. However, five months in, soldiers were entrenched in muddy ditches and bunkers and were spending all their days and nights in the cold, unsanitary conditions.

The pope at the time, Pope Benedict XV, implored European leaders to consider a ceasefire by asking "that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang". Despite the leaders of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) disagreeing with it, many of the soldiers on both sides wanted to call a truce on Christmas Day.

The Ceasefire

On Christmas Eve, German soldiers could be seen emerging cautiously and hesitantly from their sunken trenches waving their arms in a gesture of peace. The British troops observed that the men were not carrying weapons and men from both sides began to congregate in the centre of No Man's Land and fraternise with one another. They exchanged festive greetings in their native tongues and even bestowed gifts, for example many British gave chocolate to the German soldiers and some Germans gave sausages to the British. They also had a funeral service for those soldiers who had died and buried them alongside each other.

On Christmas Day, another unique event occurred: several football matches were played between German and British troops. One of these impromptu games reportedly began when a British soldier kicked a football out of his trench. The German soldiers proceeded to join in and the match commenced. It is reported that Germany won the match 3-2!



Nevertheless, such appeals for peace were ignored; the Allied Forces were warned that the Germans might plan an attack on Christmas Eve in the hope that they would continue to fight. However, late on Christmas Eve, the sound of Christmas carols and patriotic singing could be heard from the German troops. The Allied troops also caught sight of small fir trees and lanterns illuminating the German trenches.



This Christmas truce was not observed everywhere; fighting continued in many other places over the festive period. The High Command (the commander-in-chief and other senior staff of the armed forces) on both sides were resentful of the ceasefire so, at midnight, they lit a flare to signal that the truce was over and that fighting must begin again. By Boxing Day, the majority of the fighting had resumed on the battlefields. However, in some places, the fighting did not start again until New Year's Day.

After the Truce

The remarkable story of the Christmas Truce was so hard for people back home to believe that many initially thought it to be a myth. It was only when photographs emerged of German and British troops standing shoulder to shoulder that people were able to believe that this dramatic shift in conduct and break in aggression had actually occurred.

Although many had hoped the First World War would be over by Christmas, it continued for another three and a half years; during which time, there were many casualties. What is more, High Command put measures in place to ensure that this one-off truce was never again repeated. Nevertheless, many soldiers engaging in trench warfare abided by an unwritten 'live and let live' system. This meant that there were agreed temporary ceasefires in order to rebuild damaged trenches and attend to wounded soldiers in No Man's Land.

This unique event remains a subject of great interest and has been documented in films, referenced in songs and even featured in Christmas TV adverts.

Questions

1. Which word from the first paragraph suggests that the Christmas Truce was not planned for? Tick one.

- impromptu
- infamous
- unofficial
- ceasefire

2. Which of the following is **not** mentioned in the text as having happened during the Christmas Truce? Tick one.

- The soldiers played football.
- The soldiers had photographs taken together.
- The soldiers ate a Christmas dinner in No Man's Land.
- The soldiers gave each other presents.

3. How did the High Command on both sides signal that the truce was over?

4. Find and copy a phrase from the text which means 'the language of a country that someone is born in'.

5. Give **two** adjectives used to describe what it was like in the trenches during the First World War.

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6. **Pope Benedict XV, implored European leaders to consider a ceasefire...**

What does the word 'implored' mean in this sentence?

7. Why do you think that the Christmas Truce was never repeated?

8. Who has the author written this text for? Explain your answer.

9. How do you think that the soldiers on both sides would have been feeling at Christmas?

10. Use 20 words or fewer to summarise what you have learnt about the Christmas Truce.
