



Christmas in the Trenches

The only thing separating the two armies on that cold December night in 1914 was a barren stretch of muddy ground called No Man's Land. It was in this setting that the miracle began. A faint sound of singing cut through the frosty air.

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht...

Then other voices joined in.

Silent night, holy night.

For a brief time the enemies stopped fighting and behaved as friends. As many as 100,000 soldiers are assumed to have participated in what became known as the unofficial Christmas Truce.

It was a grand human moment.

The presents had been opened and dinner was over. After a long walk through the snow-covered fields, young Thomas Tolliver curled up next to his grandfather and announced, "Grandpa, this was my very favorite Christmas. Do you have a favorite Christmas?"

“Yes, Thomas, I do,” said Grandpa Francis. “I was far away from our home here in Liverpool. It was a Christmas many years ago during the first winter of the Great War.”

“You were in the war, Grandpa?” chirped little Nora, climbing onto his lap. “What was it like? Were you a hero?”

Grandpa smiled.

“Let’s see,” he said. “Why don’t I start at the beginning?”

The two children snuggled closer.



“It was 1914. My mates and I had been on the battlefield for many weeks... We were all so young... just boys... lonely and frightened, trying to be brave. We had spent a long, cold month in the muddy trenches that were now our home. We all knew that there would be no break in the fighting. We knew we would be spending Christmas in the trenches.

That Christmas Eve was a night like tonight.

The skies were clearing and frost covered No Man’s Land, the field that separated us from the German soldiers. Staring out toward the enemy trenches, we waited.

Between the bombs and the battles, war is mostly waiting. Waiting to see who will make the next move. That night we figured it would be the Germans. And we were right.

Suddenly a sentry signaled for silence. We all hushed. A ghostly sound cut through the cold night air.



Singing! It was coming from the enemy's side of No Man's Land!

One of the lads who knew German said, "It's a Christmas carol. He's singing right well, you know..." Soon, it seemed, every German voice joined in.

When they were finished, what could we do? We sang right back at them! "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." All of us knew that one.

Then they sang something familiar. We couldn't understand the words... *Stille Nacht*... but we knew the melody. It was "Silent Night." And suddenly in two tongues one song filled the night sky. I never imagined singing could seem so... holy.

"Someone's coming toward us!" the front-line sentry cried.

As we aimed our rifles into the December darkness, we saw a most amazing sight.

A single man was coming across No Man's Land. In one hand he held a white truce flag, in the other a Christmas tree shining with candles.



It was so surprising and so brave I couldn't help myself. I leapt from the trench and walked toward him. I was the first one. But soon everyone from both sides was out there too.



It was all so new and strange, we were nervous at first. Before long, though, we were trading small gifts—chocolates, tins of meat, whatever we had to share.

When we began showing each other photographs from home, we were no longer soldiers, no longer enemies. We were all just sons and fathers far away from our families and loved ones.

Our lad Sanders brought out his squeezebox. One of their boys joined in on a nice violin. And someone had... a ball.



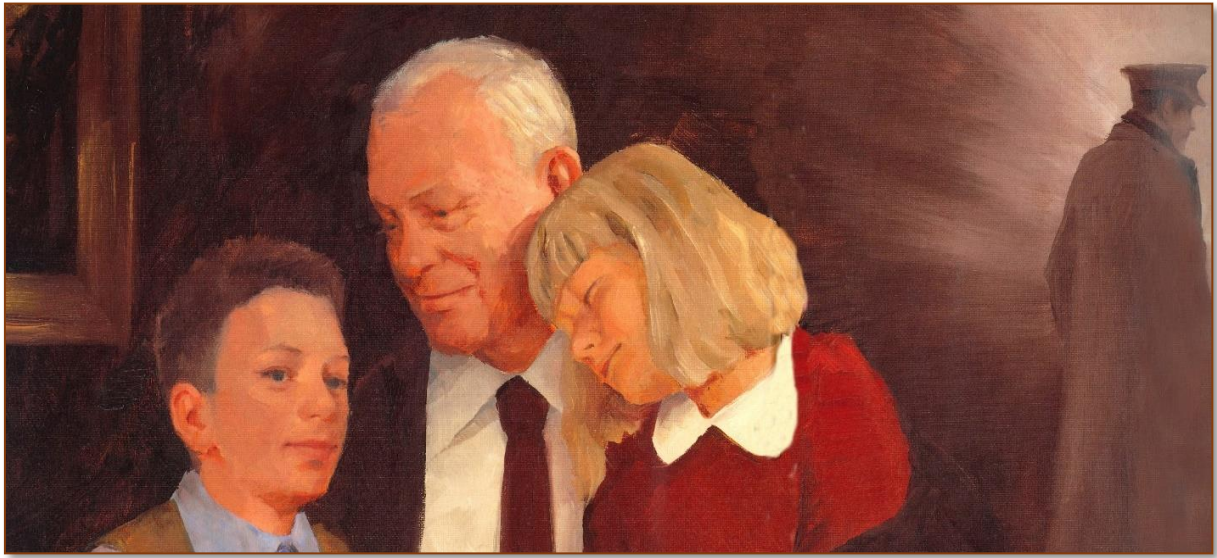
It was quite the Christmas party we had! But all too soon the dawn reminded us it was time to get back to our own sides.

Back to the trenches.

Back to the waiting.

Wondering what had just happened to us and wondering what the next move should be.

That was my favorite memory—that Christmas in the trenches. I'm a different man today because of the boy I was that night."



Grandpa hugged the children tighter.

“Was I a hero? Ah... for just one night, yes. We were all heroes.”



HISTORICAL NOTE

Although *CHRISTMAS IN THE TRENCHES* is a fictional account, the Christmas Truce of 1914 really happened. It was a series of events occurring along the front line that stretched over 400 miles, through eastern France, from the Belgian coast in the north to the Swiss border in the south.

Four months earlier at the start of World War I (or the Great War, as it came to be known), millions of men from all over Europe had responded enthusiastically to the calls of their leaders to enlist. Most people believed it would be a short war, sure to be over by Christmas. But as winter began, thousands of soldiers had been killed or wounded and the ugly reality of the battlefield had set in.

By December 1914, the Allied forces (Belgium, France, and Britain) were locked in a stalemate with the Germans, each side hoping to wait the other out. The troops were shielded by hastily dug trenches. These narrow ditches, although deeper than the height of a standing soldier, provided little protection from the bitter cold of that winter.

Between the two armies was a barren stretch of ground called No Man's Land, generally wider than the length of two football fields. In some places, only 30 yards separated the entrenched troops. In these spots, they were so near that soldiers on one side could hear their enemies on the other side talking.

From such close quarters, many of the troops must have wondered what the men across the way were really like. Were they content to be stuck in these cold, muddy trenches fighting in the name of the Kaiser or the Queen, or wouldn't they prefer to be at home?

As Christmas Eve approached, many soldiers must have been thinking about home and peace. Some had received packages from their families filled with holiday offerings. Even the royal families of Britain and Germany had shipped gifts to their troops. And Germany had sent Christmas trees to their men on the front lines.

All along the trenches, remarkable things began to happen. In the midst of a terrible war, men willed the fighting to stop, even if only for a few hours. As many as 100,000 may have participated in the unofficial truces that Christmas.

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