

The Christmas Truce

Part 1

This is a true story about something that happened a little over 100 years ago—on Christmas in 1914. The world looked very different then. But in some ways it was just the same as it is now. The world was full of conflict and war. In fact, World War I is still the biggest and most costly war that has ever been fought. More people died in World War I than in any war before or since. People believed that war was so awful that nothing like it could ever happen again.

This is a story of something that happened on Christmas in the middle of that war. It's a story about how some people learned that the real miracle of Christmas comes in very small ways.

We know about the events of this story from newspapers and letters that came home from soldiers on both sides of the war. Their stories were retold over many generations. This story was shared publicly by Walter Cronkite some years ago.

The early 1900's brought huge possibilities and promise to the world. Children who were born in those days—early in the 20th century—saw more changes and more improvement in the human condition than any generation that had ever lived before in the world's history. In the hundred years of the 20th century, advances in medicine, science and industry made huge steps toward eradicating disease, extending human life, opening dialogue among peoples all over the earth, changing the ways we communicate with one another, and lifting the accomplishments of human beings all the way into space.

But all those possibilities were dim—they seemed very far away, even impossible—as Christmas drew near in 1914. All the nations of Europe were at war. Those governments were anxious to expand and defend their borders, and so all their best and brightest young men and women were sent to fight or to help. Literally *millions* of young men were drafted into armies. Young women went to work as nurses and factory workers and office assistants, to help the war effort—in every country of Europe. And every day—every day—during the four years of that war, 10,000 people died.

A nineteen year-old German boy who had immigrated to England left his job in London to enlist in the German army, for his family and his ancestors. English boys working and studying in Hamburg and Paris returned to London to put on the British uniform, and then they went back to the places they had just been, sometimes to shoot their former friends.

In England there was no draft, so the country depended on young men to enlist. The British Secretary of War, Lord Kitchener, expanded the army overnight by letting boys who had gone to school together enlist together. When they signed up, those boys dreamed of glory and victory, but tragedy is what they saw, most of the time. Small villages on both sides of the war would lose almost all their young men in a single battle. Every British soldier carried a little booklet that included his last will and testament. Over the course of the war, thousands of those

booklets were collected from the bodies of young boys. Some of those wills said simple things, like, “I leave everything to my mother.”

Historians now think this war was mostly about nothing. But because the war was so large, and killed so many people, from all sides, it became known as the Great War.

Like this century, the 20th century brought a different kind of warfare than anyone had fought before. Guns and tanks were stronger, more powerful, than they had ever been. The commanders out in the field quickly realized that digging into the ground—building bunkers that the soldiers could hide behind and underneath—was the only way for their troops to survive the sweep of machine-gun fire.

And so, as that Christmas came in 1914, the world was a very dark and dangerous and troubled place...

Part 2

This story happened in a place called Flanders, in Belgium, right in the middle of Europe. The German army had marched all the way across Belgium from the East, but they were stopped at Flanders Field. About sixty yards away, British, French and Belgian troops were trapped in trenches they had dug to protect themselves. These holes in the ground were infested with rats and lice; but the soldiers had no other protection, nowhere else to go. Inside the bunkers, they were pelted with freezing rain. Sometimes the bullets whizzed over their heads; a few still hit them. It was December. Temperatures dropped. It was so cold, and the soldiers began to get sick. If someone raised his head above the walls of the trench, almost immediately a shot would be fired at him. The war was just four months old, and already each side was losing thousands of soldiers every day—sometimes to bullets, and sometimes to an enemy that attacked both sides of the war: influenza, which was a particularly deadly strain of the flu.

There at Flanders, in between the trenches the soldiers faced each other from, there was an area about the width of a football field. They called it No Man’s Land. That field that is now filled with poppies was then full of trash: barbed wire, and even bodies that had frozen before they could be moved. It *looked* like a picture of the land of death. Soldiers who came back from that battle later talked about so many dead bodies, that they gathered them up and stacked them like cords of wood. During the whole war, more than half a *million*—500,000—soldiers were killed at Flanders Field. They were fighting over a two-mile stretch of land.

The most famous poem of World War I was written by a soldier who fought there. The poem is called *In Flanders Field*. Here is just a little piece of it:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

During the battles there, many of the soldiers clung to their faith. They asked God to just help them get through and get home. On Sundays, soldiers on both sides passed communion to each other in the trenches. Often they could hear the sound of church bells ringing in the villages nearby. Once in a while you could hear, even across enemy lines, the sound of the soldiers singing a hymn.

Many of the soldiers had started their service thinking, hoping, that the war would be over very quickly—and that their side would win, of course. But that hope had faded away by the time December came. The soldiers were cold and hungry. The nights were long. All they wanted was to go home.

On December 23, a group of German soldiers quietly moved to the ruins of a monastery that had been bombed out, and they held an early Christmas Eve service there. Later that night, they began to put up a few Christmas trees along the bunkers and trenches that they had built to protect themselves. *Tannenbaums*, those trees are called in German. From far away, the troops on the other side could see tiny candles flickering on the trees.

From across the no man's land, British soldiers saw those lights. Those lights reminded them of Christmas at home. So they began to sing the Christmas carols that they knew from home. They whispered to one another, "Look! Look!" and they began to put their heads up to peek carefully over the sandbags to see now *thousands* of tannenbaums—German Christmas trees—glowing with what looked like little stars on them.

Part 3

And then, on Christmas Eve, two British officers did something very dangerous and very daring. They walked across that middle space—the no man's land—against orders. They talked with the leaders of the German troops. And they arranged a truce—an agreement that the fighting would temporarily stop for Christmas day. But even before they finished their negotiations, soldiers from up and down the trenches, from both sides, began celebrating Christmas. First they shared with each other—the people on their own side—the presents they had received from home. On either side of that no man's land, they threw British cakes and German chocolate from one trench to another.

And then, one German soldier threw his boot across to the British trench. And when it landed it exploded with all the things it had been stuffed with: sausages and chocolate and cigars.

It became kind of a game. One soldier wrote a letter home to his mother that night and said, "We are going to attack the enemy with every song and Christmas carol we know." The Germans responded with a Christmas concert of their own. Every Christmas carol you can imagine: *The First Noel*, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, *Joy to the World*, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*—every Christmas carol, in every language, sung by those soldiers.

For two days, there was no shooting—only singing, only good wishes. No matter how separated they were by war, those soldiers knew they were connected to everyone else on Flanders Field.

There was a soccer game. The soldiers contributed whatever food they had, and they made a Christmas dinner that they shared together.

A newspaper reporter who was there reported later that at one point, the soldiers heard a lovely, clear voice sing *O Holy Night*. Only later did they realize that it was the voice of a famous Paris opera singer, who had been drafted into the war. They had been enemies, but just for just a little while, all those young men felt the Christmas spirit of hope and peace and love for even those who fought on the other side of war.

Finally, the dawn came on Christmas morning. Trusting they would not get shot, soldiers from both sides carefully went into the muddy field between their lines. They stepped carefully around the barbed wire; and side by side, they buried their dead—all together, in one field. You can still go to that field and see all the crosses above the graves, and red poppies grow all around them. But that day, there was only mud and snow.

One German officer gave a British lieutenant a Christmas gift—a letter and cross that had belonged to another British soldier who had died. The lieutenant gave the German officer his own silk scarf. A German soldier pulled out a picture of himself in his uniform and asked some of the British troops to send it to his sister who lived in Liverpool.

Men who had shot at each other just a few days before gathered together for a worship service to remember the soldiers who had died. Some said prayers. One read the twenty-third Psalm:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
...Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

The Germans formed up on one side; the English on the other; the officers stood in front. Every hat was off; every head was bared.

As that Christmas day drew to a close, the soldiers who had sung together, played together, and prayed together returned to their own trenches. It must have been very hard for them to let that common ground between them become a No Man's Land again. But as the darkness fell around them, they heard a single voice float across the field they had stood on together.

[*Silent Night* in German]

In the true spirit of Christmas, another voice joined in.

[*Silent Night* in English]

And then another, and another...

Soon, the whole world seemed to be singing. And for a brief moment, the sound of peace was a carol that every one of them knew by heart.

When the truce was over, and the soldiers from both sides returned to their trenches after that Christmas day, the generals commanded them to resume shooting at each other. It took those generals a while to figure out that all the bullets were going up into the clouds. The soldiers who had shared Christmas with one another would not fire at those who had become their brothers in the celebration of a holy day that was all about love and peace. The war could not continue until replacements were rotated in, on both sides.

Do you think Christmas could change us in the same way?