

Christmas Truce in WWI Revisited

Last month we remembered the ending of WWI and those who fought in the war. A year ago, I wrote about the Christmas Truce that happened during WWI. It is a fitting ending to the war, even though there are several versions of if it happened and what happened, if it did. I did some more research and here is the version I found. As we know between 1914 and 1918 more than 25 million people were wounded or killed. During the first Christmas of the war, for a brief few hours, men on both sides on the Western Front laid down their arms, emerged from their trenches and shared food, Christmas carols, games and comradeship. The truce was unofficial, many officers disapproved and headquarters on both sides took strong steps to make sure it never happened again.

About 8:30pm on Christmas Eve an officer of the Royal Irish Rifles reported to headquarters that “Germans have illuminated their trenches, are singing songs and wishing us a Happy Xmas. Compliments are being exchanged but am nevertheless taking all military precautions.” Along the line, the two sides serenaded each other with carols, the Germans with Silent Night and the British with The First Noel. According to a war diary of one of the Scots Guards “met a German patrol and was given a glass of whisky and some cigars and a message was sent back saying that if we didn’t fire at them, they would not fire at us”. Another soldier from Britain reported “Come out, English soldier; come out here to us.’ For some little time we were cautious, and did not even answer. Officers, fearing treachery, ordered the men to be silent. But up and down our line one heard the men answering that Christmas greeting from the enemy. How could we resist wishing each other a Merry Christmas, even though we might be at each other’s throats immediately afterwards? So we kept up a running conversation with the Germans, all the while our hands ready on our rifles. Blood and peace, enmity and fraternity—war’s most amazing paradox. The night wore on to dawn—a night made easier by songs from the German trenches, the pipings of piccolos and from our broad lines, laughter and Christmas carols. Not a shot was fired.”

One of the theories proposed by some is that soldiers on both sides believed that the war would be over by Christmas and yet, they found themselves in trenches in snow and rain still fighting with no end of the war in site. After several weeks of this miserable weather, on Christmas Eve there was a hard frost, with a dusting of snow and frost on the trees, giving the impression that something spiritual was taking place.

The Christmas Truce occurred only on the Western Front and even there, not all of the front saw a truce. The Russians, on the Eastern Front, still used the old Julian calendar which had Christmas a couple weeks later, therefore no truce. Happy holidays to all.