

Soldiers Hold Their Fire on Christmas Day

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The London Times

VERDUN, France – Soldiers on both sides of the trenches met together yesterday in what is being called the “Christmas Day Truce.” Reports from the field indicate that up and down the Western Front thousands of men laid down their weapons, sung songs, exchanged gifts, and buried their dead.

British chief intelligence officer John Charteris said that while the British command did not condone this fraternizing with German troops, the spontaneous show of good will could not be stopped. “What were we going to do?” he asked. “It would have been ludicrous to shoot our own soldiers.”

Still, the British minister of war, Alfred Milner, said that the war would continue Christmas truce or not. “We are still at war with the Huns,” he said. “We have to remember that the Germans violated Belgium neutrality, slaughtered innocents as they marched into France, and continue to do so on the front lines today.”

The truce began, according to sources, when German soldiers along the northern end of the front began erecting makeshift Christmas trees along trenches and began singing “Stille Nacht” (Silent Night). Rifleman Graham Williams said that once the Germans finished singing this song, British troops responded by singing “The First Noel.” “First the Germans would sing one of their carols and then we would sing one of ours. I thought, well, this was really a most extraordinary thing – two nations both singing carols in the middle of a war,” Williams said.

In addition to the singing, soldiers also performed shows and buried their dead. According to one unconfirmed report, a German soldier gave an impromptu juggling show, much to the delight of soldiers on both sides of the line. Men also exchanged gifts and buttons, according to Captain Sir Edward Hulse. “It was truly extraordinary,” Hulse said.

Casualties had also been mounting on both sides, since the war had settled into a stalemate along the Marne River in early November. So both sides welcomed the chance to properly bury their fallen comrades. “We said the 23rd Psalm, once in English and once in German, and then we laid our dead to rest,” division commander Roger Turley said.

Why this all occurred may be explained in part by the attitudes of the soldiers on both sides. “This is a war of our leaders, not of ourselves,” Charles Sorley, a 19-year-old volunteer from Sussex, said.

“Our chief enemy is nettles and mosquitoes, not the German we are fighting against.”

Perhaps alcohol played a role, too. Christmas eve was cold, with temperatures hovering near freezing for much of the night. Camp fires were built, but many also took comfort in drink. “We were all moved and felt quite melancholy,” German soldier Herbert Sulzbach said. “Yes we were drinking, but we also thought about our families that we had left behind and the promise that this damned war would be over by Christmas.”

Whatever the reason for the truce, soldiers on both sides reported that they welcomed the cessation in artillery fire and what seems to them futile advances into fields strewn with bodies and barbed wire. Even the Indian conscripts in the British divisions, for whom Christmas isn’t a day of usual celebration, found the scene much to their liking. “This reminded us of a sacred Hindu festival of light,” artillery commander Kamal Sitka said.

All of this occurred in direct contradiction to orders from the high command. “We ordered our men to stop, and some did,” Hulse said. “But, truly, like in past conflicts, this was probably just a temporary aberration of our normal hostilities.”

Indeed this wasn’t the first time that British soldiers and others had ceased fighting during wartime. In 1854, soldiers on both sides of the Crimean War reportedly shared the same campfires along the Black Sea and smoked and drank together.

Still, this was an unusual day marking a conflict that has been one of the most bloody our continent has seen. Losses on both sides have been high, with the British Expeditionary Forces losing nearly 50,000 soldiers and the Germans losing twice that number since hostilities began in August. France has also suffered too, and not just with the decimation of their land, but also in number of lives lost: an estimated million dead or wounded in just the first four months of this conflict.

(716 words)

Sources

The Great War (Jay Winter)
GCSE book
BBC web site
Firstworldwar.com
wikipedia

Lead gives the who, what, where, when, why, how of the story

Use real names where possible

Use both direct and indirect quotes.

Use real quotes where possible and useful.

Include history research.

Make up quotes that reveal actual history.

Make connections to other relevant historical events.

All stories should place your story in the context of the entire war experience.