

A Christmas miracle

- the true story of the 1914 temporary truce

The meeting in France just before Remembrance Day this year between two former enemies, now both well over 100-years-old, who survived the Great War prompted Trentham historian Graham Bebbington to write about two Staffordshire soldiers who took part in that day long truce.

During Christmas 1914 large numbers of British and German troops sang carols to each other and fraternised openly on areas on the Western Front.

Yet subsequently the episode was dismissed by some Tommies as a 'latrine rumour' on account they perhaps had not shared the experience, whilst others were ordered not to comment on the affair.

So it tended to become regarded as a myth of the time, somewhat like the 'Angel of Mons' story.

Nevertheless the Christmas truce of 1914 is no legend, as some locals were able to testify, having witnessed some of the rather bizarre events which occurred.

Fraternising in No Man's Land

Also, throughout January 1915, numerous British newspapers printed evidence in the form of letters from soldiers who had participated, together with photographs of troops of opposing sides fraternising in No Man's Land.

Similarly, some magazines such as *The Illustrated London News* carried evocative drawings of incidents based on details supplied by troops at the Front.

Surprisingly, at the time, there does not appear to have been any attempt at censorship.

Unfortunately, the episode was subsequently superseded by more sombre reports and headlines, and eventually the story of the truce developed something of a legendary quality.

For some weeks prior to the Christmas period it had rained relentlessly on the Western Front making life, according to some, 'pretty rough.' Trenches were flooded to a depth of two feet or more in places and, at



Captain R J Armes, centre front, whose letters home to his wife in North Staffordshire told of the incredible scenes on the Western Front during Christmas 1914 - photograph courtesy of the Staffordshire Regimental Museum



Christmas Truce witness Arthur Greasley, photographed when serving in the Territorial after World War I - photograph loaned by Mrs Gloria Kinnersley

times, all military operations were brought to a standstill as a result of the ensuing mud.

By contrast, on December 24, weather conditions had improved to the extent of being described as 'perfect for a Christmas card.'

Frosts had transformed the landscape with mud hardened and pools frozen.

According to military historians Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton (*Christmas Truce*, Pan Books) the air was 'sharp and bracing, anaesthetising the usual trench smells of chloride of lime, soaked clothing, gunsmoke and decay.'

It really was a beautiful day.

Songs from the German front lines

In the evening, instead of the all too familiar gunfire, music could be heard coming from the German front line.

By chance, at this time, the 1st Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment was in the trenches in the Rue Du Bois area, generally known as 'Dead Man's Alley.'

Among their personnel was Captain (later Colonel) R. 1. Armes who subsequently wrote to his wife of 'the most extraordinary scenes imaginable.'

The Germans had lit their trenches up all along the front and were shouting 'no shooting.'

Some British troops cautiously got out of their trenches, sat on the parapet and the Germans did the same and they conversed in English.

Captain Armes asked in German if they would sing a Volkslied (folk song) which

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS.

No. 1051

SATURDAY, JANUARY 9, 1915.

SIXPENCE

The writer gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Staffordshire Regiment Museum, Lichfield and Mrs Gloria Kinnersley in compiling this article

they did and then the British responded with both sides applauding each other.

Meanwhile, in another section, in response to the German carol 'O Tannenbaum' the British struck up somewhat irreverently with 'We are Fred Karno's army' sung to the tune of 'The Church's One Foundation.'

Eventually, Captain Armes walked into No Man's Land and had a conversation with his German counterpart in which he also gave permission for the burial of the dead whose bodies were strewn between the two factions.

They also agreed that there would be no shooting until midnight on the following day.

Die Wacht Am Rhein

The Germans then sang 'Die Wacht Am Rhein' with the British responding with 'Christians Awake' following which they exchanged souvenirs before returning to their respective trenches.

Subsequently, Captain Armes wrote of the 'curious scene on a lovely night . . . it was weird to think that tomorrow we shall be at it hard again. If one gets through this show, it will be a Xmas time to live in one's memory.'

On that same day, Shelton born Arthur Greasley of the Royal Corps of Signals had been to Armentieres to attend the court martial of a fellow soldier.

The weather was 'bitterly cold with about half an inch of frost' he noted in his diary, and we were 'frozen to the marrow.'

On returning to his unit then in the firing line trenches, he also witnessed German troops walking into No Man's Land and wrote of meeting them halfway 'shaking hands and exchanging souvenirs.'



The front cover of The Illustrated London News, Saturday, January 9, 1915, showing British and German troops meeting in No Man's Land

Christmas Day dawned unnaturally quiet and everywhere a layer of white hoar frost etched the landscape.

Greetings were shouted across in many areas of the Front and later men from both sides started to walk, unarmed, and with white flags, into No Man's Land.

Here they worked together to sort out and bury their dead.

Veterans, had recalled the unaccustomed silence - 'it was so quiet, it was uncanny, there were no planes overhead, no observation balloons, no bombs, no rifle fire, therefore no snipers, just an occasional lark overhead.'

Some exchanged family photographs and gifts with the enemy and cigars, sauerkraut, cognac and schnapps were among items which suddenly appeared in the British trenches.

Later in the day fraternisation took on some rather bizarre forms including entertainment

by two jokers from the 1st North Staffords who paraded up and down the line of trenches 'one clad in a tail coat, black trousers and an old battered silk hat that had seen better days, the other decked out in a blouse and skirt, an old bonnet and a broken umbrella.'

Another found a broken bicycle with almost square wheels which he trundled up and down.

In some areas where unofficial ceasefires occurred, impromptu football matches were held using whatever materials could be found to form balls - rolled up sandbags or stuffed shirts etc.

At another point, a former British barber set up shop in the middle of No Man's Land with a makeshift chair.

Full of festive bonhomie, he was completely indifferent to the nationality of his mud covered customers and charged a handful of cigarettes for a trim.

In no time at all, a queue of both British and German troops

had formed, stretching back to the trenches.

As for Arthur Greasley, having witnessed the burial of the dead, he and his colleagues joined in 'a general concert' with German troops.

'I don't think such a thing has ever happened in history before' he wrote - 'we mixed together and sang ragtime, it was fine.'

December 27 brought a dramatic change in the weather with a return to the customary, soaking Flanders rain.

Where a truce had occurred it was over, and the situation was never to be the same again.

Authorities on both sides were furious at what had happened.

Some troops were ordered out of the line, officers even court martialled.

Softened by the Christmas spirit

These were replaced at the Front by troops who had 'not been softened by the Christmas spirit.'

The following Christmas saw Sir Douglas Haig as the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief, and firm instructions were issued making it plain that there was to be no attempt to restore the events of the previous year.

The Tommies endured life in the trenches until 1918.

When the mindless slaughter was finally brought to an end, a lost generation of British men lay rotting in the soil.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called the 1914 truce 'an amazing spectacle' saluting it as 'one human episode amid all the atrocities which have stained the memory of the war.'

The event continues to catch the imagination even today and it is, perhaps, one of the best and most heartening Christmas stories of modern times.

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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle