

# The Christmas Truce

Captain Chater was in his trench, surrounded by mud. Wet and old. It was December, after all. He was one of many British men who joined up before the war began. He was a professional soldier, fighting German professionals. The new men who'd signed up after the outbreak of war hadn't yet reached them.

The first world war was both old world and new. Men on horses with bayonets against machine guns, primitive tanks, barbed wire, poison gas. That first Christmas, the war was still new. There was still plenty of hell to come.

He was in his trench. Ahead of him was a no man's land – a stretch between his fellow soldiers and the Germans on the other side. Only dead men lay between. The possibility of death was always there. Which made what was about to happen that much stranger. He was looking over the wall toward the German side. The shooting had stopped, maybe just for a little while. That's when he saw two men waving their arms. Two of his enemies. That was strange enough. Why would someone take that chance and stand up and wave their arms in a war zone, but then they slowly pull themselves up from their trench and walk toward the British side? Two men, men who could have been firing at him yesterday, Germans... were on their way over.

So here's what happened. The two men, the two Germans, came out of their trenches, walked across the no man's land, and were met by British men who bravely got out of their trenches, shook the hands of the Germans and wished them a happy Christmas. Pretty soon there was a whole crowd gathered around.

It was Christmas, 1914. And soldiers, some French, some British, some German, left their positions and met their fellow men in the middle. Sometimes for hours. Imagine that. Enemies crawling out of their protected spaces after days of warfare only to join each other in the middle and... socialize. This was no isolated incident.

In just 20 miles from the English Channel to Switzerland, there were some 100,000 men who congregated. Not all in one mass, but dotted here and there. Wherever a man was brave enough to step toward certain death, hoping for a few minutes of peace.

They'd called a truce. Unofficially. It just happened. All along the front, they'd heard each other singing Christmas carols. Crouching in the mud, trying to stay warm, praying they wouldn't get shot. And, from the other side, from the enemy, comes a familiar song. That reminds you of your family, your friends, the girl you

left back home. The trenches were so close they could smell what the other side was cooking. Warm food and music.

To be clear, this was not something the British and French war offices had coordinated with the Germans. That kind of official mini-armistice had been documented since the Trojan wars, the American Civil War, the Napoleonic Wars. Higher-ups getting together to arm wrestle a deal where both sides could bury their dead or rest. No. This was individuals. A few men waving a flag or shouting from one trench to the other. Daring to dream of a few minutes of peace.

And so they stood in no man's land. Shaking hands. Burying their dead. There are reports of German clergy saying prayers next to British clergy. Praying for their men, and their fallen enemies. Some soldiers used the break to blow off some steam or attend sermons. Others, like AD Chater, used the time to build a little roof over the trench, a place for a fire, throw down some straw. To make his little nightmare a little more civil.

There are even reports of football matches, which would be soccer to us Americans. There are monuments all over Europe to this moment. Many of them feature soccer balls.

Sometimes the armistice lasted for hours, other places for days. But for a while they weren't fighting tyranny or conquering lands... they were just men.

Adapted from [a podcast by Chris Staron](#).