

Christmas Truce 1914

During the Christmas Truce of 1914, WWI soldiers sang carols, exchanged gifts, and supposedly even played a soccer game. In the midst of the unrelenting violence of World War I, a ceasefire suddenly swept across some areas of the Western front. Massive amounts of life had already been extinguished, but there was one circumstance that halted the brutality and bloodshed. It was the first Christmas of the war. It was a day for peace, if only fleeting.

On the night before Christmas, Captain Arthur O'Sullivan of the British army's Royal Irish Rifles was stationed in Rue du Bois, France. He heard a German accent float from across the barracks. It said, "Do not shoot after 12 o'clock and we will not do so either." Then, "If you English come out and talk to us, we won't fire." One Irish rifleman ventured out of his trench to test the invitation. After he arrived back safely with a German cigar as a gift, others made their way onto the still battlefield. No Man's Land filled with soldiers meeting each other halfway.

And so began the unofficial Christmas Truce of 1914. Along the lines in France and Belgium, soldiers began hearing carols in the distance. German troops sang "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" ("Silent Night, Holy Night") and the Allied troops chimed in – singing in alternating languages.

Cautiously, more soldiers began emerging. Germans held up lanterns and called to the British – assuring them in broken English that they wouldn't shoot. Instead, they wished them a Merry Christmas. Men from both sides intermingled, shook hands, and shared cigarettes and food. The Christmas Truce also provided a time for the armies to collect their deceased soldiers from the fields. This gesture meant a lot in terms of respect for the dead for both sides.

Many generals and senior officers were not on board with this overall show of goodwill. The military made it clear that this was not acceptable wartime behavior. While some officers participated in the truce, one British general stated that holidays create "the greatest danger to troops' morale. [Rather than letting them] slide into a live and let live theory of life, [it is] absolutely necessary to encourage offensive spirit." By the next day troops from both sides were ordered to fire on the people with whom they played soccer, exchanged gifts, and shared photos only hours before. Another holiday truce of this kind was never recorded.

These soldiers killed people with whom they had far more in common than those who were ordering them to fight. They were mostly poor and working class. The generals in the rear had titles like "sir" and "lord," owned large estates, and were collaborators with robber barons, kings, and other heads of state who [still!] use war to increase their wealth and power.

Soldiers who questioned the sanity of war and their own personal interest in fighting it wondered: What if we had refused to get back in our trenches? Would word have spread? What could have happened next?

--See <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/the-christmas-truce?>

Howard Zinn once wrote that people "apparently without power themselves can create power by determining not to be controlled, by acting with others to change their lives."

Let's hope that in 2020 and 2021 troops stationed at any of the 800+ U.S. military bases around the globe hear the story of the Christmas truce. Let's hope they see themselves on the battlefield during that moment in France and Belgium, banding together, dropping their weapons, ignoring the orders of officers, and declaring a truce of a more permanent kind.

This war we continue to face on all fronts transcends partisan politics, and the work to resist it continues with more urgency than ever. Only deeply engaged citizens, able and willing to think critically and to use every nonviolent tactic we can muster, will be able to make the serious, deep, systemic changes that are so very long overdue, changes upon which our very survival depends.

RESIST THIS ENDLESS WAR! Join the vigil, Sundays, here at Broadway, Park and Elm Streets in New Haven, 12 to 1 p.m.

<http://newhavensundayvigil.wordpress.com>