



## Christmas Truce

# LIVE AND LET LIVE

ALMOST TEN MILLION SOLDIERS LOST THEIR LIVES IN THE BATTLES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR. HOWEVER, THERE WAS A SHORT PERIOD, WHEN THE BELLIGERENTS ON THE WESTERN FRONT STOPPED FIGHTING, AND FOR A MOMENT THAT SEEMED EVERLASTING, PEACE CAME TO THE TRENCHES. CHRISTMAS, THE CELEBRATION OF LOVE TURNED MORTAL ENEMIES INTO FRIENDS FOR A FEW DAYS.

The armies, fired by the politicians, threw themselves into the war with gigantic enthusiasm, it all seemed to be a great patriotic adventure. However, the battles fought in the summer and autumn of 1914 ended without awarding either party with a decisive victory. The original strategic concepts failed, trench warfare began. When winter hit, the situation of the soldiers became even more miserable: their makeshift trenches leaked, the breastworks collapsed, so they

had to flounder in the mud. In this situation, they could not help but sympathise with their enemies, who suffered in the same circumstances. Besides, at that time, the parties did not feel an implacable hatred towards each other, which will characterise the battles in the later years. All these were associated with the desire to get to know the enemy: are they really so evil as the politicians, the priests and the newspapers describe them? These facts among others led in December 1914 to



As the packages arrived, the mood lifted.



Celebration on the frontline, English style: the Christmas geese getting roasted.

the largest and spontaneously occurring cease-fire in the history of all wars – to Christmas peace.

### **GRASSROOTS INITIATIVE**

Reconstructing the facts is not an easy job, because many of the stories are vague, inaccurate or conflicting, and the reports written after the events often try to lessen the significance of the Christmas peace.

What is certain: the cease-fire was a grassroots initiative; the first friendships between the enemies were made among privates, well before Christmas. The war diary of the 2nd Essex Regiment of the British Expeditionary Force bears witness to this, according to which the German and the English soldiers met at 10 a.m. of December 11, 1914, in no-man's land, midway between the trenches, and this marked the first documented non-official armistice of the fights. Private H. Scrutton from the Essex troops related the events in a letter to his relatives; his account was published in the January 1, 1915 issue of the *Norfolk Chronicle* as well as the *Norwich Gazette*.

“As I have told you before, our trenches are situated only 30-40 yards away (27-36 meters in terms of scale – the note of the author) from the German trenches. This led to an exciting incident the other day. It has become the habit of our comrades to cry out something to the enemy, and we usually get an answer from them. They



Friendly chatting with the enemy: no man's land became a very different place those days.



Football games became everlasting moments of the cease-fire.

invited us to speak with them, and this is what happened:

From our trench: ‘Good morning, Fritz.’ (no answer).

‘Good morning, Fritz.’ (still no answer).

‘GOOD MORNING, FRITZ!’

From the German trench: ‘Good morning.’

From our trench: ‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Come over here, Fritz.’

‘I won’t go over, because if I do, I will be shot down.’

## HINTERLAND

British and German soldiers sang together and exchanged small presents.



‘No, you won’t. Come over! Have no fear!’

‘Come, and you will get cigarettes, Fritz!’

‘No. Come halfway, and we shall meet there.’

‘All right.’

Whereupon, one of our comrades stuffed his pocket full of cigarettes, and climbed out of the trench. The German also climbed out of his trench, they indeed met halfway, shook hands, then the German soldier (‘Fritz’) took the cigarettes from him and gave my comrade some cheese in return. It was so good to see the Germans standing on top of their trenches, and the English doing the same, rejoicing, waving hats. About 18 of our troops went halfway along, meeting approximately the same number of Germans. All this lasted about half an hour, then both parties returned to their trenches, in order to continue shooting at each other. What I wrote down is true, but I do not think that we had made friends, as on the same night two of our comrades were killed, and I do not know, how many of them must have died.”

### SILENT NIGHT

The holiday euphoria and the desire for truce among the people in the trenches increased in direct proportion to the number of parcels received from the relatives, the army and the aid agencies. The

fact, that their country fell to a greater or lesser extent into the hands of the enemy, made the Christmas of the Belgians and the French sour. Therefore, it is not surprising that friendships with the Germans were rather made in the British sector, especially in the area of the City of Ypres, Flanders.

On December 24th the Germans lit candles upon the breastwork of their trenches, decorated their Christmas trees and chanted Christmas carols. The Brits answered with their own carols. In what follows, the two sides cried out

Christmas good wishes to each other. Not much later, the braver ones ventured out onto no-man’s land, where minor souvenirs – such as food, tobacco, alcoholic drinks, buttons, and hats – changed hands. The arms became silent in the area.

The 19-year-old Private Henry Williamson serving in the London Infantry Brigade – the famous nature writer – recalls the holy night as follows: “Soft singing voices were drifting in the chilling, hazy night air. It seemed as if I were in a different world, where I had arrived through a nightmare.”

This is what he wrote on December 26 to his people: “Dear Mother, I am writing from the trenches. It is 11 o’clock in the morning. Beside me is a coke fire, opposite me a ‘dug-out’ (wet) with straw in it. The ground is sloppy in the actual trench, but frozen elsewhere. In my mouth is a pipe presented by the Princess Mary. In the pipe is tobacco. Of course, you say. But wait. In the pipe is German tobacco. Haha, you say, from a prisoner or found in a captured trench. Oh dear, no! From a German soldier. Yes a live German soldier from his own trench. Yesterday the British & Germans met & shook hands in the Ground between the trenches, & exchanged souvenirs, & shook hands. Yes, all day Xmas day, & as I write. Marvellous, isn’t it?”

Fraternisation went on even after December 24, and the no-man’s land turned into a sort of playground. Men played



Henry Williamson

football games in some places, often with empty tins in the absence of a ball, just like the members of the Lancashire Infantry Regiment and the German soldiers.

The cease-fire also provided an opportunity to lay the fallen soldiers to their final rest at a joint funeral service in many places; these ceremonies – like some other meetings – ended up with singing Christmas carols.

## TRUCE? WHAT KIND OF TRUCE?

The Commands evidently strived to renew hostilities, but it was not very easy. For example, a unit of the 107th Saxon

Regiment of the German Armed Forces maintained the truce longer than anyone dared – until the verge of mutiny: “In the end, we began to shoot, and a shot replied from the other side, but no one was hurt. That day, and the following day we only wasted our ammos; as if we had tried to shoot down the stars from the sky” – a Saxon soldier recalled the memories of the past.

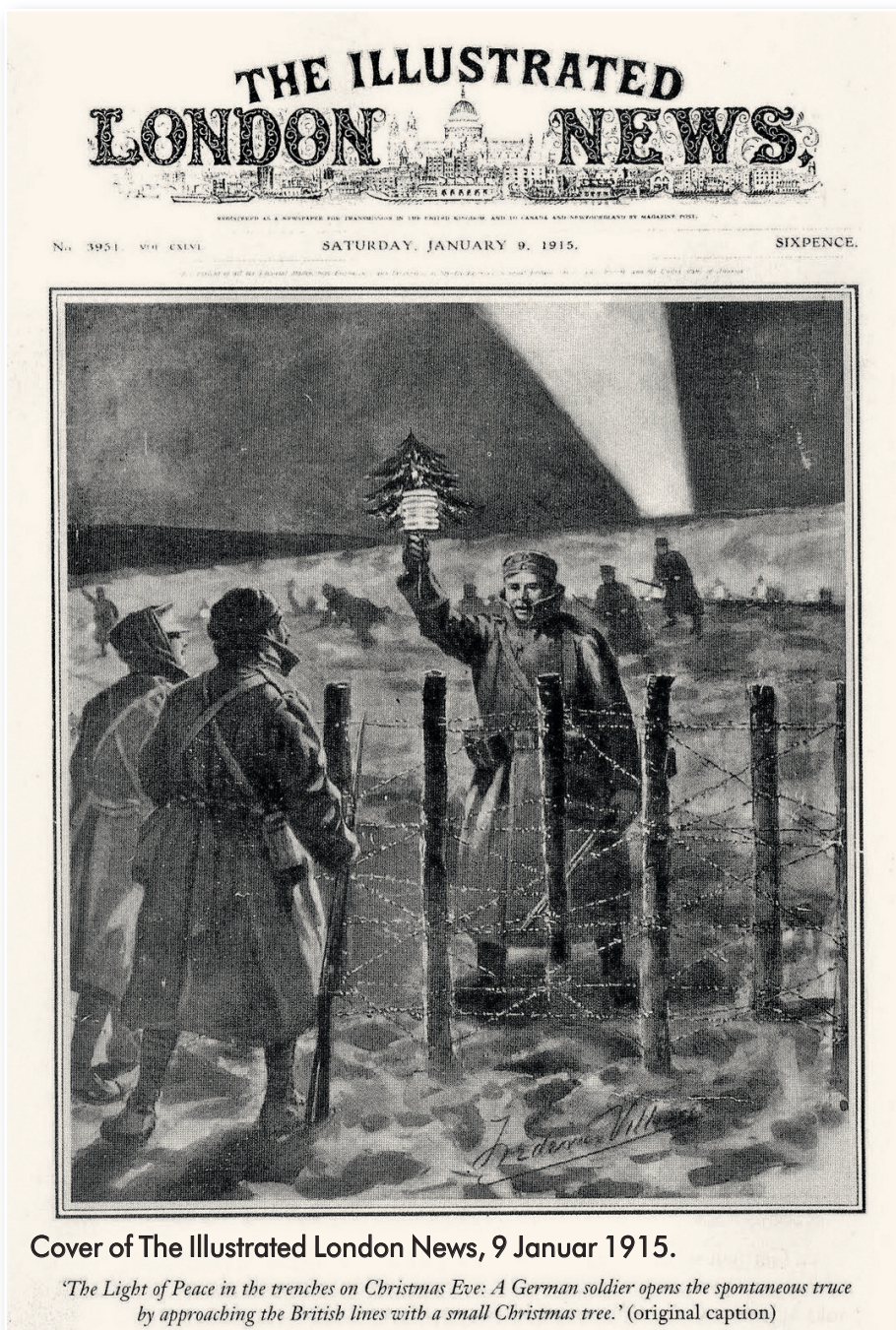
General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, the Commander of the 2nd British Corps faced the magnitude of the Christmas truce only two days after the event. He also had to realise that his officers not only overlooked fraternisation but also took part in it. The general had the power

to bring all affected soldiers to the military tribunal, but he was trapped: with a disciplinary procedure he would publicly admit, that a cease-fire took place, moreover too many people were involved in it to set an example. Because of all these, very few people were punished – and this was true for both the British and the German sides.

The newspapers had not covered the events of the truce for a week owing to a non-official press-embargo. The New York Times broke the silence on December 31, 1914. British papers quickly followed the American’s suit, and published several accounts based on front-line soldiers’ letters written to their families. From January 8, pictures were published, too: the photos taken from the British and the German soldiers singing together on no-man’s land appeared on the front page of the Mirror and the Sketch magazines, and the tone of the reports was strongly positive.

In Germany the newspapers reported about the events in a more moderate style, some of them vehemently criticized the soldiers making friends with the enemy. In France owing to the strict censure, the papers did not write about the cease-fire; the public learned about the events only from hearsay, from the stories of front-line soldiers or the injured treated in hospitals. The press was finally forced to give an answer to the proliferating rumours: they re-published a government statement, according to which making friends with the enemy qualifies as high treason. In early January, an official statement appeared about the cease-fire: ‘truce occurred exclusively in the British-controlled territories, and even there not in every place. The soldiers started singing, but it soon mounted into shooting at each other’ – said the statement.

At the end of next year, the cease-fires were not as wide-ranging as in 1914; the fragile confidence between the privates was broken because of the brutal gas- and air attacks, and the execution of the POWs. The Headquarters prohibited making contacts with the enemies in stringent orders; the soldiers making friends were threatened with a military court procedure, the deserters with execution. In 1916, following the unprecedentedly bloody battles around Somme and Verdun, the soldiers did not want to conclude Christmas truces any more.



Cover of The Illustrated London News, 9 January 1915.

*‘The Light of Peace in the trenches on Christmas Eve: A German soldier opens the spontaneous truce by approaching the British lines with a small Christmas tree.’ (original caption)*