

Christmas Truce During World War I

For several years, I've heard stories about an unofficial truce at Christmas time during World War I. I've done some research and found it actually happened, however as with most stories there are many versions. A few years ago, at the MSUM theater, I saw a short play on the Christmas Truce. It was extremely well done and very moving. Since I'm writing this on Christmas morning, it is a story worth telling.

On December 7, 1914, Pope Benedict XV suggested a temporary hiatus of the war for the celebration of Christmas. The warring countries refused to create any official cease-fire, but on Christmas the soldiers in the trenches declared their own unofficial truce. This was very early in the war and the US was not yet in the war. Starting on Christmas Eve, many German and British troops sang Christmas carols to each other across the battle lines, presumably from the trenches as WWI was a trench war. Allied soldiers joined in with the singing. On Christmas Day, some German soldiers emerged from their trenches, approached the Allied lines calling out "Merry Christmas" in German and English. At first the Allied soldiers from Britain, France and Belgium, feared a trick but did climb out of the trenches and joined the enemy, shook hands, exchanged cigarettes and sang songs. There even was a football (soccer) game played between enemies. According to a British newspaper article published today, General Sir Walter Congreve sent a letter to his wife outlining how news of the football match spread quickly along the front line. He wrote he did not venture out from the trenches but that one of his men did and saw a German doing the same. He said: "Both got out, then more, and finally all day long in that particular place they have been walking about together all day giving each other cigars and singing songs."

Both sides used this truce to retrieve the bodies of those killed on the battle field. In earlier times, often battles were stopped for the retrieval of bodies, then war resumed.

Thanks to the wonders of technology, you can see a good video clip of a 2005 French movie about the event by going to [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and searching on "Joyeux Noel" (2005) WW I Christmas Eve Truce" The search results will give you several videos to watch.

The truce took place on the Western Front in 1914, in Ypres region of Belgium not in the Belleau Wood as in a song co-written by Joe Henry and Garth Brooks and on his 1997 album *Sevens*. It is a nice song about the event but is inaccurate because the battle between Germans and British in Belleau Wood did not take place until June 1918, nearer the end of the war. My father served in the artillery during WWI and was in the Battle of Belleau Wood among others.