**The Christmas Truce**

**On Dec. 25, 1914, the guns of British and German troops fell silent,**

**and soldiers sang carols in No Man's Land.**

**Why is the truce still remembered? In a horrific war that claimed the lives of 10 million soldiers, the Christmas Truce represents an extraordinary moment of human kinship. When the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, most soldiers assumed they'd be home by Christmas. Four months later, almost a million men had already died -- with no end in sight. Amid that carnage came the truce. Starting with a handful of sporadic cease-fires between exhausted British and German soldiers in the trenches of Western Europe, the unauthorized truce spread along the 500-mile Western Front, encompassing more than 100,000 men. Sworn enemies crept out into No Man's Land to exchange food, sing carols, tell jokes -- and even play soccer. A day later, savage warfare recommenced, but the impromptu display of humanity has endured as one of the most bittersweet episodes of WWI. "It was a day of peace in war," wrote one German soldier. "It is only a pity that it was not decisive peace."**

**When did the cease-fires begin? On Christmas Eve, when British soldiers recovering the bodies of their dead comrades near Ypres, Belgium, noticed the Germans decorating their trenches and singing the Christmas carol "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night'). The Brits sang "O Come, All Ye Faithful" in response, and then "one of (the Germans) challenged anyone of us to go across for a bottle of wine," wrote a soldier. "One of our fellows accepted the challenge and took a big cake to exchange." Soldiers, who hours earlier were trying to kill each other, shook hands, wished each other a Merry Christmas, "and were soon conversing as if we had known each other for years," wrote Cpl. John Ferguson. The festivities spread across the front line, and continued into Christmas Day, with soldiers swapping stories and exchanging cigarettes.**

**Did they really play soccer? Several impromptu games broke out all across No Man's Land, with soldiers kicking either an actual ball or empty corned-beef cans, and with their steel helmets acting as goalposts. But there was one particular match between the Germans and Brits that has become legendary: that between the 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment, and some Scottish troops playing in tartan kilts. Lt. Johannes Niemann of the 133rd said that "a Scottish soldier appeared with a football which seemed to come from nowhere, and a few minutes later a real football match got underway." Spirits were high, and "us Germans really roared when a gust of wind revealed that the Scots worse no drawers under their kilts." The final score Germany 3, Britain 2.**

**Was the truce universal? No, and some of the combatants actively disapproved. Maj. John Hawksley said that the Seaforths, a Scottish regiment, "would have none of it, and when the Germans in front of them tried to fraternize and leave their trenches, the Seaforths warned them that they would shoot." Meanwhile, the Russians -- who still adhered to the Julian calendar and wouldn't celebrate Christmas until Jan. 7 -- carried on fighting on the Eastern Front, while French soldiers were understandably opposed to laying down arms, given that a third of their country was under German occupation. One Austrian-born soldier, meanwhile, thought that the fraternization with the enemy was disgraceful. "Such things should not happen in wartime," said Cpl. Adolf Hitler, according to one of his comrades in the 16trh Bavarians. "Have you Germans no sense of honor left at all?"**

**How did the truce end? As civilly as it had begun. Maj. Hawksley, who was killed by a sniper in France in 1916, said that German troops took the trouble to send notes to their British counterparts warning that hostilities were about to resume. "Gentlemen. Our automatic pistol has been ordered from the Colonel to begin to fire again at midnight, we take it an honour to award you of this fact," wrote one. "Funny, isn't it?" noted Hawksley. British and German soldiers along the front line solemnly said farewell to their new friends. "With that we parted," wrote one, "and in all probability in the course of a day or so we shall be doing our utmost to kill each other."**

**Were there other truces? No. Military leaders on both sides opposed fraternization, and ordered heavy artillery, machine gun, and sniper fire on Dec. 25 to discourage festive meetings. As the war and the carnage dragged on, both sides became too embittered to contemplate cease-fires. Even those taking part in t6he 1914 truce recognized the occasion as a fleeting moment of kinship unlikely to be experienced again. "As I finish this short and scrappy description of a strangely human event," wrote Pvt. Frederick Heath, "we are pouring rapid fire into the Gewrman trenches, and they are returning the compliment just as fiercely. So we are back once more to the ordeal of fire."**

**The tiny truce of 1944: During the existential struggle of World War II, a cease-fire was unimaginable on both sides. But one German woman named Elisabeth Vincken privately engineered her own tiny truce on a snowy Christmas Eve in 1944, when she opened her cabin on the Belgian-German border to find three lost American soldiers -- one of them badly injured. Taking pity on the men, she invited them in for Christmas dinner. But as the turkey roasted, there was another knock at the door. To Elisabeth's dismay, four German soldiers wanted to be let in. The penalty for harboring the enemy was execution, but Elisabeth calmly told them there were Americans inside; the Germans were welcome to join them, she said, as long as they left weapons outside. "It is the Holy Night and there will be no shooting here." The cabin atmosphere was tense, but after dinner and wine, relations warmed. One German, an ex-medical student, examined the wounded American; another gave them directions back to their lines. They parted ways -- and the truce was over. *(The Week magazine, December 27, 2013)***

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