

Peace in the Midst of Hell: The Evolution of Truces During the First World War

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"Every night the picks and shovels of 300 or 400 men could be heard merrily at work with the inevitable undercurrent of conversation...every morning a new length of enormous breastwork invited shells which never came. On such occasions the thought arose that we must be taking part in the most expensive farce in the history of the world."¹ This British officer puts into context one of the Great War's most ironic occurrences, peace in the middle of battle. Many historians assert that such truces were extremely rare and nonexistent following the well-documented and celebrated 1914 Christmas Truce. This renowned truce is often portrayed as an isolated event that spontaneously occurred during December of that year. However, truces occurred throughout the War and were more widespread than in any previous European engagement. Beginning in 1914, truces on both the Eastern and Western Fronts evolved from acts of chivalry conducted by upper levels of command, to new, sustained, and peaceful truces organized by the common soldier until war ended in 1918. These sustained periods of peace were able to develop as a result of soldiers' changing perception of the war and the nature of trench warfare.

From the onset of war in 1914, a particular form of truces was an accepted part of the war experience. Most often, they were conducted because of war's uncontrollable conditions. During the first few months of the war, such lulls in fighting developed during meal times on the Western Front. One soldier describes his reactions to such an occurrence: "The quartermaster used to bring the rations up to the bank of our river each night after dark; they were laid out, and parties came from the front line to fetch them. I suppose the enemy were occupied in the same way, so things were quiet at that hour for a couple of nights, and the ration parties became careless because of it, and laughed and talked on the way back to their parties."² These respectful truces often were formed out of convenience and respect for the enemy. Early truces also involved opposing armies allowing temporary truces for the retrieval and burial of troops in the middle of No Man's Land.³ Such truces were carried out of reverence for the dead and conducted by the commanding officers.

While these periods of peace were surprising to many new soldiers, their existence was by no means new. Suspending battle for mealtimes, tending to the injured and dead, and observing holidays were common practices in previous European engagements. One British General, Sir John French, indicates his strong feelings to the proper conduction of war: "I have always attached the utmost importance to the maintenance of that chivalry in war which has almost invariably

characterised every campaign of modern times in which this country has been engaged.³ Thus the occurrence of temporary "chivalrous" truces was expected by those who had experience in European warfare. The commanding officers usually initiated such truces. During the Boer War, General French reported how he oversaw a Christmas Truce, where he ordered fighting between the two sides to stop for the day, and gave permission for both sides to bury the dead.⁴ As Christmas approached in 1914, many commanders anticipated some form of a peace similar to previous treaties to honor the day. However, few could imagine the extent to which Christmas along the front would be celebrated.

As the sun rose on the twenty-fifth of December, soldiers awoke to a peace for the first time in months. The deafening sound of shelling and explosions that often filled the morning air was curiously absent. Bruce Bairnsfather describes the mood as he woke up that day: "Everything looked merry and bright that morning—the discomforts seemed to be less, somehow; they seemed to have epitomized themselves in intense, frosty cold. It was just the sort of day for Peace to be declared. I should like to have suddenly heard an immense siren blowing...[and the appearance] of a small figure running across the frozen mud waiving something... 'war off, return home, --George, R.I.'"⁵ While his dreams of a sudden, lasting peace never occurred, unprecedented amounts of fraternization did.

Many stories indicate that common German soldiers initiated the day's festivities by caroling to songs such as "Auld Lang Syne" and often invited the Allies into their trenches. Skeptical soldiers insisted that No Man's Land become the neutral meeting ground, fearing a possible attack. Once out in the field varieties of food, alcohol, cigarettes, and clothing were exchanged, family pictures were proudly produced, and personal war experiences were shared.⁶ For the first time in the war, opposing sides interacted with each other without the intent to kill. The friendly atmosphere even caused a British soldier, a barber in his civilian life, to take out his clippers and cut the long hair of a German soldier.⁷ The events of Christmas 1914 were remarkable, and as night set in the soldiers marched back to their respective trenches having developed a new respect for the enemy.

As upper levels of command learned of the events that took place that day, quick action was taken to ensure it would never occur again. An infuriated British Commander charged in a letter: "friendly intercourse with the enemy, unofficial armistice (e.g. we don't fire if you don't' etc.) and the exchange of tobacco and other comforts, however tempting and occasionally amusing they may be, are absolutely prohibited."⁸ Such angry responses to the truce cannot be considered surprising. As one officer who broke up a celebration indicated, the soldiers were there to "kill the Hun, not make friends with him."⁹ Governments feared that that interaction with the enemy would lessen a soldier's desire to fight. To combat this, much effort and time was devoted to portraying the enemy as a savage beast through various forms of propaganda. However, the experiences of soldiers on Christmas day contradicted many of these negative stereotypes. The struggle soldiers faced to rationalize the events is evident in one soldier's account of the actions of Christmas day, "These devils, I could see, all wanted to be friendly; but none of them possessed the open, frank geniality of our men. However, everyone was talking and laughing, and souvenir hunting."¹⁰ Despite referring to the Germans as devils and claiming to see through

their outward friendly appearance, the soldier would soon be immersing himself in the celebration that he had just criticized. Other soldiers were more accepting of these actions and enjoyed the other's company. Hearing carols had a particular effect on British soldier Bertie Felstead, who explained: "You couldn't hear each other sing like that without it affecting your feelings for the other side."¹¹ Upper levels of command would put in place new measures to ensure no such fraternization would ever occur, however, the groundwork for a new and unexpected type of truce had already been laid.

While the nature of the 1914 Christmas Truce could be considered chivalrous by its origins, the manner in which it was conducted cannot be. A day of peace was customary; celebration with the enemy was not. Like many other war traditions, chivalrous treaties seemed to dissipate as the war progressed. However, the desire for peace still existed, and the common soldier now mostly conducted truces. Thus, the Christmas Truce of 1914 could be seen as a transition to the type of sustained truces that were to develop later on in the war. While open fraternization comparable to that on Christmas would no longer occur, soldiers found new ways to sustain peace during the war. Often referred to as "live and let live," these truces were formed not out of respect toward the enemy, but rather a decision against fighting. Disillusionment with the conditions was often a reason.¹² One soldier explains an interaction with a German on Christmas day: "One of the enemy told me that he was longing to get back to London: I assured him that 'So was I.' He said that he was sick of the war, and I told him that when the truce was ended, any of his friends would be welcome in our trenches, and would be well-received, fed and give a free passage to the Isle of Man!"¹³ Determination not to fight was profound at the time, but would increase in regularity as the war went on.

It is important to assess the mood that developed as the war progressed which led to the new live and let live attitude towards the war. As the war advanced through 1914, optimism that it would end by Christmas had diminished. Old methods of attack had proved useless in the face of the modern warfare. Because of this, millions of men were dying and the front lines had barely advanced. Large offensives like the Somme had failed to produce the much-anticipated breakthrough that would win the war. The brutal European weather was especially taxing on the soldiers who lived in the trenches. Often times their biggest enemy was fighting the ever-rising flood of water in the trenches. All these factors contributed to the low morale experienced by many low-ranking soldiers, whose visions of war far differed from what they experienced. As the war progressed, the desire to continue to fight had often lessened and a desire for survival prevailed. Rather than volunteering to participate in attacks and putting themselves in a potentially harmful situation, soldiers did what they could initially to protect themselves.¹⁴

While the common soldier became increasingly disillusioned with the war, he became more sympathetic with the enemy. For those who did not experience the 1914 Christmas Truce, a desire for live and let live prevailed through the close distances separating the trenches. Unlike previous wars, where great distances separated units, some soldiers in the First World War were only separated by two to three hundred yards in dug out trenches.¹⁵ Such close distances often allowed the soldiers to see and hear the activities of the opposing army. Austrian soldier Fritz

Kreisler recognized the difference of fighting in trench warfare at the beginning of the war: "One fights fiercely and passionately, mass against mass, but as soon as the mass crystallizes itself into human individuals whose features one actually can recognize, hatred almost ceases."¹⁶

Proximity also allowed the troops to identify with each other. The soldiers often participated in the same acts and were troubled by the same conditions. By staying in the same trenches for long periods, troops were able to hear and see the others' rituals and realize how similar the opposition really was. The personalization of war was a new phenomenon that had never existed in war. Persistent fighting, and the desire to kill and hurt the enemy often eroded over time and resulted in a soldier's resolve to not fight. As one French Soldier later wrote, "One day as he watched the enemy from a loophole, without any thought of firing at him, he thought that that tiny silhouette was a soldier like himself, carrying out the same service, but wearing a different uniform. Both ran the same dangers, suffered the same bad weather, laboured at the same fatigues."¹⁷ Thus animosity did not grow as a result of the military stalemate, and often opposing soldiers developed a unique bond. When attacks were issued soldiers could no longer find the desire to kill. One soldier describes this effect: "I saw a young German coming towards me and at that moment, I just could not murder him and lowered my gun, he saw me do so and he followed suit, shouting 'what the h--- do you want to kill me for, I don't [sic] want to kill you.'"¹⁸ The combination of growing disillusionment to the war and identification with the enemy explains a soldier's personal decision to not fight an enemy but does not explain what allowed such truces to be developed along the lines and be sustained.

The initiation of truces was again a result of the proximity of the trenches. This allowed those desiring peace to communicate directly with the opposition, creating peaceful fronts. The majority of time, such instigators shouted across No Man's Land to initiate a truce. Lord Reith describes one such occurrence of this: "The enemy throws some shells at our trench. We've got your range accurately you see. No monkey tricks. Home battery replied. We've got yours; trench line and battery position -- both. No more nonsense. Live and Let Live."¹⁹ Close proximity also allowed for situations that could be interpreted as attacks to be quickly diffused. Once, when a bomb suprisingly hit the British trenches, tension on a quiet front grew as soldiers attempted to rationalize what had happened. A British officer described the confusing scene: "Naturally both sides got down and our men started swearing at the Germans, when all at once a brave German got on to his parapet and shouted out 'We are very sorry about that; we hope no one was hurt. It is not our fault, it is that damned Prussian artillery.'"²⁰ This soldier's strong desire for maintaining peace is evident, as he endangered his life so that the agreed truce could be maintained.

Unlike the chivalrous truces that occurred at the beginning of the war, the longevity of sustained truces lay in the control of those soldiers participating. The complex nature of the truces made it difficult for the upper levels of command to identify the instigators of the acts.²¹ Soldiers participated in attacks as they were commanded, but often would purposely miss their targets. One such example, known as "morning hate," involved soldiers intensely firing for ten to forty-five minutes across No Man's Land with the intent of missing the opposing trenches.²² Such an act not only depleted ammunition for the rest of the day but also made it appear as if actual

fighting was occurring, appeasing the chains of command. When circumstances forced soldiers to be discrete, other ways were developed to maintain their relative peace.

Some of the most ingenious forms of communication between trenches involved quick improvisation and elaborate schemes. When the Liverpool Scottish fighters developed a sustained truce with the Germans in 1915, a whistle across No Man's Land would indicate a safe time to leave the trenches and exchange food without the knowledge of the colonel.²³ Such clever manipulations of the circumstances occurred throughout the war. Soldiers often threw objects ranging from rocks to dead grenades into opposing trenches for information regarding the war or upcoming truces. When Germans were forced to attack an opposing trench, they threw a stone across a No Man's Land into the opposing trenches. Attached to the stone was a letter from the Germans indicating that they were forced to launch a forty-pound bomb, and regretted having to do so. In an attempt to give the troops time to prepare, a whistle would be blown before the bomb was to be launched.²⁴ Acts such as these reiterate the identification with the enemy and the desire not to hurt the members of the opposing trench. These sustained truces would occur throughout the rest of the war. The end of the war in 1918 greatly differed from the war that began four years earlier. Just as the tactics of war evolved, the same can be said of its truces. In the beginning, the truces were driven by an honorable military tradition that respected the enemy. However, by the end of the war, truces were often initiated by the opposing soldiers in an attempt to procure peace in the midst of battle. Truces were no longer conducted by the war-decorated generals, but discretely produced by its demoralized soldiers attempting to control a war that was far out of their reach. When considering the historical circumstances of war, the Great War would be the only opportunity for such truces to occur. Before 1914, most wars were fought in a different manner. Soldiers generally marched out into lines, fought across an open field, and were under the direct command of a general. After the war, technology improved and tactics became more effective, significantly increasing the pace and destruction of war, making stable and quiet fronts difficult to sustain. With the advent of modern warfare, the First World War stood at a crossroads in military history, and for one period of time allowed the common soldier control over his condition, and at times he choose peace.

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Endnotes

- ¹ C.R.M.F. Crutwell, *The War Service of the 4th Berkshire Regiment* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1922), 16. quoted in Tony Ashworth *Trench Warfare: The Live and Let Live System* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), 138-9.
- ² Fritz Kreisler, *Four Weeks in the Trenches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), 72.
- ³ Viscount French of Ypres, *1914* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1919), 338.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 339.
- ⁵ Bruce Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), 74.
- ⁶ The description of the Christmas Truce is a collection of different stories from different parts of the front that day. The events listed include the most reoccurring themes that soldiers participated in. For More Information see: Captain JC Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew: 1914-1919* (London: Jane's, 1987), 101-103.; Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets*, 81.
- ⁷ Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets*, 81.
- ⁸ "The Christmas Truce." *First World War.com*. 2001. <http://firstworldwar.com/features/christmastruce.htm> (15 March 2004).
- ⁹ Diana Condell, "Last Survivor of a famous First World Christmas Truce: Bertie Felstead" *The Guardian*, 3 August 2001. featured in *Aftermath World War One*, 2001, <<http://www.aftermathww1.com/felstead.asp>> (17 March 2004).
- ¹⁰ Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets*, 79-80.
- ¹¹ Condell, *Last Survivor*.

- ¹² "Live and let live" is a strategy referred to by many historians, but stressed as a particular concept in *Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* by Tony Ashworth.
- ¹³ Captain Sir Edward Hulse, *Letters* (privately printed: 1916), 54. quoted in Andy Simpson, *Hot Blood and Cold Steel*, (London: Tom Donovan, 1993), 163. The Isle of Man held the internment camps for Germans in Britain.
- ¹⁴ Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War One* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 89.
- ¹⁵ While the distance varied depending on the front, the average distance was 200-300 yards. Some trenches were as close as a few yards, while others had 500 yards of cushioning between them. John Ellis, *Eye Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (New York, 1976), 24.
- ¹⁶ Kreisler, *Four Weeks*, 69.
- ¹⁷ Stephanie Audoin-Rouzeau ed., *Men at War 1914-1918* (New York: Holms & Meier Publishers, 1980), 171.
- ¹⁸ Cecil Cox, 'A few Experiences of the First World War.' quoted in Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare*. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 136.
- ¹⁹ John Reith, *Wearing Spurs* (London: Hutchinson, 1966) quoted in Denis Winter *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 218.
- ²⁰ Owen Rutter, *The History of the Seventh (Service) Battalion, the royal Sussex Regiment, 1914-1919*. (London: Times, 1934) quoted in Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 146.
- ²¹ Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 47.
- ²² Allan Lloyd, *The War in the Trenches* New York: McKay, 1976), 38-40.
- ²³ Graham Seton Hutchison, *Footslogger: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1931) quoted in Winter *Death's Men*, 218.
- ²⁴ E. Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1930) quoted in Ashcroft, *Trench Warfare*, 35.