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| **Christmas in the Trenches, 1914** | | |
|  | **B**y the end of November 1914 the crushing German advance that had swallowed the Low Countries and threatened France had been checked by the allies before it could reach Paris. The opposing armies stared at each other from a line of hastily built defensive trenches that began at the edge of the English Channel and continued to the border of Switzerland. Barbed wire and parapets defended the trenches and between them stretched a "No-Mans-Land" that in some areas was no more than 30 yards wide.  Life in the trenches was abominable. Continuous sniping, machinegun fire and artillery shelling took a deadly toll. The misery was heightened by the ravages of Mother Nature, including rain, snow and cold. Many of the trenches, especially those in the low-lying British sector to the west, were continually flooded, exposing the troops to frost bite and "trench foot."  The treacherous monotony of life in the trenches was briefly interrupted during an unofficial and spontaneous "Christmas Truce" that began on Christmas Eve. Both sides had received Christmas packages of food and presents. The clear skies that ended the rain further lifted the spirits on both sides of no-mans-land.  The Germans seem to have made the first move. During the evening of December 24 they delivered a chocolate cake to the British line accompanied by a note that proposed a cease fire so that the Germans could have a concert. The British accepted the proposal and offered some tobacco as their present to the Germans. The good will soon spread along the 27-mile length of the British line. Enemy soldiers shouted to one another from the trenches, joined in singing songs and soon met one another in the middle of no-mans-land to talk, exchange gifts and in some areas to take part in impromptu soccer matches.  The high command on both sides took a dim view of the activities and orders were issued to stop the fraternizing with varying results. In some areas the truce ended Christmas Day in others the following day and in others it extended into January. One thing is for sure - it never happened again.  **"We and the Germans met in the middle of no-man's-land."**  *Frank Richards was a British soldier who experienced the "Christmas Truce". We join his story on Christmas morning 1914:*  "On Christmas morning we stuck up a board with 'A Merry Christmas' on it. The enemy had stuck up a similar one. Platoons would sometimes go out for twenty-four hours' rest - it was a day at least out of the trench and relieved the monotony a bit - and my platoon had gone out in this way the night before, but a few of us stayed behind to see what would happen. Two of our men then threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads. Two of the Germans done the same and commenced to walk up the river bank, our two men going to meet them. They met and shook hands and then we all got out of the trench.  Buffalo Bill [the Company Commander] rushed into the trench and endeavored to prevent it, but he was too late: the whole of the Company were now out, and so were the Germans. He had to accept the situation, so soon he and the other company officers climbed out too. We and the Germans met in the middle of no-man's-land. Their officers was also now out. Our officers exchanged greetings with them. One of the German officers said that he wished he had a camera to take a snapshot, but they were not allowed to carry cameras. Neither were our officers.  We mucked in all day with one another. They were Saxons and some of them could speak English. By the look of them their trenches were in as bad a state as our own. One of their men, speaking in English, mentioned that he had worked in Brighton for some years and that he was fed up to the neck with this damned war and would be glad when it was all over. We told him that he wasn't the only one that was fed up with it. We did not allow them in our trench and they did not allow us in theirs.  The German Company-Commander asked Buffalo Bill if he would accept a couple of barrels of beer and assured him that they would not make his men drunk. They had plenty of it in the brewery. He accepted the offer with thanks and a couple of their men rolled the barrels over and we took them into our trench. The German officer sent one of his men back to the trench, who appeared shortly after carrying a tray with bottles and glasses on it. Officers of both sides clinked glasses and drunk one another's health. Buffalo Bill had presented them with a plum pudding just before. The officers came to an understanding that the unofficial truce would end at midnight. At dusk we went back to our respective trenches.  ...The two barrels of beer were drunk, and the German officer was right: if it was possible for a man to have drunk the two barrels himself he would have bursted before he had got drunk. French beer was rotten stuff.  Just before midnight we all made it up not to commence firing before they did. At night there was always plenty of firing by both sides if there were no working parties or patrols out. Mr. Richardson, a young officer who had just joined the Battalion and was now a platoon officer in my company wrote a poem during the night about the Briton and the Bosche meeting in no-man's-land on Christmas Day, which he read out to us. A few days later it was published in *The Times* or *Morning Post*, I believe.  During the whole of Boxing Day [the day after Christmas] we never fired a shot, and they the same, each side seemed to be waiting for the other to set the ball a-rolling. One of their men shouted across in English and inquired how we had enjoyed the beer. We shouted back and told him it was very weak but that we were very grateful for it. We were conversing off and on during the whole of the day.  We were relieved that evening at dusk by a battalion of another brigade. We were mighty surprised as we had heard no whisper of any relief during the day. We told the men who relieved us how we had spent the last couple of days with the enemy, and they told us that by what they had been told the whole of the British troops in the line, with one or two exceptions, had mucked in with the enemy. They had only been out of action themselves forty-eight hours after being twenty-eight days in the front-line trenches. They also told us that the French people had heard how we had spent Christmas Day and were saying all manner of nasty things about the British Army." |  |