

Christmas in the Trenches

The "Christmas truce" is a term used to describe several brief unofficial cessations of hostilities that occurred between German and British or French troops in World War I, particularly with British troops stationed on the Western Front of World War I during Christmas 1914. In 1915 there was a similar Christmas truce between German and French troops, and during Easter 1916 a truce also existed on the Eastern Front.

The truce began on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1914, when German troops began decorating the area around their trenches in the region of Ypres, Belgium, for Christmas. They began by placing candles on trees, then continued the celebration by singing Christmas carols, most notably *Stille Nacht (Silent Night)*. The British troops in the trenches across from them responded by singing English carols.

The two sides continued by shouting Christmas greetings to each other. Soon thereafter, there were calls for visits across the "No Man's Land" where small gifts were exchanged — whisky, jam, cigars, chocolate, and the like. The artillery in the region fell silent that night. The truce also allowed a breathing spell where recently-fallen soldiers could be brought back behind their lines by burial parties. Proper burials took place as soldiers from both sides mourned the dead together and paid their respects. At one funeral in No Man's Land, soldiers from both sides gathered and read a passage from the 23rd Psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

In many sectors, the truce lasted through Christmas night, but in some areas, it continued until New Year's Day.

Complete the following activities to learn more about the Christmas truce...



Complete the following activities:

1. Listen to *Christmas in the Trenches* audio CD track 1 and read along in picture book. Listen to the two songs—track 2 & 3.

In your group, discuss the following:

What is your reaction to the story? How would you have felt about the events of this night? Was this a good or bad idea?

What things would you be missing the most around Christmas time if you had been a soldier during World War I?

How do you think the soldier's commanding officers felt about their troops interacting with "enemy" in this way?

As the German soldiers began to sing Christmas carols, the Allied forces recognized the various tunes. Even though the language was different, the songs reminded the soldiers that they had something in common. What other things did the two sides have in common?

How would you have felt about continuing combat after spending time with the soldiers from the other side? Would you still be willing to fight, possibly kill them?

If these men were able to put aside their differences and get along, why do you think various governments and countries throughout history have had so much trouble doing the same?

Do you think this could happen today with our troops in the Middle East? Why or why not?

2. After your group discussion, complete the following RAFT writing activity independently on a piece of notebook paper. You may use the internet to find out additional information. You may also want to use the 5 W's graphic organizer to help you plan your article.

R ole	War correspondent for newspaper on the front lines with the troops
A udience	Readers in 1914
F ormat	News Article consisting of the 5 Ws of journalism—who, what, when, where, why
T opic	The Christmas Eve truce between Germany and Allied forces