

# Truce on Earth, Good Will to



*British and German troops fraternise on the field of battle on Christmas Eve, greeting each other and exchanging goodwill, and are even photographed together.*

By John Halford

About 15 years ago, I met an old soldier. A very old soldier. Frank Sumpter was more than 100 years old when we met. He was one of the dwindling ranks of veterans who had fought in the trenches of the First World War that raged from 1914 to 1918. Frank is dead now, as are all those who fought with him and against him. The last known WWI combat veteran died in Australia in May 2011.

I wanted to meet Frank because he was one of the few people who had personal memories of a remarkable event that happened at Christmas in the first year of that devastating

war nearly a century ago. The old soldier's body may have been fragile, but his mind was still sharp and focused. He told me a fascinating story.

Let me set the scene for you.

The dreadful conflict that history remembers as The Great War had been building in Europe for years. Germany in the late 19th century had become a formidable, united nation, and felt threatened by its neighbours. The rest of Europe, in turn, was alarmed by Germany's growing power.

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and cigarettes. Some even played football.

Great Britain had been the unchallenged superpower of the day, but Germany was becoming a serious rival. The German leader, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the grandson of Queen Victoria of England, and the two nations were not natural enemies. But storm clouds were gathering as political and economic tensions steadily increased across the continent.

By August 1914, Europe was ready for war, and a madman's murderous assault on the Archduke of Austria provided the catalyst. Germany invaded Belgium, and Britain and

# ward Men



France had pledged to come to the little nation's defence. So hundreds of thousands of young Britons, Germans, and Frenchmen cheerfully went off to fight for King, Kaiser, or Country. Both sides expected a quick victory: 'Home by Christmas' was the patriotic slogan.

But it was not to be. A fierce winter set in over the battlefield, and neither side could gain a quick victory. By December 1914, the two huge armies were stalemated, bogged down in a line of trenches that stretched from the Belgian coast to the Alps. Losses to both sides were appalling as they fought to gain or regain a few feet of land.

It soon became obvious that this war would be different from anything the world had seen before. It would not be decided by one or two pitched battles. The front-line soldiers lived for weeks on end, knee deep in mud, literally in each other's gun sights. They had once shared the same youthful enthusiasm, the same belief that they were fighting for a worthy cause. But as winter clamped down, friend and foe realised that, far from being home for Christmas, they were trapped in the grim trenches, cannon fodder for the first modern industrialised war.

Then on the evening before Christmas of 1914, a remarkable thing began to happen. Frank Sumpter remembered:

The Germans started it. They were in the trenches about 80 yards away, with rolls of barbed wire separating us. As Christmas Eve fell, the German troops called across 'Happy Christmas, Tommy'. 'We called back 'Happy Christmas, Happy Noel'. Then the Germans signalled to us to come out and we began to move.

The officers became extremely annoyed and called out 'Get back in the trenches'. But we ignored them. We had no particular feelings of animosity towards the individuals on the other side. We were soldiers, and soldiers don't hate each other. We put our hands through the rolls of barbed wire and shook hands with the German troops.

One man asked me where I was from, and I told him. 'Do you know the Jolly Farmer Pub?' he said, and I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'I used to be the barber next door!' As far as we were concerned there was no hatred between us.<sup>1</sup>

Similar exchanges began to happen all along the front line. German soldiers adorned their lines with candles and makeshift Christmas trees. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, men who only a few hours before had been trying to kill

each other sang carols and songs across the trenches. Soldiers left their muddy trenches and met each other in No Man's Land. They shared drink, food, and cigarettes. Some even played football.

Soldiers on both sides wrote home about this extraordinary event. One German soldier wrote:

Is it possible? Are the French really going to leave us in peace today, Christmas Eve? Then, listen; from across the way came the sound of a festive song. A Frenchman singing a Christmas carol with a marvellous tenor voice.

Everyone lay still, listening in the quiet of the night. Is it our imagination or is it maybe meant to lull us into a false sense of security? Or is it in fact the victory of God's love over human conflict?

And from a letter written by Sergeant A. Lovell of the 3rd Rifle Brigade:

Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description...as I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us....Our boys answered with a cheer. Eventually a party of our men got out from the trenches and invited the Germans to meet them halfway and talk. And there in the searchlight they stood, Englishmen and Germans, chatting, and smoking cigarettes together midway between the lines. A rousing cheer went up from friends and foe alike.

The diary of Lieutenant Geoffrey Heinekey of the 2nd Queen's Royal West Surrey regiment recounted an astonishing development as Christmas dawned over the front line:

The next morning a most extraordinary thing happened—I should think one of the most curious things in the war. Some Germans came out and held up their hands and began taking

in some of our wounded, and so we ourselves immediately got out of the trenches and began to bring in our wounded also. The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning, and I talked with several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men. It seemed too ironical for words. There,



Officers and men of 26th Divisional Ammunition Train playing football in Salonika, Greece on Christmas Day, 1915.

the night before we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were, smoking their cigarettes and they smoking ours.

No one gave the order to fraternise like this. It happened spontaneously, in many different places, all along the front. It was just that the ordinary Tommy, Fritz, and Jacques had had enough, and for 'one brief shining moment,'<sup>2</sup> sanity prevailed over the madness. The generals didn't like it. They realised that if opposing soldiers became friendly, it would weaken their resolve to continue the struggle. Nevertheless, in some places the unofficial armistice continued into the New Year. (Certain areas of the line actually remained quiet for even longer by an unspoken, mutual consent.) But eventually the fighting started again.

It lasted for nearly four more years, until the 11th minute of the 11th hour of the 11th month of 1918. So terrible had been the carnage that politicians confidently said it had been the war to end all wars. It wasn't. Twenty-one years later, the sons of those who fought in those trenches

were at it again in the trenches of World War II. It never ends.

Of course, there is another way—a way humanity longs to go but cannot. But that path, the path of love, the path of peace, is a path humanity is incapable of walking. Even when we are weary of the fighting, hating, and killing; even when we weep the tears of deepest pain and anguish for our sons, and now our daughters, who are sent away to war to return broken and traumatised, if not in body bags. Even then—even then—we always do it again. In the words of the musical, *Shenandoah*, set in the U.S. Civil War: 'They always got a holy cause to send you off to war'.

Jesus changed all that.

Christmas is our way of celebrating the Incarnation, the 'becoming human' of the Son of God for the sake of humanity. He became one of us. He took up our cause into his own being. He lived our life for us.<sup>3</sup> He died our death for us.<sup>4</sup> He is our righteousness,<sup>5</sup> and he draws all people, even you and me, to him.<sup>6</sup> He has made us one with him, one

with each other, and in him, one with the Father.<sup>7</sup> In Jesus Christ, at what the Bible calls 'the day of his appearing', the day will at last have arrived when 'Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore'.<sup>8</sup>

Ninety-eight years ago, at Christmastime, for one shining moment in the midst of a ghastly war, the spirit and hope of peace transformed the hearts of soldiers at the front. The day is coming when such a moment will last forever.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Louis Orgeldinger, *History of Württembergische Reserve Infantry Regiment No. 246*, Stuttgart, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Lerner and Lowe, *Camelot*.

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:4.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:30.

<sup>6</sup> John 12:32.

<sup>7</sup> John 14:20.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 2:4.

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