BRIT POLITICS Fact Sheet – First World War Christmas Truce 1914

Between the 24 and 26 December 1914 spontaneous, unofficial truces were called over widespread sections of the Western Front. It is estimated that around 100,000 men took part along half of the British front.

On Christmas Eve the British reported hearing Christmas carols being sung in the German trenches and seeing makeshift Christmas trees decorated with candles. In some places this resulted in carol singing competitions between the British and German trenches, in others they would join in and sing together. Messages were shouted out or hoisted above the trenches wishing the men opposite a Merry Christmas or to suggest a ceasefire.

On Christmas Day there were more reports of unofficial armistices with men climbing out of the trenches and making their way into No Man’s Land. Here the soldiers would shake hands and talk, many of the Germans spoke some English. They would swap regimental buttons, food, alcohol and cigarettes and show photographs of their families.

There were also stories of soldiers kicking footballs (or makeshift footballs) around in No Man’s Land or holding impromptu football matches. An account from the 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment mentions a game of football played against “Scottish Troops”. The games were not likely to have been fully organised matches, more informal kick-abouts. Other accounts talk of bicycle races and a barber giving men haircuts in No Man’s Land.

In many places the temporary truce was used as a time to bury the dead with some British and Germans conducting joint burial services. Other sections of the line made an agreement not to fire on each other for the day, but didn’t leave their trenches.

The Christmas Truce was widely publicised at the time. Men wrote home to their wives and families. Letters from men who had taken part were published in local and national newspapers during January 1915. A drawing of the event made the cover of The London Illustrated News.

There are also surviving photographs some of which are held by the Imperial War Museum. These show officers and men of the Northumberland Hussars meeting with German troops in No Man’s Land and holding burial services. Another shows soldiers of the 2nd Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers during a Boxing Day truce.

The Christmas Truce was not just confined to the Western Front. There are also accounts of Austrian and Russian troops exchanging alcohol, food and cigarettes.

A truce was not observed everywhere. Some sections of the line carried on as normal. On Christmas Day the 2nd Grenadier Guards had men killed and wounded during heavy fighting. In other areas of the line offers by German troops to hold a ceasefire were not taken up.

The senior British Commanders were appalled by this fraternisation with the enemy. They believed that such actions would lower the men’s morale and prevent them from fighting effectively once the truce had ended. General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien felt that it needed to be discouraged or the men wouldn’t “keep up the fighting spirit”. Strict orders were sent out that these unofficial armistices had to stop and the offenders were threatened with disciplinary action.

The friendly spirit carried on in some areas for a few days after Boxing Day although fewer meetings in No Man’s Land took place. The widespread Christmas truces on the Western Front were never repeated.