The Christmas Truce of 1914

World War I

- WWI began mid-1914.
- The early trenches were poorly constructed.
  - Poor locations got sniped.
  - During bad weather, trenches would flood and cave in.
World War I

- The winter of 1914 was particularly cold and wet.
- Troops often found themselves wading in freezing mud and decaying bodies.
- Men at the front felt a degree of sympathy for their opponents who were facing the same miserable conditions.

World War I

- Soldiers at the front in 1914 could see damaged, but standing villages in the distance.
- Fields were pitted from artillery, but not yet completely destroyed.
World War I

- This meant that the ‘civilizing effect’ of the everyday world was always present at the front.
- The manners and customs of civilization, along with thoughts of home, softened the animosity of war.

World War I

- The war was just a few months old.
- The misery, pain, and hatred of war had not set in yet.
- The opponents mutually desired to know:
  - Who are we fighting?
  - Are the opponents as bad as the politicians, media, and priests say?
The Christmas Truce

- It was the combination of these many factors that allowed the Christmas Truce to occur.
- The truce “officially” began December 24, 1914.

The Christmas Truce

- December 23
- The British Army was manning a 27 mile line.
- Spanned from Ypres to the La Bassee Canal.
The Christmas Truce

- The enemy trenches were very close together. Sometimes, the trenches were only 30 yards apart – well within shouting distance.
- It was not uncommon for soldiers to talk across the lines to each other.

Along the 27 mile stretch, many units came to tacit peace agreements.
- Even units that just suffered aggressive attacks from the enemy were still able to make temporary peace.
The Christmas Truce

- As Christmas drew near, a desire for a truce grew as care packages began arriving from home.
- Surrounding towns, villages, and various support associations generously gave warm clothes and letters of thanks.

The Christmas Truce

- Common gifts included chocolate, butterscotch, cigarettes, and tobacco.
- With boosted morale and more than usual to eat, the Christmas Spirit entered the trenches.
The Christmas Truce

● According to a British journalist, the Germans managed to slip a chocolate cake into the British trench.
● Perhaps more astonishingly, it was accompanied by a note asking for a ceasefire so the Germans could celebrate their captain’s birthday.

The Christmas Truce

● The British accepted and offered some tobacco in return.
● Later that night, with candles visible up on the edge of their trenches, the Germans began singing carols at the British.
The Christmas Truce

- December 24
- Some sporadic fighting continued along the front.
- In some areas, the Germans decorated their trench with small Christmas trees with candles in them.

This prompted more carol singing and even meetings in no-man’s land.
- This was the first time that the opponents met, even if just briefly, in no-man’s land.
The Christmas Truce

- December 25
- After a silent morning, both troops and officers ventured into no-man’s land.
- At one place on the line, the Germans and British played a game of soccer together.

The Christmas Truce

- In other places on the line, Christmas began on a sadder note.
- Both sides took the opportunity to seek out their fallen comrades and provide a proper burial.
The Christmas Truce

• For some units, the truce ended the next day.
• For many other units, the truce continued on past Boxing Day, and even until New Years.

The Christmas Truce

• Many commanders on both sides ordered continued attacks, but few troops obeyed.
• Other generals saw the truce as an opportunity to rebuild their defenses.
• In the end, very few troops were punished for not following orders.
The Christmas Truce

- Today, pragmatists believe that the truce was merely a lull that allowed both sides to reinforce defenses and scout the enemy.
- Romantics see the truce as a natural effort by men trying to end the violence.
- Whichever is correct, the Christmas Truce shows that even when told to hate and kill, men are still able to spread love, goodwill, peace, and Christmas cheer.