



The Christmas Truce

By the time Christmas 1914 came the Queen's Westminster Rifles had come to learn the reality of trench warfare:

"Think of your old pal sleeping on a waterproof sheet laid on cold wet day, with all his clothes and overcoat on - both of which are sodden with clay - and covered with a soaking wet blanket." Rifleman Frank Morley, Queen's Westminster Rifles, 26th December 1914

Christmas 1914 found the Westminsters in flooded trenches opposite the Saxon 107th Regiment in the Rue du Bois. The first hints of a truce came on Christmas Eve: *'You will be very much surprised to hear I had one of the best Christmas Days I have had for years. On Christmas Eve I went to the trenches and the Germans were singing carols to our men and we were singing to them. They then shouted to us, "A Merry Christmas, British comrades. You English are fine singers."*' Rifleman E. E. Meadley, Queen's Westminster Rifles. Letter in *Northampton Daily Echo and Mercury*, 15th January 1915.

That Christmas every soldier received a Princess Mary tin containing cigarettes, tobacco, a Christmas card and a photograph of the Princess. The soldiers now had plenty of gifts to barter with as souvenirs. Rifleman Ollis of the Queen's Westminster Rifles reminisced: *"A few hours before we were jolly careful to keep our heads below the parapet and now we were sitting on it, throwing cigarettes and tobacco to our enemies who wandered out into the middle of the lines."* Many of the Germans spoke English. Rifleman A J Philip struck up conversation in no-man's land with a German officer from Catford, and elsewhere a German soldier was keen to find out how Fulham F.C. had been getting on! He was not the only German football fan.

Rifleman William Eve described how the Westminsters played football in no-man's land, while on a different part of the Front that Christmas, a Lieutenant Johannes Niemann famously described how: *"the Fritzes beat the Tommies by 3-2."* Many of the battalions in the line had footballs with them, some were sent by clubs like Chelsea, following requests from fans. On Christmas morning, Rifleman Treloar, of the Queen's Westminster Rifles returned to his trench with a sample of German ammunition and a button as souvenirs, while Rifleman C H Brazier got one of them to write his name and address on a postcard as a souvenir.

Some of the Westminsters took things too far and paid the consequences. Rifleman Byng, Sands and Pearce went missing and Sergeant Bernard Brookes was sent out to look for them: *"the Bosches told us that two men the night before had walked into their trench in a state, which proved that they had 'drunk of the loving cup, not wisely, but too well.' We asked that they should be returned to us, but they refused on account of the fact that these men had seen the position of their machine guns."*

They were not the only men who were carried away by the spirit of the occasion. Sergeant Brookes wrote somewhat disapprovingly of a 'Germ' staggering around in women's clothing. However, Rifleman C. H. Brazier's letter seems to suggest Brookes had mistaken the identity of the Christmas Truce cross-dressers: *"We found old bicycles, top-hats, straw hats, umbrellas etc. We dressed ourselves up in these and went over to the Germans. It seemed so comical to see fellows walking about in top-hats and with umbrellas up. Some rode the bicycles backwards. We had some fine sport and made the Germans laugh."*

SIMPLY WONDERFUL, Football Between the British and German Trenches.

From Rifleman William Eve, of the 1st Battalion Queen's Westminsters.

I have never, and am not likely again to witness such scenes as took place last night and this morning.

The order was sent down from our captain that during Christmas we were not to do any sniping unless we were sniped at. So last night we were talking to the Germans in their trenches, and standing up on the parapet with lighted matches.

Never to be Forgotten.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and the ground was white with frost. It was a spectacle never to be forgotten. We were like a lot of ants on an ant-hill and all right up to now. Our fellows and the Germans have been walking about, meeting halfway. Our chaps took out cake and chocolate.

It is simply wonderful that here in the midst of war, this glorious day should have such a hold as to make peace between us for a day: to-morrow we shall be going for each other again. Our chaps actually have been playing football in front, and the officers were allowed to go and converse, providing they were dressed as private.

"God Surely Reigns."

Try and picture it to yourself; there is not a man to be heard, and everyone strolling about as though there was no thought of war. God surely reigns on high.

Of course, we were prepared for a surprise, and the front was so severe last night that we had to work the bolts of our rifles every quarter of an hour to keep them free.

And this morning the German soldiers were calling out "Happy Christmas," and various other things that you know. It is wicked that we should be here shooting each other when they don't want to fight any more than we do.

Some of our chaps have just come in; they have been exchanging cigarettes. This is a rotten war.

Newspaper article report describes the Christmas Truce.
National Army Museum



Sergeant Bernard Brookes.
Bob Brooks (grandson)



Drag artist Rifleman Weeks, a West End actor who joined the Queen's Westminster Rifles.
City of Westminster Archives



Rifleman William Eve of the Queen's Westminster Rifles. Chris Eve



Soldiers from both sides stand together reflecting the absurdity of war, 1914. *The Daily Mirror*



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