Christmas in the Trenches, 1914

By the end of November 1914 the crushing German advance that had swallowed the Low Countries and threatened France had been checked by the allies before it could reach Paris. The opposing armies stared at each other from a line of hastily built defensive trenches that began at the edge of the English Channel and continued to the border of Switzerland. Barbed wire and parapets defended the trenches and between them stretched a "No-Mans-Land" that in some areas was no more than 30 yards wide.

Life in the trenches was abominable (terrible). Continuous sniping, machinegun fire and artillery shelling took a deadly toll. The misery was heightened by the ravages of Mother Nature, including rain, snow and cold. Many of the trenches, especially those in the low-lying British sector to the west, were continually flooded, exposing the troops to frost bite and "trench foot."

The treacherous monotony (boredom) of life in the trenches was briefly interrupted during an unofficial and spontaneous "Christmas Truce" that began on Christmas Eve. Both sides had received Christmas packages of food and presents. The clear skies that ended the rain further lifted the spirits on both sides of no-mans-land.

The Germans seem to have made the first move. During the evening of December 24 they delivered a chocolate cake to the British line accompanied by a note that proposed a cease fire so that the Germans could have a concert. The British accepted the proposal and offered some tobacco as their present to the Germans. The good will soon spread along the 27-mile length of the British line. Enemy soldiers shouted to one another from the trenches, joined in singing songs and soon met one another in the middle of no-mans-land to talk, exchange gifts and in some areas to take part in impromptu soccer matches.

The high command on both sides took a dim view of the activities and orders were issued to stop the fraternizing with varying results. In some areas the truce ended Christmas Day in others the following day and in others it extended into January. One thing is for sure - it never happened again.

"We and the Germans met in the middle of no-man's-land."
- Frank Richards was a British soldier who experienced the "Christmas Truce"

Briton and the Bosche meeting in no-man's-land on Christmas Day, which he read out to us. A few days later it was published in The Times or Morning Post, I believe.

During the whole of Boxing Day [the day after Christmas] we never fired a shot, and they the same, each side seemed to be waiting for the other to set the ball a-rolling. One of their men shouted across in English and inquired how we had enjoyed the beer. We shouted back and told him it was very weak but that we were very grateful for it. We were conversing off and on during the whole of the day.

We were relieved that evening at dusk by a battalion of another brigade. We were mighty surprised as we had heard no whisper of any relief during the day. We told the men who relieved us how we had spent the last couple of days with the enemy, and they told us that by what they had been told the whole of the British troops in the line, with one or two exceptions, had mucked in with the enemy. They had only been out of action themselves 48 hours after being 28 days in the front-line trenches. They also told us that the French people had heard how we had spent Christmas Day and were saying all manner of nasty things about the British Army."

References:
This eyewitness account appears in Richards, Frank, Old Soldiers Never Die (1933); Keegan, John, The First World War (1999); Simkins, Peter, World War I, the Western Front (1991).
Questions to Answer:

1) Imagine you were a soldier during “Christmas in the Trenches” explain your thoughts would be.

2) What are some similarities the soldiers on both sides feel?

3) After spending time, and getting to know soldier on the opposite side, would you still be able to fight them?

4) Do you think this could happen today? Explain your answer