The Christmas Truce

During World War I, enemy troops did the unthinkable. They stopped fighting and celebrated Christmas—together.

PROLOGUE
Prologue narrator: As Christmas 1914 approaches, a cold and rainy Europe is in the throes of World War I. The war has grown out of tensions festering on the continent for years.

Near the French border, French, British, and Belgian troops are trying to prevent Germany from capturing more of France. In an area called the Western Front, the troops have dug trenches. From there, they try to fire on the enemy without giving up territory.

Characters
Prologue narrator
*British soldiers 1-4
*Captain William Boyd, British Army
Karl Aldag, a philosophy student and German soldier
*German soldiers 1-4
General Horace Smith-Dorrien, British Army
Corporal Adolf Hitler, German Army
Captain Rudolf Binding, German Army
Narrators A-E
Epilogue narrator
*indicates a fictional character.
All others were real people.

SCENE 1
Narrator A: The Western Front is more than 475 miles long. Opposing armies crouch in parallel trenches that are sometimes only 50 yards apart. Between them lies a wasteland of barbed wire and corpses called No-Man’s Land.

Narrator B: In one of the muddy trenches, exhausted British soldiers sit and await orders.

British soldier #1: I am so tired of mud! It has been raining for weeks, and we’ve been stuck down here waiting for the enemy to charge.

British soldier #2: The constant explosions are shattering my nerves. Wait, here comes an officer!

Captain William Boyd: Men, we have orders from High Command. It’s time for the raid. Get whatever information you can about the enemy. Up you go—over the top!

British soldier #1: Another suicide run. Good luck!

British soldier #2: Same to you!

Narrator C: About 30 British troops scramble out of their trenches. They dash across No-Man’s Land, leaping over barbed wire they had secretly cut through the night before. They hope that their approach will be a surprise. But the Germans are ready. From the safety of their trenches, they shoot down the soldiers. There is no shield or shelter in No-Man’s Land.

Boyd (to himself): This is insane! High Command is ordering these raids just to keep the men from getting bored and lazy.

Narrator D: Elsewhere on the Western Front, a German soldier and philosophy student named Karl Aldag writes a letter to his parents, shielding it from the rain.

Karl Aldag (writing): This life of slime and mud fills me with disgust. There are rats and lice everywhere—

German soldier #1: Hey, Mr. Philosophy, we’re about to go on a raid. How can you write a letter?

Aldag: I might not make it back.

SCENE 2
Narrator E: Another night, Captain Boyd sends two soldiers into No-Man’s Land on a different kind of mission. They return

Words to Know
- court-martial (v): to put on trial before a military court.
- fraternization (n): brotherly behavior; associating with an enemy.
- front (n): a line of battle; a zone of conflict between armies.
- projectile (n): an object that can be or has been shot.
as quietly as they left.

Boyd: Did you get information?

British soldier #3: Sir, we heard them talking, but we couldn't understand what they were saying.

British soldier #4: We heard coughing—and laughing.

Boyd: Why were they laughing?

British soldier #4: I don't know, sir. But they sounded just like us.

Narrator A: On the German side, Aldag also begins to see things differently.

Aldag: Do you hear that?

German soldier #2: Hear what?

Aldag: The British are singing hymns. How beautiful!

German soldier #1: You are too sentimental, Mr. Philosophy. This is war!

Aldag: You can find beauty even in war, if you pay attention.

Narrator B: As Christmas nears, men all along the Western Front reach out to the enemy in different ways. But at British headquarters, General Smith-Dorrien is not happy. He issues new orders for the troops.

General Horace Smith-Dorrien: We cannot have British soldiers singing with Germans! If our men no longer see the Germans as enemies, all is lost. Fraternization is officially prohibited.

Narrator C: Elsewhere on the front, a German corporal is just as unhappy at how things are going.

Corporal Adolf Hitler: This fraternization is dangerous! We cannot win if we turn our enemies into friends.

German soldier #3: Perhaps they were never our enemies in the first place.

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**Scene 3**

**Narrator D:** The High Command on each side orders attacks leading up to Christmas. Thousands of men are killed and wounded. But just before the holiday, soldiers are cheered by gift boxes from people at home as well as their governments. German soldiers also receive small pine trees with candles.

**Narrator E:** On Christmas Eve, it snows. The muddy ground freezes, making it easier for the men to move about in the trenches. Then Captain Boyd receives another order from High Command.

**Boyd:** Men, the enemy may be planning a Christmas attack—

**British soldier #3:** Captain, look! **Narrator A:** The Captain turns. German soldiers are standing in No-Man’s Land with lighted Christmas trees. They sing “Silent Night” in German as snow falls. The Captain is stunned.

**British soldier #4:** It’s—amazing. **Boyd:** Indeed, it is.

**Narrator B:** The British watch the Germans in awe.

**Boyd:** Perhaps a Christmas cease-fire is a good idea after all.

**Narrator C:** Captain Boyd ventures into No-Man’s Land, calling out in German. Behind him, his men are singing “Silent Night” in English.

**Narrator D:** Similar incidents are happening elsewhere on the front. This angers German Captain Rudolf Binding.

**German soldier #4:** Sir, a projectile has landed in our trench. It appears to be a gift from the British—a Christmas pudding!

**Captain Rudolf Binding:** Men at war should not celebrate Christmas. Enemies, death, and a Christmas tree—they cannot live so close together.

**Scene 4**

**Narrator E:** On Christmas morning, the men on the front awaken to silence. No planes, machine-gun fire, or explosions. They hear birds for the first time in months. On the German side, Karl Aldag stands and looks across No-Man’s Land.

**German soldier #1 (still hunkered down):** What do you see?

**Aldag:** A sign! It says “Merry Christmas.” Should we write back?

**German soldier #2:** I have a better idea.

**Narrator A:** The soldier grabs his gift package and climbs out of the trench. He walks slowly into No-Man’s Land. A British soldier joins him there. They exchange gifts and shake hands, communicating as best they can.

**Narrator B:** Cease-fires are arranged all along the Western Front, and men from opposing sides offer each other holiday greetings. But the sight of enemies making peace enranges Corporal Hitler.

**Hitler:** Such a thing should never happen in wartime!

**German soldier #3:** Come on, Corporal, it’s Christmas.

**Hitler:** Have you no German sense of honor?

**Narrator C:** Honor itself is on many men’s minds as they stand in No-Man’s Land, surrounded by the bodies of their fallen comrades. They help each other bury the dead, holding services in both German and English.

**Narrator D:** Before returning to their trenches, the soldiers exchange food and souvenirs.

**British soldier #3:** Have you ever seen such a Christmas, Captain?

**Boyd:** Never!

**British soldier #4:** Today’s peace will probably bring hell tomorrow.

**Boyd:** I suspect, gentlemen, that we will feel it was worth it.

**Scene 5**

**Narrator E:** When word of the Christmas truce gets back to the British General, he is furious.
General Smith-Dorrien: I want the names of the units and officers who took part in this. They must be disciplined!

Narrator A: German Captain Binding conveys a similar message to his men.

Binding: High Command directs that fraternization is to cease! Officers allowing it will be court-martialed. It is time to fight.

German soldier #4: But sir, they are good fellows. We can't shoot.

Binding: If you won't shoot the enemy, the officers will shoot you.

Narrator B: British soldiers also struggle with their orders.

British soldier #3: I won't shoot at them. How can I? We just exchanged Christmas gifts!

British soldier #4: No one said we had to shoot at them.

Narrator C: All along the front, soldiers have the same idea. They fire their weapons as ordered, but shoot into the air. In some places, officers issue warnings before the shooting starts. But General Smith-Dorrien has another plan.

Smith-Dorrien: We shall reassign the units, separating opponents who have become friendly. A truce like this shall never happen again.

Narrator D: In the end, the men have no choice. As they are forced back into battle, peace and goodwill are once again things of the past.

EPilogue

Epilogue narrator: When the war ended in 1918, little ground had been gained. The front lines were remarkably similar to those that had existed in 1914. But more than 8 million soldiers and 6.5 million civilians had died in the conflict.

Some men who participated in the truce said that if they had not been under the command of others, the war would have ended that day without another shot fired. “It is especially saddening that such soldiers are not in charge,” read an editorial in The Herald, an English newspaper. “If they were, we would have a natural and human Europe.”

Today, the Christmas Truce of 1914 serves as a powerful reminder that even in war, enemies can put down their weapons and extend a hand of peace.

—Louise Rozett

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Think About It

1. Why do you think the soldiers and officers had differing viewpoints about the truce?
2. What does Aldag mean when he says, “You can find beauty even in war?”

“A Deeper Appreciation”

An interview with Jim Murphy, author of TRUCE: The Day the Soldiers Stopped Fighting

Q: Do you know of any truces similar to the one in 1914?
A: There have always been small truces during wars, though most lasted for only a few hours and were called for specific reasons—usually, to get wounded soldiers off the battlefield or to bury the dead. The 1914 truce involved tens of thousands of soldiers and lasted for many days in some places. In one [place], it lasted from Christmas to Easter! Also, it was a much more friendly event, with enemy soldiers meeting on the battlefield to chat, share food, play music or sports.

Q: What do you hope students will learn from this story?
A: I hope they come away realizing that people have a great deal more in common than we sometimes realize. And I hope they understand that going to war is a very serious choice and that they have to weigh the reasons for going to war very, very carefully.

Q: What surprised you most while researching World War I?
A: That it didn’t have to happen. All sides went out of their way to paint their enemies as evil monsters and to suggest that they would attack at any minute, which made most citizens fearful and ready for war. No one really entered into serious negotiations to ease these tensions.

Q: What draws you to history?
A: I love learning about the past—what it was like to live through such events as the truce in 1914, for instance. . . . If we can see and feel what our ancestors went through, it will give us a deeper appreciation of how the country we live in today came about.