



HISTORICAL NOTE

Although *CHRISTMAS IN THE TRENCHES* is a fictional account, the Christmas Truce of 1914 really happened. It was a series of events occurring along the front line that stretched over 400 miles, through eastern France, from the Belgian coast in the north to the Swiss border in the south.

Four months earlier at the start of World War I (or the Great War, as it came to be known), millions of men from all over Europe had responded enthusiastically to the calls of their leaders to enlist. Most people believed it would be a short war, sure to be over by Christmas. But as winter began, thousands of soldiers had been killed or wounded and the ugly

reality of the battlefield had set in.

By December 1914, the Allied forces (Belgium, France, and Britain) were locked in a stalemate with the Germans, each side hoping to wait the other out. The troops were shielded by hastily dug trenches. These narrow ditches, although deeper than the height of a standing soldier, provided little protection from the bitter cold of that winter.

Between the two armies was a barren stretch of ground called No Man's Land, generally wider than the length of two football fields. In some places, only 30 yards separated the entrenched troops. In these spots, they were so near that soldiers on one side could hear their enemies on the other side talking.

From such close quarters, many of the troops must have wondered what the men across the way were really like. Were they content to be stuck in these cold, muddy trenches fighting in the name of the Kaiser or the Queen, or wouldn't they prefer to be at home? As Christmas Eve approached, many soldiers must have been thinking about home and peace. Some had received packages from their

families filled with holiday offerings. Even the royal families of Britain and Germany had shipped gifts to their troops. And Germany had sent Christmas trees to their men on the front lines.

All along the trenches, remarkable things began to happen. In the midst of a terrible war, men willed the fighting to stop, even if only for a few hours. As many as 100,000 may have participated in the unofficial truces that Christmas.

Some recorded eyewitness accounts in diaries and letters.

Albert Moren, a seventeen-year-old British private, wrote:

It was a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere; and...there was a lot of commotion in the German trenches and then there were those lights—I don't know what they were. And then they sang "Silent Night"—"*Stille Nacht*."

Corporal John Ferguson, a Scotsman, wrote:

...What a sight—little groups of Germans and British extending almost the length of our front!... Where they couldn't talk the language they were making themselves understood by signs, and everyone seemed to be getting on nicely. Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours ago we were trying to kill!

Kurt Zehmisch, a German soldier, wrote in his diary:

The English brought a soccer ball from the trenches, and pretty soon a lively game ensued. How marvelously wonderful, yet how strange it was. The English officers felt the same way about it. Thus Christmas, the celebration of Love, managed to bring mortal enemies together as friends for a time.

The two definitive references about the Christmas Truce are *SILENT NIGHT* by Stanley Weintraub (Free Press, 2001; Penguin, 2002, expanded paperback edition) and *CHRISTMAS TRUCE* by Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton (Pan Macmillan Ltd, 1994, expanded paperback edition) both of which were used in developing this note.

For more information about the truce and World War I, including additional references, visit our website at www.christmasinthetrenches.info.