

The Christmas Truce - a Readers' Theatre production

1: We are representing soldiers from World War I. We are reading from their journals.

2: The Christmas Truce of 1914 is one of the most remarkable incidents of World War I and perhaps of all military history.

3: Starting in some places on Christmas Eve and in others on Christmas Day, the truce involved thousands of soldiers.

4: Nearly everything described here is drawn from first-hand accounts in letters and diaries of the time. This is a true story!

Soldier 1: Christmas Day, 1914. Dear mother, it is 2:00 in the morning and most of our men are asleep in their dugouts.

Soldier 2: Yet I could not sleep myself before writing to you of the wonderful events of Christmas Eve. In truth, what happened seems almost like a fairy tale, and if I hadn't been through it myself, I would scarcely believe it.

Soldier 3: Just imagine: While you and the family sang carols before the fire there in London, I did the same with enemy soldiers here on the battlefields of France!

Soldier 4: As I wrote before, there has been little serious fighting of late. The first battles of the war left so many dead that both sides have held back until replacements could come from home. So we have mostly stayed in our trenches and waited.

Soldier 5: But what a terrible waiting it has been! Knowing that any moment an artillery shell might land and explode beside us in the trench, killing or maiming several men. And in daylight not daring to lift our heads above ground, for fear of a sniper's bullet.

Captain: Through all this, we couldn't help feeling curious about the German soldiers across the way. After all, they faced the same dangers we did, and slogged about in the same muck.

Soldier 6: Of course, we hated them whenever they killed our friends. But other times, we joked about them and almost felt we had something in common.

Soldier 7: And now it seems they felt the same.

Soldier 8: Just yesterday morning—Christmas Eve Day—we had our first good freeze. Cold as we were, we welcomed it, because at least the mud froze solid. Everything was tinged white with frost, while a bright sun shone over all. Perfect Christmas weather.

Soldier 9: During the day, there was little shelling or rifle fire from either side. And as darkness fell on our Christmas Eve, the shooting stopped entirely. Our first complete silence in months! We hoped it might promise a peaceful holiday, but we didn't count on it. We'd been told the Germans might attack and try to catch us off guard.

Soldier 10: I went to the dugout to rest, and lying on my cot, I must have drifted asleep. All at once my friend was shaking me awake, saying, "Come and see! See what the Germans are doing!" I grabbed my rifle, stumbled out into the trench, and stuck my head cautiously above the sandbags.

Soldier 11: I never hope to see a stranger and more lovely sight. Clusters of tiny lights were shining all along the German line, left and right as far as the eye could see. "What is it?" I asked in bewilderment, and someone answered, "Christmas trees!"

Soldier 12: And so it was. The Germans had placed Christmas trees in front of their trenches, lit by candle or lantern like beacons of good will. And then we heard their voices raised in song. (*singing*) "Stille nacht, heilige nacht"

Soldier 13: This carol may not yet be familiar to us in Britain, but one soldier knew it and translated: "Silent night, holy night." I've never heard one lovelier—or more meaningful, in that quiet, clear night, its dark softened by a first-quarter moon.

Sing first TWO LINES of Silent Night, holy night...

Soldier 14: When the song finished, the men in our trenches applauded. Yes, British soldiers applauding Germans! Then one of our own men started singing, and we all joined in. (*singing*)

STUDENTS SINGING - first TWO LINES of ...

... "The first Noel, .

Soldier 1: In truth, we sounded not nearly as good as the Germans, with their fine harmonies. But they responded with enthusiastic applause of their own and then began another. (*singing*) "O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum"

Soldier 2: Then we replied. "O come all ye faithful" But this time, they joined in, singing the same words in Latin. . .

STUDENTS SINGING - first TWO LINES of 'O come all ye faithful' ...

at the same time as first TWO LINES of "Adeste fideles ..."

Soldier 3: British and German harmonizing across No Man's Land! I would have thought nothing could be more amazing—but what came next was more so. We heard one of the Germans shout:

German 1: "English, come over! You no shoot, we no shoot."

Soldier 4: "You come over here."

(Two German soldiers rise from behind a trench, and walk towards the English soldier)

Soldier 5: To our astonishment, we saw two figures rise from the trench, climb over their barbed wire, and advance unprotected across No Man's Land. One of them called

German 2: "Send officer to talk."

Soldier 6: I saw one of our men lift his rifle to the ready, and no doubt others did the same—but our captain called out

Captain: "Hold your fire."

Soldier 7: Then he climbed out and went to meet the Germans halfway. We heard them talking, and a few minutes later, the captain came back with a German cigar in his mouth!

Captain: We've agreed there will be no shooting before midnight tomorrow, but sentries are to remain on duty, and the rest of you, stay alert.

Soldier 8: Across the way, we could make out groups of two or three men starting out of trenches and coming toward us. Then some of us were climbing out too, and in minutes more,

there we were in No Man's Land, over a hundred soldiers and officers of each side, shaking hands with men we'd been trying to kill just hours earlier!

MORE GERMAN AND BRITISH SOLDIERS COMING OUT FROM BEHIND TRENCHES AND SHAKING HANDS.

Soldier 9: Before long a bonfire was built, and around it we mingled—British khaki and German grey. I must say, the Germans were the better dressed, with fresh uniforms for the holiday.

Soldier 10: Only a couple of our men knew German, but more of the Germans knew English. I asked one of them why that was.

German 3: "Because many have worked in England! Before all this, I was a waiter at the Hotel Cecil. Perhaps I waited on your table!"

Soldier 11: "Perhaps you did!" (laughing)

Soldier 12: Then one of the German soldiers said

German 4: I have a girlfriend in London. The war interrupted our plans to get married.

Soldier 13: Don't worry. We'll have you beat by Easter, then you can come back and marry your girlfriend.

Soldier 14: He laughed at that. Then he asked

German 4: If I give you a postcard for her, will you send it to her for me?

Soldier 14: Sure. No problem.

German 5: Although I am German, I used to work in London. I was a porter at Victoria Station. Would you like to see a picture of my family?

Soldier 1: His eldest sister was so lovely, I said I should like to meet her someday.

German 5: I would like that very much. I'll give you my family's address.

Soldier 1: Even those who could not understand each other's language could still exchange gifts—our tea for their coffee, our corned beef for their sausage. Badges and buttons from uniforms changed owners, and one of our soldiers walked off with the one of the German soldier's helmets!

(EXCHANGE GIFTS)

Soldier 2: After meeting these men, I wonder how truthful our newspapers have been. These are not the "savage barbarians" we've read so much about. They are men with homes and families, hopes and fears, principles and, yes, love of country.

Soldier 3: In other words, men like ourselves. Why are we led to believe otherwise?

Soldier 4: As it grew late, a few more songs were traded around the fire, and then all joined in for—I am not lying to you—"Auld Lang Syne."

SING first TWO LINES of "Auld Lang Syne ..."

Soldier 5: Then we parted with promises to meet again tomorrow, and even some talk of a football match. I was just starting back to the trenches when an older German clutched my arm.

German 1: Why can't we have peace and all go home?

Soldier 6: I told him gently, "That you must ask your emperor." He looked at me then, searchingly.

German 1: "Perhaps, my friend. But also we must ask our hearts."

Soldier 6: Tell me, has there ever been such a Christmas Eve in all history? And what does it all mean, this impossible befriending of enemies? For the fighting here, of course, it means regrettably little. Decent fellows those soldiers may be, but they follow orders and we do the same.

Captain: Besides, we are here to stop their army and send it home, and never could we shirk that duty. Still, one cannot help imagine what would happen if the spirit shown here were caught by the nations of the world.

Soldier 7: Of course, there are always arguments between people and between countries.

Soldier 8: But what if our leaders were to offer good wishes in place of threats?

Soldier 9: Songs in place of slurs?

German 2: Games in place of guns?

Soldier 10: Presents in place of revenge?

German 3: Would not all war end at once?

Soldier 11: All nations say they want peace.

German 4: Yet on this Christmas morning, I wonder if we want it quite enough.

German 5: We have given this presentation to show how the special spirit of Christmas is magical.

German 1: Our story demonstrates how people can put aside fighting to share the beauty of Christmas.

Captain: Unlike how the soldiers of World War One had to continue fighting, we hope that for us, the Christmas spirit will inspire continued kindness all year long!