

This is the letter a British soldier fighting in France wrote to his sister on **25 December 1914** - it tells about an extraordinary event that happened during World War 1, that was undisclosed for a long time....  
Happy reading!

Christmas Day, 1914

*My dear sister Janet,*

*it is 2:00 in the morning and most of our men are asleep in their **dugouts**—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 scarce believe it. 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!***

*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. **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.*

*And the rain—it has fallen almost daily. Of course, it collects right in our trenches, where we must bail it out with pots and pans. And with the rain has come **mud**—a good foot or more deep. It splatters and cakes everything, and constantly sucks at our boots. One new recruit got his feet stuck in it, and then his hands too when he tried to get out—just like in that American story of the tar baby! (part 1)*

*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. What's more, their first trench was only 50 yards from ours. Between us lay **No Man's Land**, bordered on both sides by **barbed wire**—yet they were close enough we sometimes heard their voices. Of course, we hated them when they killed our friends. But other times, we joked about them and almost felt **we had something in common**. And now it seems they felt the same.*

*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.*

*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**. (part 2)*

*I went to the dugout to rest, and lying on my cot, I must have drifted asleep. All at once my friend John 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**.

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, and John answered, "Christmas trees!" 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. **Stille nacht, heilige nacht ....**

This carol may not yet be familiar to us in Britain, but John 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. 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. **The first Nowell, the angel did say ....**

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. **O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum ....** Then we replied. **O come all ye faithful** . But this time they joined in, singing the same words in Latin. **Adeste fideles.**

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. "English, come over!" we heard them shout. "You no shoot, we no shoot." There in the trenches, we looked at each other in **bewilderment**. Then we shouted jokingly, "You come over here."

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, "Send officer to talk."

I saw one of our men lift his rifle to the ready, and no doubt others did the same—but our captain called out, "Hold your fire." 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!

**"We've agreed there will be no shooting before midnight tomorrow,"** he announced. "But **sentries** are to remain **on duty**, and the rest of you, stay **alert.**" (part 3)

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!

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. Only a couple of our men knew German, but more of the Germans knew English. I asked one of them why that was. "Because many

have worked in England!" he said. "Before all this, I was a waiter at the Hotel Cecil. Perhaps I waited on your table!" "Perhaps you did!" I said, laughing. He told me he had a girlfriend in London and that the war had interrupted their plans for marriage. I told him, "Don't worry. We'll have you beat by Easter, then you can come back and marry the girl." He laughed at that. Then he asked if I'd send her a postcard he'd give me later, and I promised I would.

Another German had been a porter at Victoria Station. He showed me a picture of his family back in Munich. His eldest sister was so lovely, I said I should like to meet her someday. He beamed and said he would like that very much and gave me his family's address.

Even those who could not converse could still exchange gifts—our cigarettes for their cigars, our tea for their coffee, our corned beef for their sausage. Badges and buttons from uniforms changed owners, and one of our lads walked off with the infamous spiked helmet! I myself traded a jackknife for a leather equipment belt—a fine souvenir to show when I get home. Newspapers too changed hands, and the Germans howled with laughter at ours. They assured us that France was finished and Russia nearly beaten too. We told them that was nonsense, and one of them said, "Well, you believe your newspapers and we'll believe ours."

Clearly they are lied to—yet after meeting these men, I wonder how truthful our own 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. In other words, men like ourselves. Why are we led to believe otherwise? (Part 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**." 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. "My God," he said, "why cannot we have peace and all go home?" I told him gently, "That you must ask your emperor." He looked at me then, searchingly. "Perhaps, my friend. But also we must ask our hearts." (part 5)

And so, dear sister, 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. 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. Of course, disputes must always arise. But what if our leaders were to offer well wishes in place of warnings? Songs in place of slurs? Presents in place of reprisals? Would not all war end at once? All nations say they want peace. Yet on this Christmas morning, I wonder if we want it quite enough.

Your Loving Brother,

Tom

Read the letter and answer the following questions

1. The soldier gives his sister some facts about fighting and life in the trenches - can you list them below?
2. How did British soldier feel about the German ones (in part 1 of the letter)?
3. According to what this soldier writes in part 2 of the letter – what did the British and the German soldiers have in common?
4. What does the soldier report happening on Christmas Eve? summarise briefly
5. Why does the soldier write: '*I would have thought nothing could be more amazing*' - what was amazing really?
6. What does the line: "*We've agreed there will be no shooting before midnight tomorrow,*" mean?
7. What do British and German soldiers did exactly on Christmas Day according to what reported in this letter? - list all the events
8. What do you think the sentence "*Well, you believe your newspapers and we'll believe ours*" refers to and implicitly means?
9. Why do you think the soldier tells his sister: "*I wonder how truthful our own newspapers have been*"
10. Can you explain what this dialogue exchange between the British and the German soldier means?- in part 4 "*My God,*" he said, "*why cannot we have peace and all go home?*" I told him gently, "*That you must ask your emperor.*" He looked at me then, searchingly. "*Perhaps, my friend. But also we must ask our hearts.*"
11. The final part (part 5) of the letter contains a series of questions and remarks made that the soldier - What do you think is he really asking and wondering?
12. Finally what do you think this letter actually says about World War 1 and wars in general?

## FOLLOW UP

The Christmas truce of 1914 has inspired many artists and was even the subject of a commercial in 2014 here are a few examples:

Enjoy!

- Film - Joyeux Noel  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8vp-i3k3Xs&t=503s>
- Song: Pipes of peace  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwyFTRGiIUU>
- British supermarket Christmas commercial 2014  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eJn3j7Qr9A>
- The story behind the commercial  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s1YvnfcFVs>

And Merry Christmas to you all!

