

CHRISTMAS 2003¹

A letter written early Christmas Day, 1914, from a British soldier in a trench somewhere in France...

My dear sister Janet,

It is two in the morning and most of our men are asleep in their dugouts—but I could not sleep before writing to you of the wonderful events of Christmas Eve. What happened seems almost like a fairy tale. If I hadn't been through it myself, I would scarce believe it.

Yesterday morning—Christmas Eve 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 try to catch us off guard and attack.

I went to the dugout to rest. All at once my friend John was shaking me awake, saying, "Come and see what the Germans are doing!" I grabbed my rifle, stumbled out into the trench, and stuck my head cautiously above the sandbags.

I doubt I shall ever see a stranger or more lovely sight...clusters of tiny lights shining all along the German line...left and right as far as the eye could see. The Germans had placed Christmas trees in front of their trenches, lit by candles and lanterns like beacons of good will.

And then...we heard them singing... "*Stille nacht, heilige nacht*". It didn't take us long to join in with "*Silent Night, Holy Night*".

We started singing "*The first Noel*" And they sang "*O Tannenbaum... O Tannenbaum.*"

Then we all 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.

¹ Edited and delivered by Kenneth A. Jarvis from "The Christmas Truce" by Aaron Shepard. Adapted for "Storytelling" by the author.
(<http://www.aaronshep.com/storytelling/GOS21.html>)

Across the way, we could make out groups of two or three men climbing out of their trenches and coming toward us. Then some of us climbed out as well, and in minutes, there we were in No Man's Land, shaking hands with men we'd been trying to kill just hours earlier! Before long a bonfire was built, and around it we mingled...singing more Christmas carols and talking of our homes and families.

And so, dear sister, I wonder...has there ever been such a Christmas Eve in all history? One cannot help imagine what would happen if the spirit shown here were caught by the nations of the world.

All nations say they want peace. Yet on this Christmas morning, I wonder if we want it quite enough.

Your loving brother, Tom.