

The Christmas Truce

Told by Aaron Shepard

Adapted by LHU Language Center

Characters:

Soldiers 1–4

SOLDIER 1: (*to audience*) Christmas Day, 1914. Dear mother,

SOLDIER 4: (*to audience*) My darling Meg,

SOLDIER 2: (*to audience*) My good friend Charles,

SOLDIER 3: (*to audience*) My dear sister Janet,

SOLDIER 1: It is 2:00 in the morning and most of our men are asleep in their dugouts.

SOLDIER 4: Yet I could not sleep myself before writing to you of the wonderful events of Christmas Eve.

SOLDIER 2: In truth, what happened seems almost like a fairy tale.

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 1: As I wrote before, there has been little serious fighting of late. We have mostly stayed in our trenches and waited.

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 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.

SOLDIER 4: What's more, their first trench was only fifty yards from ours. Between us lay No Man's Land, bordered on both sides by barbed wire—

SOLDIER 2: 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 3: And now it seems they felt the same.

SOLDIER 1: Just yesterday morning—Christmas Eve Day—we had our first good freeze.

SOLDIER 4: Everything was tinged white with frost, while a bright sun shone over all. Perfect Christmas weather.

SOLDIER 2: 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.

SOLDIER 3: Our first complete silence in months!

SOLDIER 1: 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!"

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 2: "What is it?" I asked in bewilderment, and someone answered, "Christmas trees!"

SOLDIER 1: And then we heard their voices raised in song. (*singing*) "Stille nacht, heilige nacht . . ."

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 2: When the song finished, the men in our trenches applauded. Yes, British soldiers applauding Germans!

SOLDIER 3: Then one of our own men started singing, and we all joined in. (*singing*) "The first Nowell, the angel did say . . ."

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 4: Then we replied. (*singing*) "O come all ye faithful . . ."

SOLDIER 2: But this time they joined in, singing the words in Latin. (*singing*) "Adeste fideles . . ."

SOLDIER 3: British and German harmonizing across No Man's Land!

SOLDIER 1: "English, come over!" we heard one of them shout. "You no shoot, we no shoot."

SOLDIER 4: There in the trenches, we looked at each other in bewilderment. Then one of us shouted jokingly, "You come over here."

SOLDIER 2: To our astonishment, we saw two figures rise from the trench, climb over their barbed wire, and advance unprotected across No Man's Land.

SOLDIER 3: One of them called, "Send officer to talk."

SOLDIER 1: Our captain climbed out and went to meet the Germans halfway.

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 3: Then some of us were climbing out, 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!

SOLDIER 1: Before long a bonfire was built, and around it we mingled—British khaki and German grey.

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 2: One German told me he had a girlfriend in London. Then he asked if I'd send her a postcard he'd give me later, and I promised I would.

SOLDIER 3: Another German. He showed me a picture of his family back in Munich. His eldest sister was so lovely, I told him I should like to meet her someday. He beamed and gave me his family's address.

SOLDIER 1: 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.

SOLDIER 1: As it grew late, a few more songs were traded around the fire.

SOLDIER 4: Then we parted with promises to meet again tomorrow,

SOLDIER 3: 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."

SOLDIER 4: And what does it all mean, this impossible befriending of enemies?

SOLDIER 2: 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.

SOLDIER 1: Still, one cannot help imagine what would happen if the spirit shown here were caught by the nations of the world.

SOLDIER 4: Of course, disputes must always arise.

SOLDIER 2: But what if our leaders were to offer well wishes in place of warnings?

SOLDIER 3: Songs in place of slurs?

SOLDIER 1: Presents in place of reprisals?

SOLDIER 4: Would not all war end at once?

SOLDIER 2: All nations say they want peace.

SOLDIER 3: Yet on this Christmas morning, I wonder if we want it quite enough.

SOLDIER 1: Yours truly,

SOLDIER 4: Yours always,

SOLDIER 2: Sincerely,

SOLDIER 3: With all my love,

SOLDIER 1: John

SOLDIER 4: Andrew

SOLDIER 2: Philip

SOLDIER 3: Tom