

THE ROYAL WELCH FUSILIERS AND THE GREAT CHRISTMAS TRUCE, 1914

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The summer crisis of 1914, which had begun on 28 June with the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir Franz Ferdinand, approached its climax on 2 August, the day on which the German government sent an ultimatum to Belgium demanding passage for its troops through Belgian territory in order to attack France. On 3 August, the Belgian government refused the German demands and Britain issued a guarantee of armed support to Belgium should Germany violate Belgian neutrality, in support of its position as a guarantor of Belgium's neutrality under the Treaty of London in 1839. **Germany immediately declared war on France** and the British government ordered general mobilization. So we come to 4 August, the day that lies, as Barbara Tuchman put it, like an iron gate between us and the old world. That day, German troops crossed the Belgian frontier and attacked the fortress of Liège. In response, the British government sent an ultimatum to Germany demanding the withdrawal of German troops from neutral Belgium which, if it had not been accepted by 11pm London time, meant war. No such undertaking was received, and consequently Britain declared war on Germany.

British war plans

Britain intended to stay out of any European war if at all possible, even though a well-developed mobilization and deployment plan existed, which had been worked out by the General Staff as relations with France, the old enemy, had warmed. This rapprochement by two former, and recent, enemies was quite an achievement by Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had tried to pull Britain into a German alliance by threats rather than by negotiations. Under these Anglo-French plans, Britain, for the first time in a century, committed itself to a continental rather than a wholly maritime strategy in Europe.¹ This is not to say that the British fleet, the most powerful naval force in the world, suddenly became less important – but that is another story.

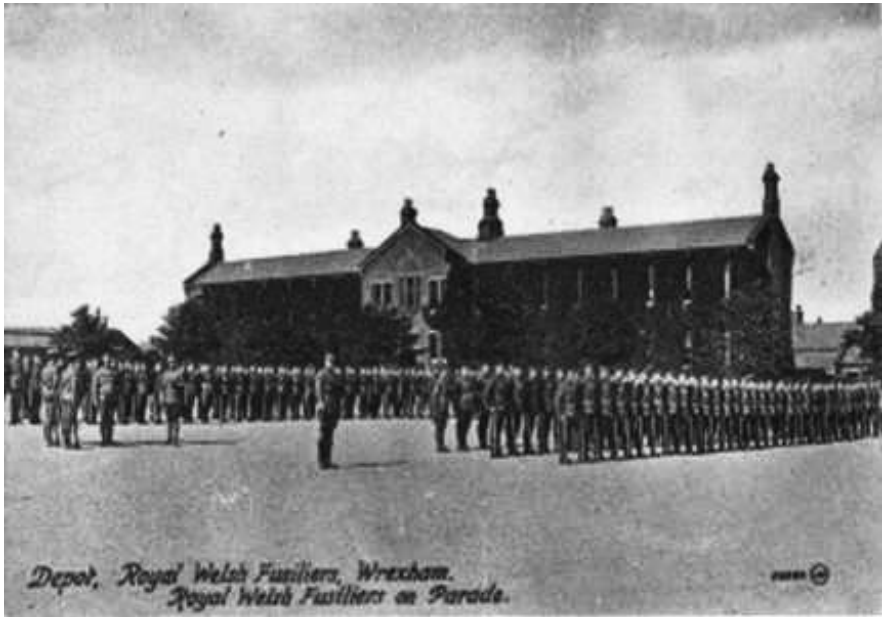
British plans, in outline, involved the mobilization and deployment of a force of up to six infantry divisions – three corps – and a cavalry division (not much when compared with the 34 corps of the German army in the west) which would fall in on the left flank of the French armies. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was not to be a Prussian-style force, however, but a small, mobile, and strategically decisive *balancing* force; as the staff plan put it, ‘to make up for the inadequacy of the French Armies for their great task of defending the entire French frontier’.²

1 Allan Mallinson, *1914: Fight the Good Fight. Britain, the Army and the Coming of the First World War* (London: Bantam, 2013), pp. 99–120.

2 Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen 1914–1918* (London: Cassell, 1926).

British mobilization – reserves

In 1914, the Royal Welch Fusiliers recruited throughout Wales, in the border counties of England, in Ireland, in Birmingham, and in London. Its order of battle included two regular army battalions – the 1st and 2nd; a Militia, or Special Reserve, battalion – the 3rd – based in Wrexham; and four Territorial Force battalions: the 4th in Flintshire; the 5th in Denbighshire; the 6th in Caernarvonshire and Anglesey; and the 7th in Montgomeryshire, Merioneth, and Cardiganshire.



Troops on parade at Wrexham, mobilization, 1914

All these battalions were immediately warned for mobilization, so let us briefly clarify what that meant. Mobilization was – is – the orders, administrative machinery, transportation, and so on that brought an army from its peace-time state to a war footing. It was the issue of war stores like ammunition, the loading of supply columns, the establishment of field hospitals and stores dumps. It was also the business of raising regular army units from peacetime manpower strength to their higher war establishment, using reservists.

In Britain, there were three classes of reservists.³ First, there was the Territorial Force of nine divisions, which would go to war once embodied as a formed force,

3 Jonathon Riley, 'An Expeditionary Army: The Mirror of 1914', *Generalship* (1998) <<http://generalship.org/mirror-of-1914.html>> [accessed 1 December 2016].

but which needed up to six months preparation. In Wales, this was the 53rd (Welsh) Division, of which the four Royal Welch Fusiliers territorial battalions formed a part. It does not come into our story and will therefore be left aside. Secondly, there were regular reservists. These were men who had completed a period of service with the regular army but remained liable to recall for a period after their discharge, in the event of war or other emergency. By 1914, the standard regular army engagement was seven years with the Colours and five in the reserve,⁴ which had produced an available manpower of 145,090. An efficient recall and mobilization process existed, by which men knew the unit they belonged to, and this was backed up by a comprehensive movement order and reception plan at regimental and corps depots.

When put to the test in 1914, the system in general worked extremely smoothly. One such reservist was Private Frank Richards, who will come into this story later. He had been born near Newport, Monmouthshire in 1883 and in 1901 he enlisted into The Royal Welch Fusiliers. In 1902, he was sent to the 2nd Battalion in India, where he remained for the rest of his service, until 1909. In 1914, he was recalled to the Regimental Depot at Wrexham and from there went back to his old battalion. In later life he wrote two books, *Old Soldier Sahib* and *Old Soldiers Never Die*,⁵ with the help of Robert Graves and others, which tell the story of his service in India and during the Great War.



Troops at the Depot in Wrexham on mobilization, 1914

4 Times Newspaper, *The Times History of the War (1914–1918)*, 22 vols (London, 1922), I, p. 130.

5 Frank Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936); *Old Soldiers Never Die* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933).

The third class of reservists were Special Reservists. These men were, like Territorials, part-timers, but they enlisted into the Special Reserve battalions of regiments. These were the survivors of the old militia units, which for centuries had formed the largest part of Britain's military establishment. These men turned in for training for a set number of days each year, had to pass annual tests in shooting and other skills, and, in the event of mobilization, would not serve with their S. R. battalion but be drafted as individual reinforcements to the regular battalions of their regiments. One such regular reservist was Private William Ashley,⁶ from Macclesfield in Cheshire, who enlisted into the 3rd Battalion of The Royal Welch Fusiliers in 1902. In 1914, he was drafted to the 1st Battalion of the Regiment and had a most remarkable war behind German lines – but that is another story.

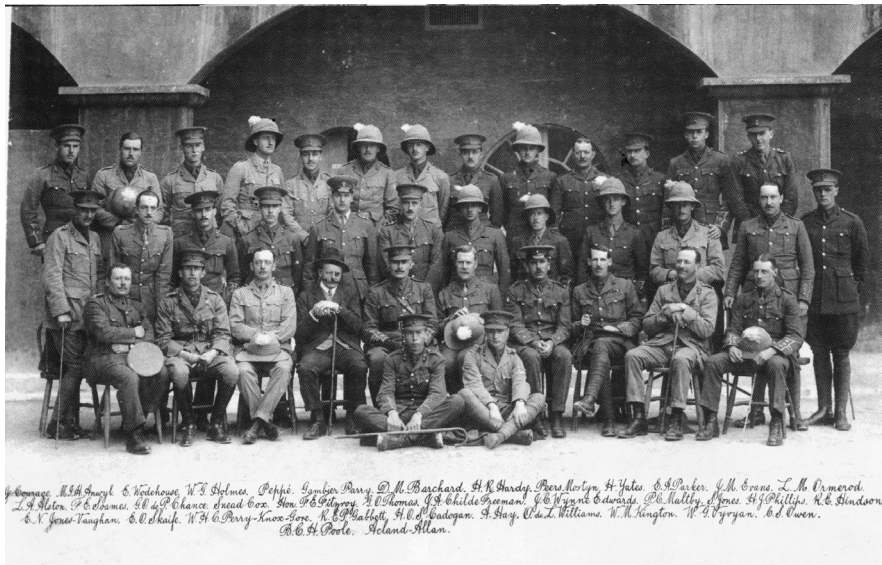
The War, August–December 1914

Once the decision was taken to go to war, the military plans swung into action. With the Channel secured by the Royal Navy, the Expeditionary Force crossed with barely a hitch and moved forward to its concentration area between Avesnes and Le Cateau. Contact was made with the advancing Germans at the battles of Mons and Le Cateau on 26 August 1914, when the strength of the German army, especially in artillery, was rudely realized. There followed the sixteen-day withdrawal to the Marne. It was now that the want of enough forces on the German side became apparent, for as the German right wing swung south and east towards Paris, a gap opened: the Germans had exposed their right flank, and, once this was realized, the French armies, with the British largely in support, launched the great counter-attack of the Marne from 5 to 12 September. The Germans in their turn were now pushed back and their chance to win the war in a month was gone. But they too withdrew in good order to the line of the River Aisne and here, between 12 and 15 September, the line solidified. Then began what has become known as 'the race for the sea', as the two sides tried to outflank each other to the west. By the time that winter weather set in, in November, the line was continuous from the Channel to the Swiss frontier.

As Christmas approached, there were moves towards some sort of truce or armistice. Pope Benedict XV proposed the idea in early December,⁷ and the Germans accepted almost at once but with the proviso that so too did everyone else. That, however, was a forlorn hope. The Muslim Turks had no interest in such an idea; the Russians and Serbs, being Orthodox, celebrated Christmas eleven days later and were also hostile to anything coming from Rome. The French and Belgians, after seeing their countries invaded, were in no mood for talk of goodwill. Similar proposals from the USA also got nowhere. In all armies, however, there were preparations for the troops' Christmas at the front.

6 John Krijnen, 'The Amazing Story of Private William Ashley' (unpublished MS, 2011).
7 Benedict XV, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum Appealing for Peace*, 1 November 1914.

The 1st Battalion of The Royal Welsh Fusiliers landed, having shipped from Malta, on 7 October 1914 at Zeebrugge, at a strength of 1,150 men – of whom 342 were reservists – and joined the 7th Division. The 2nd Battalion had already landed at Rouen on 11 August 1914 with a strength of 28 officers and 973 men – of whom 359 were reservists – having only recently come back from Karachi in India, where it had been stationed for nearly eighteen years. The two battalions had in fact met in Malta during the 2nd Battalion's homeward voyage on 1 March 1914 and celebrated St David's Day together for the first time in the history of the regiment. A picture of the two officers' messes that day (below) shows thirty-seven men, of whom, by Christmas, half were dead, wounded, missing, or captured. Another seven were killed by 1918 – so a third of those in this picture did not survive the war and of those who did, only two (Captains Parker and Yates, the Quartermasters) escaped unscathed.⁸



The two battalions had very different experiences of the war during the late summer and early autumn of 1914. 2 R. W. Fus were originally designated as line of communication troops but were rapidly placed under the command of 19 Independent Infantry Brigade. The battalion's first contact with the enemy was

8 Dudley Ward, *Regimental Records of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, 1914–1918*, Vol. III (London: Foster Groom, 1928).

at Le Cateau on 26 August. Its losses were very slight in these first encounters, after which the battalion took part in the retreat from Mons to Lagny on the River Marne. The battalion's first real losses, one officer and twelve men, were taken during the fighting on the Marne. The battalion was again positioned in a quiet part of the line during the Battle of the Aisne. On 12 October, 19 Brigade was placed under the command of the 6th Infantry Division and was ordered to occupy the heights to the north of Lille. It began entrenching there ten days later at the Ferme de La Cordonnerie. The battalion was then redeployed into what one diarist described as 'rotten trenches' to the east of Houplines, a district of Armentières, and then into billets in Houplines. On 25 November, it was ordered into the line at the village of Frelinghien on the French/Belgian border,⁹ where it was to remain for the next month.

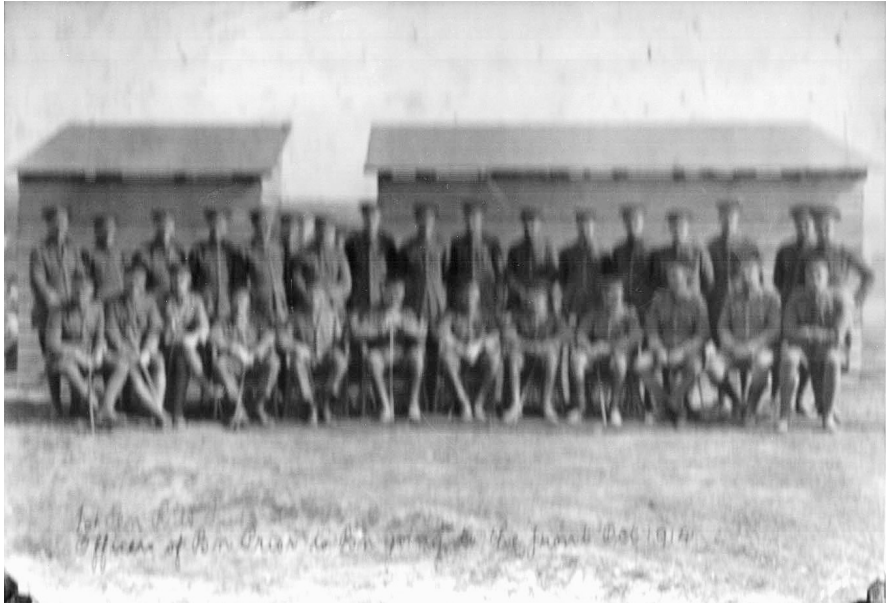


Area Map

Matters were far, far worse for the 1st Battalion than for the 2nd. During the First Battle of Ypres, it had been heavily engaged, losing 177 men in a single day, 19 October 1914. No more than 400 strong on the 20 October, it was almost annihilated by a German attack to the west of the village of Zandvoorde (where a new memorial was unveiled in October 2014). Here, it was reduced by casualties to only ninety all ranks. Its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel H. O. S. ('Hal')

9 2 R. W. Fus War Diary, August to December 1914, in R. W. F. Mus/Archives.

Cadogan, was among those killed. By 21 October only one officer, a Quartermaster Sergeant, and thirty men were still alive and unwounded in 1 R. W. Fus.¹⁰ Another picture held by the Regimental Archives (below) shows twenty-nine officers who were with the battalion on embarkation. By Christmas, only one was alive and unwounded; eleven were dead, seven wounded, another seven wounded and captured, and three missing.



The Officers, 1 RWF, on departure for France, August 1914

A government report, published in 1922, stated that for the whole BEF between 4 August and 30 November, losses amounted to approximately 84,000 men out of the original 160,000.¹¹ The scale of losses in this period of the war was far greater as a proportion of those engaged than the losses on the Somme and these early losses had a massive impact on the post-war, and Second World War, regular army. Talk of an entire lost generation of British men during the Great War does not stand up, but there certainly was one lost generation – the generation of young, professional soldiers and their leaders.

¹⁰ See the account in Henry Cadogan, *The Road to Armageddon* (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 2009).

¹¹ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914–1920* (War Office, March 1922).

The Royal Saxon Infantry

What of the German side? On 9 August 1914, the 133rd (9th Royal Saxon) Infantry Regiment transferred from Zwickau on the river Mulde to the Luxembourg border and from 18 August it advanced to the French border. The River Maas was crossed on the 22 August. The first contact with the enemy was made on 23 and 24 August. On 1 and 2 September, the river Aisne was crossed and fighting continued. From 6 September on, the regiment took part in the Battle of the Marne. On 11 September, the Saxons began to withdraw to the east of Chalons. Following the fall of Lille in mid October, they too started digging-in to the south of this industrial town.

Its losses had also been severe. From the 133rd Regiment's eighty-four officers and 3,294 men on the day of its mobilization, 8 August 1914, thirty-seven officers and 1,001 men were dead or wounded by 3 October. On 8 December, the King of Saxony visited his troops and welcomed delegations from all battalions. Repeated attacks by the British on the positions of the Saxons were repelled between 17 and 19 December, for, under pressure from Marshal Joffre and General Foch, Sir John French had begun a series of attacks in the early days of December. All of these ended in costly failure; a particular case was the assault on Ploegsteert Wood near Ypres. According to the 133rd Regimental report, however, once these attacks had subsided, all was quiet between 22 and 28 December when the 133rd was in the line around the village of Frelinghien.

The troops at Frelinghien, December 1914

The captain commanding the machine-gun company of the 2nd (Silesian) Jaeger-Battalion which was serving with the Saxons was Freiherr (Baron) Friedrich Karl Maximilian von Sinner. Von Sinner had been born on 24 August 1875 at Saarbrücken and commissioned in March 1895. He became a machine-gun specialist in 1901. Von Sinner later commanded a battalion, survived the war, and retired as a colonel in December 1920. On Christmas Eve, von Sinner and his men were in the line, in front of the brewery on the south side of Frelinghien and right next to the River Lys.¹²

Opposite them, commanding A Company of 2 R. W. Fus, was Captain Clifton Inglis Stockwell, who had been born on 27 September 1879 and was commissioned in 1899; he was, as it happened, a fluent German speaker. Stockwell later commanded 1 R. W. Fus, and was given the nickname 'Buffalo Bill', as reported by Robert Graves, and referred to as 'Kinjack' in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*.¹³ He ended the war as a Brigadier General and was by all accounts tough, brave but very fair. These two very different people, von Sinner and Stockwell, and their two very different units had, through the chances of war, ended up opposite each other at Frelinghein.

12 Archives of Saxony, Dresden.

13 Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), p. 22 et seq.

What about this village, Frelinghien? On 23 February 1915, the principal of the Albertinum secondary school at Freiberg, Senior Teacher Dr Otto Eduard Schmidt, received an order from the King of Saxony sent to him by the Ministry of Culture saying that he was to go to the Western Front and record for posterity the part the Saxon troops played in the Great War. Through the record of his journey, which he conducted between 20 March and 9 April 1915 and which was published in the same year, we are fortunate to have a contemporary impression of the situation of the Saxon troops at Frelinghien.

Schmidt described the positions on the Lys at Frelinghien thus:

The beautiful church in the middle of the town is a view of terrible destruction, only the gothic outer wall and a deplorable stump of the tower wall still stand [...] We enter a big ruin of a former brewery [...] Carefully we climb up the stairs and look, through a big hole created by a shell, unseen from the enemy, to the West. There runs the Lys right next to the bottom of our feet, at the time not wider than the [...] Mulde at Zwickau, but in times of flooding a couple of hundred meters wide, and then it is a beast feared by the soldiers. Because then she fills up every trench and dugout in her reach with her mud-green water. The iron bridge, which once crossed the river, lies shattered by shells, a bent entanglement, in the water, but next to it our pioneers had laid a wooden path [...] A couple of hundred meters away from the Western bank I can see the long stretched line of English trenches.¹⁴

Some more detail from the eyes of a soldier comes from a letter by Corporal (later Lieutenant) Herbert Jahn, then aged twenty-five. He too survived the war and retired in 1920 with Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class, the Albrecht-Order 2nd Class with Swords, the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Saint Heinrich, and the Hohenzollern Cross of Honour 3rd Class with Swords:

After the heavily fortified brewery and the adjacent buildings had been taken and were in German hands we started digging in [...] Our position was a particularly bad one, because the terrain in front of us was slowly inclining towards the enemy and was difficult to overlook [...] The distance from the enemy is now only 80 metres on the right flank, 100m and 150m in the centre, and to the left [...] 200m.¹⁵

Here at Frelinghien, the men of both sides would have to spend Christmas in the cold and wet of the trenches along the River Lys. The administrative organization of both armies worked hard to get special hot food and a ration of rum up to the line. Both sides, too, had distinctive Christmas presents for their soldiers. All

14 Archives of Saxony, Dresden.

15 From a field post letter, Frelinghien, 7 December 1914, Archives of Saxony, Dresden.



The Church in Frelinghien, 1914



Princess Mary's Gift Box

British soldiers were sent Princess Mary's gift box, which came into existence as a reminder of the Queen Victoria tin box, a small box with chocolate which was given as a Christmas present to her soldiers fighting in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War. Princess Mary was the third child and only daughter of King George V and Queen Mary and had launched the Princess Mary Fund to provide comforts for the troops. In late November 1914, this had a value of about £100,000 – in terms of purchasing power, just over £8 million at today's rates. From this, 426,724 brass boxes were purchased, divided into three classes – A, B, and C – and packed with cigarettes, or a pipe and an ounce of tobacco, a tinder lighter or matches, a Christmas card from the King and the Queen and a photograph of the Princess. For non-smokers the box could hold acid drops. For officers, there was a khaki writing case and a sterling silver pen in a .303 cartridge. The Indian colonial troops were given sugar candy and a small tin box with spices. Nurses were given chocolate.¹⁶

To the Germans, the Christmas presents became known as 'Gifts of Love'. From the Kaiser, each soldier received a cigar case with the inscription 'Christmas in the field 1914'. The Crown Prince, as a reminder of the present from the King in the war of 1870–71, presented the soldiers of his Fifth Army with a pipe showing his picture. Saxony planned to have one parcel for every fifty men, containing four or five presents for each soldier. The presents could be anything: clothing, food, or luxuries, hygiene and other articles for personal use. Three county districts and ninety-one cities and towns participated in the collections, which in most cases were organized by the German Red Cross. The schools of Leipzig, for example, collected 13,000 parcels, those of Chemnitz 3,065 parcels. Leipzig alone collected gifts worth 400,000 Reichmarks in the city's main department store, which, together with the King's Christmas parcels, required twenty-three railway freight wagons to move them to Lille on 3 December.¹⁷

The truce at Frelinghien

The War Diary of 2 R. W. Fus reported the days leading up to Christmas and the surprising events of the morning of 25 December – a subject on which the German regimental history was, by contrast, completely silent.¹⁸ A lot more detail comes from letters home by nineteen-year-old Lieutenant Mervyn Richardson who wrote an account of the truce in the form of a poem which closely accords with the account given by C. I. Stockwell. Private John Morris also wrote a short account

16 From about 1997, British troops on operation in Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan were given a gift box each Christmas. The cardboard box contained treats such as chocolate, toiletries, and other items donated by businesses; the tradition lives on.

17 Information provided by the Archives of Saxony, Dresden.

18 2 R. W. Fus War Diary, August–December 1914 in R. W. F. Mus/Archives; CI Stockwell, *Personal Diary*, by permission of the Stockwell Family. See also Ward, *Regimental Records*, vol. III.



The Crown Prince's Christmas Gift

of the truce in a letter home;¹⁹ but above all, the most comprehensive account is in the personal diary and a long letter to his wife by C. I. Stockwell, which related what happened:

24 December 1914, Frelinghien:

Was very quiet on the front. A pheasant in No Man's Land was shot through the head and brought in. It was probably a refugee from Plug Street Wood, and raised by the Hennessy of brandy fame.

25 December 1914, Frelinghien:

Our Pioneer Sergeant, 'Nobby' Hall, made a screen, and painted on it, 'A Merry Christmas', which we hoisted on Christmas morning. No shots were fired. On the left we could see that our fellows were carrying their breakfast in the open and everything was quiet. Both sides got a bit venturesome and looked over the top; then a German started to walk down the tow-path toward our lines and Ike Sawyer went to meet him. The German handed over a box of cigars. Later the Germans came boldly out of their trenches, but our men were forbidden to leave theirs, so they threw out tins of bully, and plum and apple jam etc., with plenty of sympathy in the shape of, 'Here you are, you poor hungry bastards' and other such-like endearments [...]

19 Both held by R. W. F. Mus/Archives.

The Saxons opposite were quite human, One, who spoke excellent English, used to climb up in some eyrie in the brewery and spend his time asking 'how London was getting on', 'how was Gertie Miller and the Gaiety', and so on. Lots of our men had blind shots at him in the dark, at which he laughed. One night I came out and called, 'Who the hell are you?' At once came back the answer, 'Ah, the officer – I expect I know you – I used to be the head-waiter at the Great Central Hotel.'

I ran out into the trench and found that all the men were holding their rifles at the ready on the parapet, and that the Saxons were shouting, 'Don't shoot. We don't want to fight today. We will send you some beer.' A cask was hoisted on to the parapet and three men started to roll it into the middle of No Man's Land. A lot more Saxons then appeared without arms. Things were getting a bit thick. My men were getting a bit excited, and the Saxons kept shouting to them to come out. We did not like to fire as they were all unarmed, but we had strict orders and someone might have fired, so I climbed over the parapet and shouted, in my best German, for the opposing Captain to appear. Our men were all chattering and saying, 'The Captain's going to speak to them.' We finally met and formally saluted. He introduced himself as Count Something-or-other, and seemed a very decent fellow. He could not talk a word of English. He then called out his subalterns and formally introduced them with much clicking of heels and saluting. They were all very well turned out, while I was in a goatskin coat. One of the subalterns could talk a few words of English, but not enough to carry on a conversation. I said to the German Captain, 'My orders are to keep my men in the trench and allow no armistice. Don't you think it is dangerous, all your men running about in the open like this? Someone may open fire.' He called out an order, and all his men went back to their parapet, leaving me and the five German officers and a barrel of beer in the middle of No Man's Land. He then said, 'My orders are the same as yours, but could we not have a truce from shooting today? We don't want to shoot, do you?' I said, 'No, we certainly don't want to shoot, but I have my orders to obey' – to which he agreed. I then suggested that we should return to our trenches and that no one should come out of the trench. We agreed not to shoot until the following morning, when I was to signal that we were going to begin. He said, 'You had better take the beer; we have lots.' So I called up to men to bring the barrel to our side. I did not like to take their beer without giving something in exchange, and I suddenly had a brainwave. We had lots of plum puddings, so I went for one and formally presented it to him in exchange for the beer. He then called out 'Waiter', and a German private whipped out six glasses and two bottles of beer, and with much bowing and saluting we solemnly

drank it, amid cheers from both sides. We then all formally saluted and returned to our lines.²⁰

Private John Morris wrote home:

25 December 1914, Frelinghien:

Xmas is here now and our chaps and the Germans are shaking hands running to meet each other, between the trenches. They don't seem to want the war, like our chaps [...] We have just had the Xmas card of the King and Queen's photo together, very nice. It's been a nice day for Xmas day, very frosty and cold [...] with Best Love to you all, From your True Son Jack.²¹



German Soldiers in Frelinghien – Out of the Trenches on Christmas Day 1914

Private Frank Richards recorded the same events in his memoir of the war, which differs in some detail from Stockwell's account – however, one must bear in mind that Stockwell was writing at the time while Richards was being interviewed after a lapse of fifty years:

20 Diary of C. I. Stockwell, 25 December 1914, by permission of Major Miles Stockwell.

21 R. W. F. Mus/Archives.

One of their men, speaking in English, mentioned that he had worked in Brighton for some years and that he was fed up to the neck with this damn war and would be glad when it was all over. We told him that he wasn't the only one that was fed up with it.

During the whole of Boxing Day we never fired a shot, and they the same, each side seemed to be waiting for the other to set the ball a-rolling. One of their men shouted across in English and inquired how we had enjoyed the beer. We shouted back and told him it was very weak but that we were very grateful for it. We were conversing off and on during the whole of the day.²²

Recently a new account has come to light in the letters of Private James Davies, a native of Lampeter and a soldier in Stockwell's company. Davies survived the war but was invalided out of the Army in 1915 when a trench collapsed, breaking his back. He died aged 61 in Cardiff in 1959. In one letter, he wrote that he had had:

a good chat with the Germans on Xmas Day. They were only fifty yards away from us in the trenches. They came out and we went to meet them. We shook hands with them. We gave them cigs, jam and corned beef, they also gave us cigars but they didn't have much food. I think they are hard up for it. They were fed up with the war.²³

These events were not restricted to the village of Frelinghien. A short distance up the line, Stockwell's cousin Charlie was serving with the Seaforth Highlanders. Opposite them was another battalion of the 133rd Infantry Regiment. Twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant Johannes Niemann was commanding a platoon of this, the 3rd Battalion, and he wrote an account in which he described a rough-and-tumble game of football and an exchange of gifts.²⁴ Souvenirs had been exchanged between the Saxons and the R. W. Fusiliers as well – a German forage cap, which was given to a fusilier in No-Man's Land on 25 December 1914, amazingly enough survived the war and is now in the Regimental Museum.



German forage cap given to a soldier of the R.W. Fus in No-Man's Land, 25 December 1914 [R. W. F. Mus/Archives]

22 Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, pp. 45–6.

23 Caroline Davies, 'Cigars, Songs ... and a Nice Kip, Thanks to the 1914 Truce', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2015, p. 5.

24 Archives of Saxony, Dresden.

Aftermath

By mutual consent, the truce came to an end after Boxing Day. Not every unit up and down the line had participated: some attempts at fraternization had been met with warning shots. One wonders what response the 1st Battalion of The Royal Welch Fusiliers would have given, having suffered the losses they had, if it had been them in the line at Frelinghien rather than the 2nd Battalion. Of those that had been in the line, most were relieved immediately after Christmas so that they could have a share in the comforts of the rear area.

It was not long before the accounts and photographs of the truce began to appear in the press. The London *Daily News* and the *New York Times* broke the story on 31 December with the headline 'Foes in Trenches swap pies for wine'.²⁵ Pictures followed in the *Daily Sketch*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Daily Graphic* and a steady stream of articles and features ran on until the end of January. The leader in the *Daily Mirror* of 2 January was a fair example of the coverage,²⁶ for although anti-German feeling was running very high the paper conceded that it was hard for soldiers 'to keep up the gospel of hate where chance throws men into a companionship of toil and danger'. Other articles appeared even in the most pro-war establishment newspapers: the *Illustrated London News*,²⁷ *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Scotsman*, and *Manchester Guardian*.²⁸ On the German side, there was coverage too in papers such as the *Berliner Tageblatt*, *Tägliche Rundschau*, and the magazine *Reclams Universum*.

Official reaction to the events was, understandably, firmly disapproving. Sir John French wrote that: 'When this was reported to me I issued immediate orders to prevent any recurrence of such conduct, and called the local commanders to strict account, which resulted in a good deal of trouble.'²⁹ French, like his counterparts in other armies, was of course charged with fighting a war and, for someone in his position, there could be no room for compromise in what had already become a war from which only one side would emerge with its nationhood and integrity intact. He did, however, later reflect that:

I have since often thought deeply over the principle involved in the manifestation of such sentiments between hostile armies in the field. I am not sure that, had the question of the agreement upon an armistice for the day been submitted to me, I should have dissented from it. I have always attached the utmost importance to the maintenance of that chivalry in war which has almost invariably characterized every campaign of modern times in which this country has been engaged.³⁰

25 'Foes in Trenches Swap Pies for Wine', *Daily News*, 1 January 1915.

26 'An Historic Group', *Daily Mirror*; 1 January 1915 and Leader, 2 January 1915.

27 *I. L. N.*, 9 January 1915.

28 'Christmas Truce at the Front', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 December 1914; 'The Amazing Truce', 4 January 1915; and 'Christmas Day in the Trenches', 6 January 1915.

29 Sir John French, *1914* (London: Constable, 1919), chapter 18.

30 *Ibid.*

On the German side, too, there was a crackdown: the truce did not at all accord with the Kaiser's concept of *Shrecklichkeit* – frightfulness – in war. However, one brigade commander, Major General Richard Kaden, wrote in his memoirs after the war:

From a strictly warlike point of view one can have a different opinion on such 'season hallowing'. Seen from a human point of view, to me it is a deeply poignant expression of a common Christian feeling, which, being far from soldierly misconduct, even in this men-murdering war, lets one not forget that, here as well as there, stood men, loving and defending their fatherland, but who also deeply felt the holy peace of Christmas in their hearts.³¹

Long after the war, in 1962 in fact, the poet and writer Robert Graves wrote a short story on the truce. Graves had served in the 1st and 2nd Battalions of The Royal Welch Fusiliers, although he did not reach France until early 1915. He did, however, know Frank Richards and helped him write his account of the war in *Old Soldiers Never Die*. The story portrays a fictional infantry regiment, but the events he describes are very clearly those at Frelinghien – albeit an amalgam of what 2 R. W. Fus and the Seaforths, and indeed the Saxons, had experienced. Graves went on in his story to describe a second truce, at Christmas 1915, in which the same two battalions again ended up facing each other in the line and in which the survivors again meet in No-Man's Land.³²

1915 had been a year of battles which A. J. P. Taylor aptly described as having no meaning other than as names on a war memorial.³³ From the British point of view, it had been a year of bloodshed for no advantage, both on the Western Front and at Gallipoli. It was also the year that saw the first use of poison gas, the first *Zeppelin* raids on England, the sinking of the liner *Luisitania*, and the rapid increase of submarine warfare. In France and Flanders, a much larger British Army was holding a much longer stretch of the front and it was now under the command not of Sir John French but of Sir Douglas Haig. Haig was determined that there would be no repetition of the events of 1914 and firm instructions were issued right down the chain of command, reminding everyone of the 'unauthorized truce' of the previous year and ordering that 'nothing of the kind is to be allowed this year'.³⁴ Many divisional and brigade commanders issued orders that any German showing himself was to be shot. On the German side, too, there were orders against fraternization, and threatening the direst consequences: any visits, agreements not to fire on each other, exchanges of news or whatever were not only strictly forbidden but would be counted as

31 Archives of Saxony, Dresden.

32 Robert Graves, 'Christmas Truce' in *The Shout and Other Stories* (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

33 A. J. P. Taylor, *Illustrated History of the First World War* (London: Penguin, 1974), pp. 62–3.

34 See, for example, the signal issued by Major-General Sir Charles Barter, G. O. C. 47th Division, cited in Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce* (London: Papermac, 1994; reissued Pan 2001), p. 198.

‘verging on high treason’ – code for a capital crime.³⁵

So is there any truth in Graves’s story? Actually yes – up to a point. At Christmas 1915, both 1 and 2 R. W. Fus were out of the line, resting: thus far, Graves is wrong. However, there was a R. W. Fus battalion in the line: the famous 15th Battalion, the 1st London Welsh, in which served many other notable literary figures of the war. The 1915 Christmas Truce is, however, another story and one which will be told in a subsequent article.

There is, of course a great deal of myth about the Great War. One such myth, relayed for example in the musical *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, was that that the ordinary soldiers on both sides longed only for a comradely peace and were excited or compelled to fight by jingoistic officers pursuing their class interest. In fact, it was the officers on both sides who initiated or agreed the Christmas truces in 1914 and 1915. After a parley to agree the terms of the ceasefires, most officers mingled with the enemy just as keenly as their men did. In his memoir *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Robert Graves explained why:

My battalion [2 R. W. Fus] never allowed itself to have any political feelings about the Germans. A professional soldier’s duty was simply to fight whomever the King ordered him to fight [...] The Christmas 1914 fraternization, in which the Battalion was among the first to participate, had had the same professional simplicity: no emotional hiatus, this, but a commonplace of military tradition – an exchange of courtesies between officers of opposing armies.³⁶

He was right. Truces and temporary cessations of hostilities had always formed part of warfare, for various reasons: collecting the wounded, burying the dead, or parley. Some were for a few hours, others – such as during the Dutch-Spanish Wars of the sixteenth century – for years. But they were what Graves said, a commonplace of military tradition.

Bruce Bairnsfather, one of the most popular soldier-writers and cartoonists of the Great War, was present at the truce of 1914 and he recounted that the ordinary soldier was just as hardheaded. There was, he wrote, not an atom of hate on either side during these truces, ‘and yet, on our side, not for a moment was the will to win the war and the will to beat them relaxed. It was just like the interval between the rounds in a boxing match’.³⁷

The poet Siegfried Sassoon, another Royal Welch Fusilier, commented, as did others, that there was often more comradely feeling between the soldiers of the opposing armies, who shared the same dangers and privations, than between soldiers and civilians. Sassoon was in no doubt, for example, that troops would relish the opportunity to take on the pro-war press, or politicians in safe billets, rather than the Germans.³⁸ Robert Graves, like Sassoon, served in the 1st and 2nd

35 See the account in Brown and Seaton, *Christmas Truce*.

36 Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929).

37 Cited in Brown and Seaton, *Christmas Truce*.

38 See, for example, Siegfried Sassoon, ‘Fight to a Finish’, *Cambridge Magazine*, 27 October 1917.

Battalions of The Royal Welch Fusiliers and remarked that the men at the front loathed striking munitions workers at home far more than they hated the Germans and would be 'only too glad of a chance to shoot a few'.³⁹ Even so, there was little if any attempt at a truce in 1916 and none whatsoever in 1917. Fellow-feeling there might be, a degree of chivalry even, but by the end of the second year of war there was no hope of fraternization.

A century on, however, the truce has become a symbol of reconciliation, a glimmer of the light of common humanity among a mass of darkness. In December 2014 at Frelinghien, where a memorial to the truce has stood since 2007, the local communities and troops from the British and German armies gathered to mark the centenary of the truce. On the exact spot – so far as one can tell – where von Sinner and Stockwell had met in 1914, their grandsons, who had both served in their grandfathers' regiments, met and exchanged beer and Christmas pudding. By a strange irony, the space between the lines, where they met, is now a football field.



Memorial to the truce at Frelinghien, December 2014