

THE *SECOND* CHRISTMAS TRUCE, 1915

Lieutenant-General Jonathon Riley

Abstract

Following the famous truce of Christmas 1914 when German and allied soldiers spontaneously put aside their weapons to exchange greetings, a similar event occurred on Christmas Day 1915. Much less remarked upon than the earlier truce, this second truce was strongly discouraged by British commanding officers and yet achieved a temporary break in the hostilities which was clearly welcomed by ordinary soldiers on both sides. This article brings forward literary and documentary evidence about the second (and last) Christmas truce of the First World War, drawing on the diaries of serving soldiers among the allied troops.

On 25 December 1914, Captain Clifton Stockwell of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers, and Captain Friedrich Freiherr von Sinner of the 2nd (Silesian) *Jaeger* Battalion, had met in no-man's-land to exchange compliments, beer, and Christmas puddings.¹ This meeting was repeated in many areas along the line and even at the time, although officially frowned upon, the truce was much covered in the press – including *The Daily News*,² *Daily Mirror*,³ *Manchester Guardian*⁴ and the *Illustrated London News*⁵ – and there was an understanding, even though anti-German feeling was running high at home, that where chance threw men together in war, even when they were on opposing sides, there was a shared companionship based on experience.

Long after the war, in 1962, Robert Graves, who had served in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, wrote a short story on the truce.⁶

- 1 Frank Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, annotated by H. J. Krijnen and D. E. Langley (Peterborough: Krijnen & Langley, 2004), pp. 45–47 and voice recording in Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum (R.W.F. Mus); Captain J. C. Dunne, *The War the Infantry Knew: 1914–1919* (London: Abacus, 1994), pp. 101–03; C. I. Stockwell's diary and letters cited in Major C. H. Dudley Ward, *Regimental Records of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Vol. III: 1914–1918 France and Flanders* (London: Forster, Groom & Co. Ltd., 1928), pp. 112–13, and in R.W.F. Mus 2708; account by Lieutenant M. S. Richardson dated 31 December 1914 in The National Archives (T.N.A.) WO 95/1365, 2 R.W. Fus. War Dairy August–December 1914. See also Lieutenant-General Jonathon Riley, 'The Royal Welch Fusiliers and the Great Christmas Truce, 1914', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 22 (2016), 154–72.
- 2 'Foes in Trenches Swap Pies for Wine', *Daily News*, 1 January 1915.
- 3 'An Historic Group', *Daily Mirror*, 1 January 1915 and 'Leader', 2 January 1915.
- 4 '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.
- 5 *I.L.N.*, 9 January 1915.
- 6 Robert Graves, 'Christmas Truce', in *The Shout and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 99–115.

Graves did not reach France until early 1915 and so had not been present at the first Christmas Truce. He did, however, know the soldier-writer Frank Richards who had been present at the 1914 Truce and helped him write his account of the war in 'Old Soldiers Never Die'. The story portrays a fictional infantry regiment, but the events of December 1914 that he describes are very clearly those at Frelinghien. 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.

1915 had been a year of battles which the historian A. J. P. Taylor aptly described as having no meaning other than as names on a war memorial.⁷ In France and Flanders in December 1915, 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, who had been in command at Christmas 1914, but of Sir Douglas Haig. Haig had taken command of the B.E.F. (British Expeditionary Force) only a few days before Christmas, on 19 December 1915,⁸ but he was determined that there would be no repetition of the events of 1914. 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'.⁹ Many divisional and brigade commanders issued orders that any German showing himself was to be shot.¹⁰ On the German side, too, there were orders against fraternization, 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 'verging on high treason' – in other words, a capital crime.¹¹

So is there any truth in Robert Graves's story? At Christmas 1915, both the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Royal Welch Fusiliers were out of the line, resting.¹² Thus far, Graves is wrong. However there was a Royal Welch Fusilier battalion in the line: the famous 15th Battalion, the 1st London Welsh. 15 R.W. Fus. was a war-service battalion and had arrived in France in November 1915.¹³ It had seen little serious action thus far and had no reason to feel animosity towards the Germans on a personal level – with the exception of those who had lost friends or brothers in other battalions. Just before Christmas the battalion was in the line at Laventie, just a few miles south of Frelinghien.

Here, in the cold and wet of December, the line was described in the diary of an officer of a unit then holding the sector, Captain Carlos 'Pip' Blacker of the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards:

- 7 Alan J. P. Taylor, *Illustrated History of the First World War* (London: Penguin, 1974), pp. 62–63.
- 8 Gary Sheffield and John Bourne, eds., *Douglas Haig War Diaries and Letters 1914–1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 173.
- 9 See, for example, the signal issued by Major-General Sir Charles Barter, G.O.C. 47th Division, cited in Malcom Brown and Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce* (London: Papermac, 1994), p. 198.
- 10 Brigadier W. Thwaites, Commander 140 Infantry Brigade, for example, passed on his G.O.C.'s instructions in this way. See Brown and Seaton, *Christmas Truce*, p. 198.
- 11 General Order from G.H.Q. Spa dated 12 December 1915.
- 12 Dudley Ward, *Regimental Records*, pp. 159, 161.
- 13 *A Concise History of the 15th R.W.F. (1st London Welsh)* (R.W.F. Mus 3048/B), p. 4.



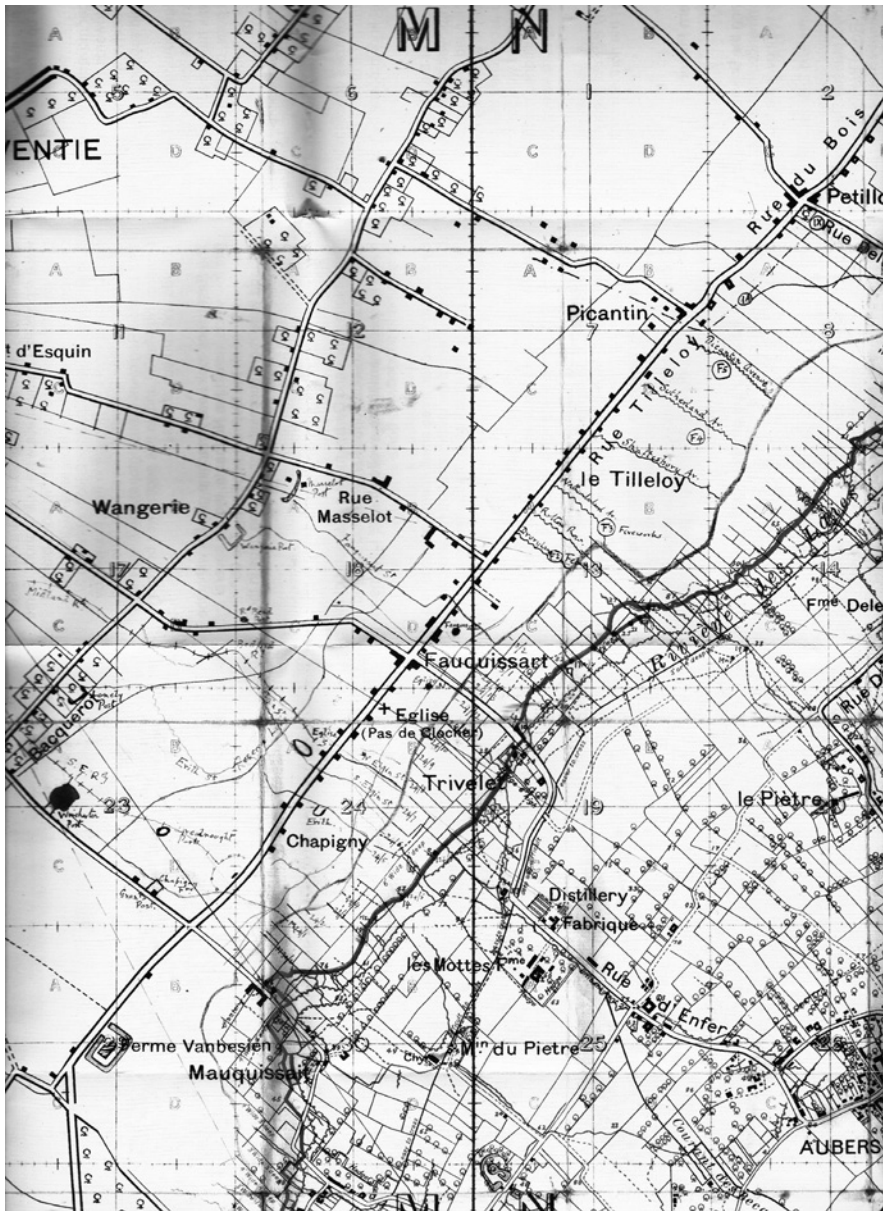
[Fig. 1] *Robert Graves in 1915*
(*R.W.F. Museum 3687*)

It consisted of a line of breastworks through which you could keep watch and shoot. The view through one of these loopholes was not inspiring. Across a stretch of no-man's-land you beheld a conspicuous line of enemy breastworks which looked pale grey in the middle distance [...] At the foot of both lines ran narrow belts of rusty wire which looked dark against the grey sandbags beyond. And between those two belts lay a mostly featureless waste, patched with dead goosefoot and docks and pocked with shell-holes, the deeper ones half-filled with slimy water [...] A confrontation, winding away into seeming infinity on each side, alive with watchfulness.¹⁴

15 R.W. Fus. was not all together in the line: each of its companies was under instruction from a different battalion of 2 Guards Brigade and it was thus spread along a lengthy stretch of the line.¹⁵ This dispersion solves the puzzle of why there are such differing versions of events among the witnesses in 15 R.W. Fus. – according to the Irish Guards' History, one platoon of 15 R.W. Fus. was attached

14 John Blacker, ed., *Have You Forgotten Yet? The First World War Memoirs of C. P. Blacker MC, GM* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2000), p. 68.

15 T.N.A. WO 95/2556/1, 15 R.W.Fus. War Diary, 1 December 1915–28 February 1918.



[Fig. 2] A trench map showing the line at Laventie where 15 R.W. Fus. was in the line with 2 Guards Brigade in December 1915

to each Guards company.¹⁶ The Welsh writer Llewelyn Wyn Griffith's company, C Company, was assigned to Blacker's battalion, 1st Coldstream Guards, and he recounted in his memoir *Up to Mametz* that Haig's orders had been received: 'We must confine our goodwill not only to fellow Christians,' Griffith wrote, 'but to Christians of allied nationality. We were to remain throughout possessed by the spirit of hate, answering any advances with lead.'¹⁷

On Christmas Eve, sounds of singing and merrymaking could be heard in the German trenches opposite C Company and the Coldstreamers, about 100 yards away, which were occupied by Catholic soldiers of the 13th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment.¹⁸ These men were reservists, dragged, probably unwillingly, from their civilian lives; they were also more easy-going as a people than the stern, Protestant Prussians. Soon, shouts of 'Merry Christmas, Tommy' were heard. These were answered with shouts of 'Merry Christmas, Fritz'.¹⁹ Blacker confirms this account, saying that:

The German breastworks were near enough for verbal exchange to be possible between the two sides. [...] I recall someone shouting across: 'What have you got for dinner today Fritz?' The reply sounded like 'a fat goose' (more Germans spoke English than our people spoke German). Fritz was invited to come over, but at this stage there was no movement.²⁰

The Company Sergeant Major of D Company 15 R.W. Fus. was No 22801 John Bradshaw, who had been a regular soldier in the King's Royal Rifle Corps during the South African War and who had, for reasons unknown, enlisted into the Royal Welch Fusiliers in London in January 1915. His diary also survives, and it records how the company was 'brought by motors from Warne to Neuve Chapelle into the trenches with the Grenadier Guards' on 19 December. They withdrew into rest on 20 December and then returned to the trenches with a different battalion on 23 December.²¹ Bradshaw notes that the company was now with the Scots Guards; however, the War Diary records that D Company was attached to the 2nd Battalion Irish Guards.²² According to Rudyard Kipling's *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (1923), the 2nd Battalion was indeed in the line on Christmas Eve but was relieved at 20.00 hrs that night by the 1st Coldstream,²³ as Llewelyn Wyn Griffith also recounts. Bradshaw must, therefore, be mistaken. He

16 Rudyard Kipling, *The Irish Guards in the Great War. Volume II: The 2nd Battalion* (London: Macmillan, 1923), p 41.

17 Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz and Beyond*, ed. and annotated by Jonathon Riley (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010), p. 13.

18 Hermann Cron, *Imperial German Army 1914–18: Organisation, Structure, Orders-of-Battle* (Solihull: Helion & Co, 2001), pp. 111–16.

19 Griffith, *Up to Mametz*, p 14.

20 Blacker, *Have You Forgotten Yet?*, p. 75.

21 Diary of John Bradshaw for 1915 (with permission of Mr John Griffiths), 19–23 December 1915.

22 T.N.A. WO 95/2556/1, 15 R.W. Fus. War Diary, 1 December 1915–28 February 1918.

23 Kipling, *Irish Guards in the Great War*, p. 47.



[Fig. 3] *Two contemporary photographs of the line at Laventie, taken in December 1915, showing the state of the ground and the relatively primitive conditions after a year of war (R.W.F. Museum 3817)*

was never able to complete his account as he died of wounds after a trench raid near Laventie in May 1916.

Another witness to the exchanges on Christmas Eve in D Company 15 R.W. Fus. was Private Bertie Felstead. Felstead died at the age of 106, in 2001, the oldest man then alive in Britain and the last witness of these events.²⁴ In his later life, Felstead remembered how the German soldiers opposite sang, in German, a hymn which shared the same tune with the Welsh hymn, 'Ar Hyd y Nos' ('All Through the Night'). This was probably the German version of the hymn, 'Go my Children with my Blessing' ('Gehen meine Kinder mit meinem Segen'). This choice of hymn – probably a lucky chance – was taken as a much-appreciated acknowledgment of the nationality of the opposing company, and the Royal Welch Fusiliers responded by singing 'Good King Wenceslas' – another detail used by Robert Graves in his fictional account.

After the night's carol singing, Felstead recalled that feelings of goodwill had so swelled up that, at dawn, Bavarian and British soldiers clambered spontaneously out of their trenches. Shouting such greetings as 'Hello Tommy' and 'Hello Fritz' they at first shook hands in no-man's-land, and then presented one another with gifts. German beer, sausages, and spiked helmets were given, or bartered, in return for bully beef, biscuits, and tunic buttons. Bradshaw's diary, rather laconically, confirms that 'the Germans fraternized with our troops for fifteen minutes'.²⁵ Interestingly, Bradshaw's personal effects which were sent back to his family after his death include a brass Bavarian belt buckle which, one can at least speculate, he exchanged in no-man's-land on that Christmas Day a hundred years ago.

Away in C Company's area, Wyn Griffith recounted his memories of a very similar scene,²⁶ and Blacker also recounted the events in this part of the line in his diary:

Loudening noises of shouts and singing came across no-man's-land, and when there was enough daylight figures could be seen moving about between their breastworks and wire. Our people followed suit. The Germans then came out in front of their wire. Our people did the same. No shooting anywhere. Both sides then gained in boldness until there was quite a crowd in no-man's-land [...] The two sides exchanged cigarettes and other souvenirs, including buttons and badges [...] The conversation, which was amiable, went on for about five minutes. It was brought to an end by a burst of shrapnel overhead.²⁷

24 'Bertie Felstead: The last known survivor of no-man's-land football died on July 22, 2001 aged 106', *The Economist*, 2 August 2001; 'Last Soldier recalls the Christmas truce', *Sunday Telegraph*, 22 December 1996; 'Match of the century', *Daily Mail*, 9 November 1999; see also Felstead's obituaries in *The Times*, 26, 28 July 2001 and *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 July 2001.

25 Bradshaw's Diary, 25 December 1915.

26 Griffith, *Up to Mametz*, pp. 14–15.

27 Blacker, *Have You Forgotten Yet?*, pp. 75–76.



[Fig. 4] *Llewelyn Wyn Griffith in 1915 (R.W.F. Museum 3817b)*



[Fig. 5] *Bertie Felstead in 1915 (R.W.F. Museum)*



[Fig. 6] *John Bradshaw in 1915 (Mr John Griffiths)*



[Fig. 7] *Bertie Felstead shortly before his death in 2001 (The Economist)*

Felstead, whose company was removed from Wyn Griffith's, remembered that there was a soccer match of sorts: 'It wasn't a game as such, more a kick-around and a free-for-all. There could have been 50 on each side for all I know. I played because I really liked football. I don't know how long it lasted, probably half an hour'.²⁸ Bradshaw's diary does not confirm this – probably because, as Company Sergeant Major, he disapproved, would have prevented it if he could, and did not wish to preserve any evidence of collaboration which might later be inconvenient.

The Welsh artist and writer David Jones was in B Company, which had been attached to the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards. He recalled that on Christmas morning he heard the Germans singing Christmas carols and the cockneys of 15 R.W. Fus. singing louder, to drown them out. The London Welsh sang 'Casey Jones', a song he particularly liked.²⁹ Later that morning, however, the 3rd Grenadiers went into reserve and so Jones saw no more – but he did hear of the meetings in no-man's-land and wrote of it in his epic poem, *The Anathémata*:

I saw and heard their cockney song salute the happy morning; and later, this same morning [...], walking in daylight, upright, through the lanes of the war-net to outside and beyond the rusted trip-belt, some with gifts, none with ported weapons, embraced him between his fossa and ours, exchanging tokens.³⁰

Recently, another previously unknown account has surfaced. This is the personal diary of Private Robert Keating, of 4 Rectory Close, Clapham, an underage Private of about 16 years old in 15 R.W. Fus. who later transferred to the Royal Engineers and survived the war. He re-joined the Army in the 1920s and by 1942 was a Regimental Sergeant Major; he was afterwards commissioned as an officer in the Intelligence Corps; he died in 1967.

In 1915, Keating was in A Company, assigned to the 1st Battalion Scots Guards who were opposite No 246 Württemberg Reserve Infantry Regiment – Catholic soldiers again but from the Rhineland, not Bavaria, and also reservists.³¹ Keating recorded what had happened after the morning stand-to and breakfast were over on Christmas Day:

Had breakfast after which we shouted greetings to the Germans over the way. We shouted come over – they shouted come over. We stood up and saw them walking on their parapets then some of the Jocks ran across & Gordon [unidentified] and I. The officer was shouting come back! – come back! But we took no heed &

28 Richard Alleyne, 'Veteran of 1915 soccer game dies', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 July 2001;

Bertie Felstead, 'Football made us friends for a day', *Western Mail*, 12 November 1999.

29 Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones in the Great War* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2012), pp. 71–72.

30 David Jones, *The Anathémata: Fragments of An Attempted Writing* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), p. 216.

31 *Reichsarchiv Militär-Verlag* (Berlin, 1927), S. 71, pp. 146–47.

went on. The Germans who turned out to be the Wurttemberg Reserves crowded round us & chatted about old England – one fellow we were talking to was born in Northampton & was longing for the day when he could return. They said the war would end in a few months in our favour & that they were absolutely fed up with everything generally. Just as we were exchanging souvenirs the blooming artillery started and you should have seen us run: – Heaps of fellows we[re] caught in the barbed wire, but really there was no danger to us as the shells were dropping on the German trenches. The reason why we rushed back was because our artillery firing on the Allerman [i.e. Allemands, or Germans] might entice their snipers to fire on us. However, this was not so. Before leaving the Germans one of their officers told one of ours that they would not fire another shot for two days if we did the same, and believe me or believe me not, on our part of the line not a single shot was fired until we were relieved by the Irish Guards on Sunday evening [26 December]. Well, to revert, at 12 noon I was told off for fatigue duty with about two dozen other Scots, we had to [...] get a thousand sand-bags [...] Arriving back in the trench at 2.30 p.m. I dumped my load and joined a party who were burying a dead Scot in ‘no-man’s-land’. We intended burying a lot of fellows but owing to our artillery fire we had to abandon the attempt.³²

The personal diary of Captain Sir Iain Colquhoun, a company commander with the Scots Guards, supports this account:

Stand to at 6.30. Germans very quiet. Remained in Firing Trenches until 8.30. No sign of anything unusual. When having breakfast about 9 am a sentry reported to me that the Germans were standing up on their parapets and walking towards our barbed wire. I ran out to our firing trenches and saw our men looking over the parapet and the Germans outside our barbed wire. A German officer came forward and asked me for a truce for Xmas. I replied that this was impossible. He then asked for $\frac{3}{4}$ hour [three-quarters of an hour] to bury his dead. I agreed. The Germans then started burying their dead and we did the same. This was finished in $\frac{1}{2}$ hrs time. Our men and the Germans then talked and exchanged cigars, cigarettes etc for $\frac{1}{4}$ of an hour and when the time was up I blew a whistle and both sides returned to their trenches. For the rest of the day the Germans walked about and sat on their parapets. Our men did much the same but remained in their trenches. Not a shot was fired. At night the Germans put up Fairy lights on their parapets and their trenches were outlined for miles on either side. It was a mild

32 Robert Keating’s Diary, Vol 1, 1 December 1915–6 July 1916, R.W.F. Mus 9203.

looking night with clouds and a full moon and the prettiest sight I have ever seen. Our machine guns played on them and the lights were removed. Our guns shelled heavily all night at intervals of ½ an hour and the Germans retaliated on Sunken Road. I had to leave my dug-out five times during the night owing to shells.³³

Further attempts at peace-making were quickly stamped out. Wyn Griffith recalled an irate Brigadier, spluttering up the line, throwing out threats of courts-martial and ordering an extra dose of military action that night.³⁴ This was very likely to have been Brigadier-General Lord Henry Seymour, the Commander of 2 Guards Brigade. Private Harold Diffey, another soldier of C Company 15 R.W. Fus. who survived the war and who also remembered the truce, recounted the same episode in a letter home:

After about 20 to 30 minutes a Staff Officer with red tabs [...] and a vociferous sergeant-major appeared yelling, 'You came out to fight the Huns, not to make friends with them.' So our lads reluctantly returned followed by a salvo from our 18-pounders which ended the episode.³⁵

Keating too recorded Seymour's arrival: 'The remainder of the day we spent in shouting to the Germans. Meanwhile the Brigadier General came round the trenches and told every fellow to shoot any German he saw [...] no one took any notice of this order and carried on as usual.'³⁶ Keating went on to record what had happened on Christmas Night:

[That evening] we were roused out by the Scots and dragged on to the parapet where we found all the Welsh fellows gathered. Here we were, Welsh and Scots all, clustered round the burning brazier which was placed on the outer parapet. The Germans were sending up star lights and singing – they stopped, so we cheered them & we began singing Land of Hope and Glory – Men of Harlech et cetera – we stopped and they cheered us. So we went on till the early hours of the morning.³⁷

Firmer measures were clearly needed to enforce the approved martial spirit, and Keating's diary of Boxing Day recorded that after the morning routine:

The Germans were not firing but no-one got on the parapet although many heads were above. Orders were issued out that if any man was

33 Sir Iain Colquhoun's Diary has been made available on open source through his local historical society, the Vale of Leven, <www.valeofleven.org.uk> [accessed 20 November 2017].

34 Griffith, *Up to Mametz*, p. 14.

35 Letter from Harold Diffey in R.W.F. Mus 7133f.

36 Keating's Diary, Vol 1.

37 Keating's Diary, Vol 1.



[Fig. 8] *David Jones in 1915*
(R.W.F. Museum 3687)



[Fig. 9] *Robert Keating in 1915*
(R.W.F. Museum 9203)



[Fig. 10] *Harold Diffey in later life* (*The Journal [Highgate]*, 21 October 1983)

seen waving or heard shouting they would be put to the wall at once [i.e. shot] – this order put an end to our fun [...] At 5.30 p.m. the Irish Guards relieved us but before going we were told not to mention anything of what happened in the trenches yesterday and today.³⁸

Colquhoun's diary recorded what happened to him on Boxing Day:

Fine day. No rifle firing, but no Germans showing. I went at 10 a.m. to Winchester House to explain to a Court of Inquiry my conduct on Christmas Day. The Brigadier (who came round my trenches 10 mins after my truce was over) didn't mind a bit but the Major General [Lord Cavan] is furious about it. The Coldstreams and our 2nd Batt are also implicated. Relieved by the 1st Irish Guards. Marched out by platoons down Sunken Road and Sign Post line to Rouge Choistre. Dropped the R.W.F. and marched via Rouge Bailleul to La Gorgue at 7 p.m. and billeted there.³⁹

Later, both Colquhoun and the acting commanding officer of 1 Scots Guards, Captain Miles Barne, were tried by court-martial; Barne was acquitted of all charges, Colquhoun received a reprimand but this was not confirmed by Sir Douglas Haig – possibly because Colquhoun was related by marriage to the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith.⁴⁰

So ended the Christmas Truce of 1915, which, unlike that of 1914, passed unrecorded in the newspapers and magazines. It was the last such event of the war, other than informal truces to bury the dead and recover the wounded which had been a feature of warfare for centuries and which lingered on in the Great War. There was little if any attempt at a truce over Christmas 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.

38 Keating's Diary, Vol 1.

39 Sir Iain Colquhoun's Diary, <www.valeofleven.org.uk>.

40 Brown and Seaton, *Christams Truce*, p. 205.