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## A Farewell to Arms

One hundred years ago, English and German soldiers put down their weapons and used their feet

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**I**N LATE 1914, AS WORLD WAR I BLEDED THROUGH EUROPE and the first months of combat gave way to the Christmas holiday, the Allies and the Central Powers were locked onto a front that stretched from Switzerland to the North Sea. In the fields around Plugstreet, a village in southern Belgium, British and German soldiers huddled in trenches carved into the farmland. It was a new form of warfare, more brutal than anything in human experience. Instead of battles that lasted hours, these soldiers lived and died for months within sight of their enemies, who were camped across the expanse of nothingness called no-man’s-land.

Soldiers on both sides endured the cold, the rain, the mud, the filth, and the mortars whizzing overhead. As early as November 1914, there are reports of fraternization between the enemies in moments when the fighting quieted down. Sometimes, at dusk, an agreed-upon respite from the fighting allowed soldiers to collect their dead and wounded comrades from between the trenches. But what happened on Christmas Eve 1914 was unprecedented. The German troops placed small trees lit with candles along the edges of their trenches and began to sing carols. The British replied with their own carols, until eventually the two sides united, singing “O Come, All Ye Faithful” in Latin (“Adeste Fideles”) together.

Over the next several hours, the unthinkable happened: the soldiers put down their weapons and approached one another, exchanged handshakes and even gifts such as food, cigars, alcohol, badges, and uniform buttons.

“Just think,” wrote Oswald Tilley, of the London Rifle Brigade, in a letter to his family, “while you were eating turkey, I was talking and shaking hands with the very men I had been trying to kill a few hours before. It was astounding!”

A second lieutenant in the British army recalled seeing “one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile Boche, who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck.” “Boche” is a derogatory term for a German.

There are estimates that as many as 100,000 soldiers took part in the truce, which lasted in some places through Christmas Day and in others until New Year’s. In places, soccer matches between the two sides took place down the length of the 500-mile front line on Christmas Day, with ration tins of bully beef used as balls.

“Our men went out and brought dead in and buried them,” wrote Staff Sergeant Clement Barker, from Ipswich, in a letter to his brother. “The next thing, a football kicked out of our trenches—and the Germans and English played football.”

“Higher up in the line—you would scarcely believe it—they are playing a football match,” wrote Lieutenant Charles Brewer of the Second Bedfordshires. The Lancashire Fusiliers recorded that its A Company played a Christmas game against the enemy just north of Le Touquet, using a ration tin for a ball, and lost 3–2.

“Us Germans really roared when a gust of wind revealed that the Scots wore no drawers under their kilts—and hooted and whistled every time they caught an impudent glimpse of one posterior belonging to one of ‘yesterday’s enemies.’”

“Sergeant Bob Lovell of the Third London Rifles played at footer,” reads another record, “and although his side lost, the fact that the match happened at all left him in awe. ‘Even as I write,’ he noted at dusk, ‘I can scarcely credit what I have seen and done. It has indeed been a wonderful day.’”

Accounts are much scarcer on the German side. A diary entry by Kurt Zehmisch, a member of the 134th Saxon Regiment, is often cited: “The English brought a soccer ball from the trenches, and pretty soon a lively game ensued. How marvellously wonderful, yet how strange it was.”

Journalist and amateur historian Mike Dash published an article on SmithsonianMag.com in which he cites a 1960s interview given by a member of the 133rd Saxons named Johannes Niemann, who said that “a Scottish soldier appeared with a football, which seemed to come from nowhere, and a few minutes later a real football match got under way. The Scots marked their goal mouth with their strange caps, and we did the same with ours. It was far from easy to play on the frozen ground, but we continued, keeping rigorously to the rules despite the fact that it only lasted an hour and that we had no referee. A great many of the passes went wide, but all the amateur footballers, although they must have been very tired, played with huge enthusiasm.”

It was the first and, presumably, the last time the Scots played against a team in uniform—or that the Germans played a team wearing kilts. According to Niemann, “Us Germans really roared when a gust of wind revealed that the Scots wore no drawers under their kilts—and hooted and whistled every time they caught an impudent glimpse of one posterior belonging to one of ‘yesterday’s enemies.’”



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In all, it’s likely that only three or four matches took place between the warring sides. Many more games were played between teams of Brits, happy for a rare chance to run around on the frozen ground.

Historians have come to view the Christmas truce as one of the first, and certainly the largest, instance of noncooperation during the war—and the potential damage to the war effort that could result from soldiers losing their animosity for the enemy alarmed officers on both sides. Sir John French, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, sent orders forbidding fraternization with the Germans. In some cases, these orders were observed. But the truce took hold, for some period of time, along two-thirds of the British-held line. There were reports of niceties be-

tween the Germans and Russians, but nothing like the temporary peace with the English occurred elsewhere, either on the Eastern Front or with the French, for whom the Germans were not only adversaries but invaders.

Last November, a new Christmas Truce Pitch opened in Ypres, Belgium, a 20-minute drive from Plugstreet. And in December, the Chelsea U-12 boys team beat Paris Saint-Germain in the final of the Christmas Truce International Tournament,

which included teams from Austria, Belgium, England, France, Germany, and Scotland—the countries that were at war with one another in Western Europe in 1914.

A few days before the tournament, UEFA president Michel Platini spoke at a ceremony in the area. The men, he said, had “expressed their humanity by playing football together.”

The National Football Museum in Manchester is putting on *The Greater Game: Football and the First World War* through September 2015. The exhibition includes original art, diaries, and other items from the period as well as footage of the war and wartime soccer.

Visit [NATIONALFOOTBALLMUSEUM.COM](http://NATIONALFOOTBALLMUSEUM.COM) for more information.