



# GET TO KNOW WW1

## Look Closer

### 5. NEWS STORIES 1914

FirstNews WORLD WAR I

# Christmas truces spread



British and German troops celebrating Yuletide together on the Western Front



British troops in trenches along the Western Front. War was put on hold while they exchanged gifts with German soldiers

*"When German soldiers came out of their trenches and walked across unarmed... what were our men to do? Shoot? You could not shoot unarmed men"*  
– Brigadier Count Edward Gleichen

## 30 December 1914

**HUNDREDS** of thousands of British and German soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front have spontaneously dropped their weapons and called a series of truces over Christmas.

The shock move took British and German generals by surprise. Permission didn't come from the Secretary of War, Lord Kitchener.

The Western Front stretches for 400 miles, from the Swiss border with France through to the North Sea coast in northern France. Fortified trenches have been built along the front by both the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire) and Allied forces.

### *Giving gifts*

Soldiers dropped their weapons and exchanged gifts, with several even venturing into the 'no-man's-land' between trenches to shake hands with their enemies. The spontaneous ceasefires have been taking place regularly since Christmas Eve, with up to 100,000 troops thought to have taken part.

The extraordinary show of affection between soldiers was started by German soldiers who held up Christmas trees from one of their trenches. After seeing the trees, some of which were lit up by candles, the British soldiers began shouting across from their trenches. It wasn't long before the men of the British and German forces walked out of their trenches and exchanged small gifts, handshakes and good wishes.

The gifts were anything the troops could get their hands on. Buttons, food, tobacco, and alcohol were all given. It is believed that the commander of the British forces, Sir John French, disapproved of the soldiers' actions, while General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, commander of the British II Corps, issued "strict orders" that friendliness between opposing sides was not allowed. "To finish this war quickly, we must keep up the fighting spirit," he said.

### *Football with the enemy*

As well as celebrating Yuletide with trees and presents, reports indicate that soldiers of both sides sang Christmas carols together and played football matches against each other.

The truce has also allowed for burials of fallen soldiers to take place. British troops killed behind German lines were brought back to the Allied side for a dignified burial, and vice versa. On Christmas Day, German and British troops even held joint funerals.

While some truces along the Western Front are believed to still be in place, the vast majority of soldiers have resumed the fight – against the same men they were exchanging gifts and singing carols with just a few days ago.



Learning through news

[www.firstnews.co.uk/forschools](http://www.firstnews.co.uk/forschools)



# GET TO KNOW WW1

## Look Closer

Carefully read 'Christmas truces spread', 30 Dec 1914, then answer the following questions:

Q1) True or false? (AF2)

- There was one truce between the British and German soldiers.
- The high-ranking officers in charge of the soldiers encouraged the ceasefire to take place.
- No-man's-land was the name given to the area between the German and British trenches.
- The men gave each other presents, such as food and tobacco.
- There was even carol singing and football matches.



Q2) Look at the headline 'Christmas truces spread'. Why do you think the journalist has chosen this particular headline? Why do you think it works? (AF6)

Q3) The opening sentence, or lead, of a newspaper report should answer the 5 Ws (Who? What? Where? When? Why?). Can you work out the key facts from the lead and answer these important questions? (AF3)

Q4) Some of the high-ranking officers in charge of the British troops did not agree with the soldiers' truce. Which words explain this to the reader? (AF5)

Q5) The British Government was worried enough to release a warning statement that it was treason to fraternise (be friendly) with the enemy, and that the ceasefire had only been short. But the newspapers did report positively on the Christmas truce and included soldiers' letters with accounts of the event.

Look at this image of the front page of *The Illustrated London News*, from 9th January 1915. How is this front page similar or different to the *First News* article 'Christmas truces spread'?

Q6) Apart from the headline and lead, how else is the newspaper article structured (put together) to tell us the Christmas truce story? (AF4)



The Light of Peace in the trenches on Christmas Eve: A German soldier opens the spontaneous truce by approaching the British lines with a small Christmas tree

Picture source: The Illustrated London News via diamaverby.wordpress.com



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Who? .....

What? .....

Where? .....

When? .....

Why? .....

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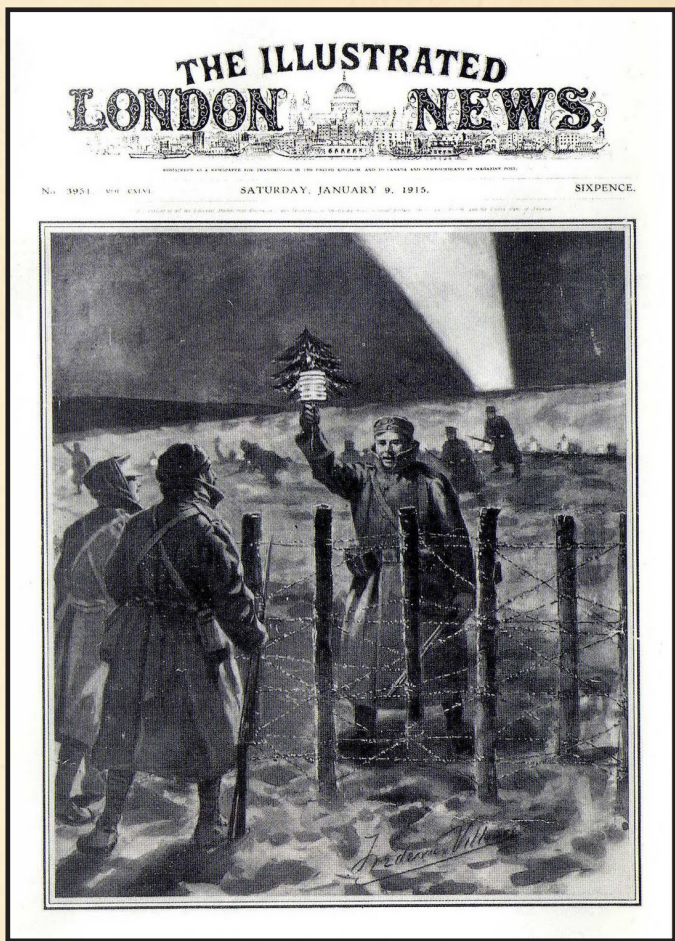


# GET TO KNOW WW1

## Look Closer

Q5) The British Government was worried enough to release a warning statement that it was treason to fraternise (be friendly) with the enemy, and that the ceasefire had only been short. But the newspapers did report positively on the Christmas truce and included soldiers' letters with accounts of the event.

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Picture source: The Illustrated London News via diannoverby.wordpress.com



# GET TO KNOW WW1

## Look Closer

6) Apart from the headline and lead, how else is the newspaper article structured (put together) to tell us the Christmas truce story? Annotate around the image of the page, below. (AF4)

**5. NEWS STORIES 1914** FirstNews WORLD WAR I

# Christmas truces spread



British troops in trenches along the Western Front. War was put on hold while they exchanged gifts with German soldiers

**30 December 1914**

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The shock move took British and German generals by surprise. Permission didn't come from the Secretary of War, Lord Kitchener.

The Western Front stretches for 400 miles, from the Swiss border with France through to the North Sea coast in northern France. Fortified trenches have been built along the front by both the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire) and Allied forces.

The gifts were anything the troops could get their hands on. Buttons, food, tobacco, and alcohol were all given. It is believed that the commander of the British forces, Sir John French, disapproved of the soldiers' actions, while General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, commander of the British II Corps, issued "strict orders" that friendliness between opposing sides was not allowed. "To finish this war quickly, we must keep up the fighting spirit," he said.

The truce has also allowed for burials of fallen soldiers to take place. British troops killed behind German lines were brought back to the Allied side for a dignified burial, and vice versa. On Christmas Day, German and British troops even held joint funerals.

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British and German troops celebrating Yuletide together on the Western Front

**Giving gifts**

Soldiers dropped their weapons and exchanged gifts, with several even venturing into the 'no-man's-land' between trenches to shake hands with their enemies. The spontaneous ceasefires have been taking place regularly since Christmas Eve, with up to 100,000 troops thought to have taken part.

The extraordinary show of affection between soldiers was started by German soldiers who held up Christmas trees from one of their trenches. After seeing the trees, some of which were lit up by candles, the British soldiers began shouting across from their trenches. It wasn't long before the men of the British and German forces walked out of their trenches and exchanged small gifts, handshakes and good wishes.

**Football with the enemy**

As well as celebrating Yuletide with trees and presents, reports indicate that soldiers of both sides sang Christmas carols together and played football matches against each other.

**"When German soldiers came out of their trenches and walked across unarmed... what were our men to do? Shoot? You could not shoot unarmed men" – Brigadier Count Edward Gleichen**





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## Look Closer

### TEACHER ANSWERS

The teacher answers are intended to be a guide to the AF strand of the question and possible responses from pupils working at different levels.

#### Q1) True or false? (AF2)

AF2 – understand, describe, select, retrieve information, events or ideas from texts and use quotations and reference to the text

Possible answers:

L3 – identifying obvious points

L4 – identifying relevant points

- There was one truce between the British and German soldiers. F - there were lots
- The high-ranking officers in charge of the soldiers encouraged the ceasefire to take place. F – many were against fraternisation
- No-man’s-land was the name given to the area between the German and British trenches. T
- The men gave each other presents, such as food and tobacco. T
- There was even carol singing and football matches. T

#### Q2) Look at the headline ‘Christmas truces spread’. Why do you think the journalist has chosen this particular headline? Why do you think it works? (AF6)

AF6 – identify and comment on the writer’s purpose and viewpoint, and the overall effect on the reader

Possible answers:

L4 – main purpose identified, simple comments show some awareness of the writer’s viewpoint

L5 – main purpose identified, viewpoint clearly identified but limited

L6 – The writer’s viewpoint clearly identified, with evidence precisely located, and the effect upon the reader explained

- The journalist has chosen to sum up the events in a simple and direct way – just three words, and with no emotive language. This echoes the straightforward and direct way the soldiers made their truce. They didn’t need high ranking officers to get involved – they just successfully sorted out a ceasefire themselves.
- The word ‘truces’ has been placed in the middle of the headline. This is so it can be seen first because it’s the most important word in the headline, as it explains this incredible WW1 event.
- In amongst all the tragic events of WW1, this story is extremely uplifting. So, the writer has created a very positive headline. Each word contributes to this message of peace and hope. We associate Christmas with hopefulness. For Christians, this is the time of the birth of Christ the Saviour. The word ‘truce’ means ceasefire, and the verb ‘spread’ gives the reader optimism that more and more soldiers are putting down their weapons and not fighting anymore.

#### Q3) The opening sentence, or lead, of a newspaper report should answer the 5 Ws (Who? What? Where? When? Why?). Can you work out the key facts from the lead and answer these important questions? (AF3)

AF3 – deduce information from the text

L3 – a few examples correct, showing simple deduction

L4 – most deductions correct

L5 – correct deductions

Who? Hundreds of thousands of British and German Soldiers

What? Spontaneously (suddenly) put down their weapons





# GET TO KNOW WW1

## Look Closer

Where? In the Western Front trenches  
When? Christmas  
Why? They had called a truce

**Q4) Some of the high-ranking officers in charge of the British troops did not agree with the soldiers' truce. Which words explain this to the reader? (AF5)**

AF5 – explain and comment on the writer's use of language...

Possible answers:

L4/5 - some explanation and comment

L6 – detailed explanation and comment

- In paragraph 2, the news of the truce is described as a 'shock' for the generals – and this is an emotive adjective to emphasise their dislike of the truce and the fact that they had not authorised the ceasefire.
- The man in charge – War Secretary Lord Kitchener – had not allowed the truce / given 'permission' either, so this extra fact shows how brave the soldiers were because, by being friendly with each other, they went against orders.
- Sir John French is quoted as having 'disapproved' of the ceasefire by the soldiers. This one verb is strong and means to criticise or object to, so it shows how much some of the high-ranking officers were against the soldiers being friendly to the enemy.
- General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien is quoted as having issued 'strict orders' – the strong adjective is to reinforce discipline to the troops. He also says, 'To finish this war quickly, we must keep up the fighting spirit.' He is implying that the soldiers are delaying the end of the war with the truces. He wants to put further emotional pressure on the soldiers to get back to the fighting.

**Q5) The British Government was worried enough to release a warning statement that it was treason to fraternise (be friendly) with the enemy, and that the ceasefire had only been short. But the newspapers did report positively on the Christmas truce and included soldiers' letters with accounts of the event.**

**Look at this image of the front page of The Illustrated London News, from 9th January 1915. How is this front page similar or different to the First News article 'Christmas truces spread'?**

AF7 - relate texts to their social, cultural and historical traditions

Possible answers:

L5 – Similarities and differences identified, with some explanation, including context

L6 – Some detailed comment and discussion, exploring similarities and differences between the two texts, and how the contexts in which they were written and read affect meaning i.e. how the historical context influences the text, how a topic is treated differently in texts from different times

- There is an illustration on the front of The London Illustrated News – an artist's impression, or secondary source, of the German and British soldiers' truce. It's not a photo, which is more factual and firsthand, such as the primary source photos used in First News.
- The Illustrated London News' image is idealised - the soldiers look well-dressed and clean unlike the real life ones in the First News photos. Perhaps because the public would not have wanted to see the poor conditions of the soldiers on the Western Front. It might have made them question the war.
- Although the newspaper is showing a peaceful event, it did have to be careful not to be seen to be publishing anti-war propaganda in 1915. (The Government did issue a statement reminding people that fraternisation was an act of treason – so it must have been anxious that truces could lead to soldiers not wanting to fight any more – and the public supporting this action).
- First News does not have to worry about upsetting the Government with anti-war imagery. Its focus is to present a clear overview of events from a hundred years ago, which children will be able to understand.





# GET TO KNOW WW1

## Look Closer

That's why it has extra details about how both sides had trenches and how long the Western Front was – because their young readers will not know the same kind of information that readers of the WW1 period would probably have known through letters from the Front etc.

- *First News* is also able to be more balanced and show less bias and patriotism towards the British because we are not at war. Also, with the passage of time, there is now more evidence available to journalists about what really happened to both sides in the war. 'Christmas truces spread' describes both the British and the Germans as being able to give their soldiers a 'dignified' burial. This positive language about the Germans may have been seen as disloyal or unpatriotic during the war.
- There is artistic licence in the way the picture has been drawn to highlight the positive events of the truces. This may not have been exactly how the event took place. For example, the light is placed in the middle of the picture, in front of the Christmas tree to symbolise hope and peace.
- This is a front page piece, unlike the *First News* article, so it is not unusual for a large image to be used instead of an article to tell the story to attract people's attention to the news stand - rather than lots of small text which can't be seen from a distance. *The London Illustrated News* may have had a story inside as 'Christmas truces spread' is on page 5 of *First News*.
- People buy the paper and turn to the articles inside to read more about the story. The *First News* article contains lots of details about the truce, such as the 5 Ws, including the fact that the soldiers spoke to each other across the trenches before they put down their weapons and that they gave each other gifts and played football. The artist hasn't put all this information into the illustration because it would make it too crowded for a reader and not as easy to understand. Lots of details are better in paragraphs of an article, like 'Christmas truces spread'.
- The caption of *The London Illustrated News* image does explain a key moment in the event though; and we learn about a German soldier presenting a Christmas tree to British soldiers, which is what actually happened, and is also described in the *First News* article.
- The phrase 'spontaneous truce' has also been used by the journalist in the *First News* article because the troops are described as 'spontaneously' dropping their weapons. The writer is using source vocabulary to give the article more authenticity and a flavour of WW1, even though the article has been written a hundred years later.
- *The London Illustrated News* caption is very emotive especially with its line, 'The Light of Peace in the trenches'. There is a religious link here. Jesus is known as the Light of the World and he is depicted in a famous painting called, 'The Light of the World' by William Holman Hunt. The soldier is not unlike a Jesus figure bringing peace to the trenches on Christmas Day. Readers of this WW1 paper would have been adults and more likely to have understood this symbolism – especially as more people went to church then.
- Children are the target audience of the *First News* WW1 edition, so the article has photos that tell a simpler story – a focus on the opposing sides fraternising with each other despite the horrible conditions of the trenches.
- *The London Illustrated News* image might have been chosen exactly because of its religious significance

### Q6) Apart from the headline and lead, how else is the newspaper article structured (put together) to tell us the Christmas truce story? (AF4)

AF4 - identify and comment upon on the structure and organisation of the text...

Possible answers:

L4 – simple comment on features, such as the photographs and paragraphs

● The photos show the British and German soldiers in the trenches.

L5 – various features clearly identified with some explanation

● The photos help to tell the story of the Christmas truce in another way to the words. They are the facts to show the British and German soldiers together and how tough it is for them in the trenches.

L6 – some detailed exploration and comment







# GET TO KNOW WW1

## Look Closer

- Use of photographs – the main photo helps us see what it was like for soldiers in the narrow and unending trenches and understand why they might have wanted the ceasefire and a break from those uncomfortable conditions. The photos back up the article’s description of the ceasefire in the trenches. They also help us understand the story more quickly because we can see the event for ourselves.
- The photos are also original source evidence, facts about what really happened, not just a journalist reporting information. For example, the second group photo is proof that the British and German soldiers did get together to celebrate Christmas and it supports the writer’s story about the truce.
- The captions give us more information about the photos, so that we know the soldiers are in a Western Front trench and that the second photo does picture German and British soldiers together.
- The subheadings are in bold to grab our attention and they act like the headline to sum up details of the story and make us want to read on. ‘Giving gifts’ tells us the soldiers exchanged presents with each other - an unusual fact from WW1, so it will hook us into the story. It further stands out with its use of alliteration of ‘giving’ and ‘gifts.’ With the subheading ‘Football with the enemy’ there is the juxtaposition between football – a friendly game of rivalry - and the contrasting word ‘enemy’. This makes the reader intrigued to see how a game could include foes.
- The paragraphs tell the story of the Christmas truce in more and more detail as the article progresses. The most important facts, containing the main details of Who? What? Where? When? and Why? are in the lead, so the reader can quickly understand the event. Paragraph 2 is about how the truce by the ordinary soldiers surprised the high-ranking officers. Paragraph 3 gives the reader some background to the trenches – where they were and the fact that both Allied and Central Powers built trenches. Paragraph 4 gives an overview of how the troops celebrated Christmas. Paragraph 5 then provides more detail about how the men began their truce, e.g. seeing the trees with candles and communicating with each other with shouts. Paragraph 6 explains which high-ranking officers were against the ceasefire and quotes General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien as evidence. Paragraph 7 outlines the fact there were also carols and football during the ceasefire. The penultimate paragraph 8 includes the information that both sides had time to bury their dead and the final paragraph 9 sums up the story to show that fighting soon started up again.

