

## Christmas Truce 1914

### *An Extract from "A Signaller's War: Notes Compiled from My Diary 1914-1918" by Sgt. Bernard Brookes*

24.12.1914

I was on duty again from 8.00am to midday on Thursday the 24th December (Xmas eve) and in the afternoon I crawled behind a hedge and got to some cottages where we had left our cycles, and gave mine a clean-up, which was very necessary. It was a beautiful sunny day, and very clear. There was a factory behind the houses and this could be reached without any great difficulty. It had been badly shelled. A high chimney had been hit, the shell having made a large hole near the top, but otherwise it was sound.

With another man I went to have a look round the factory for "souvenirs" such as shell heads or anything of interest. Of course we should not have been near the place, but it was interesting. Whilst looking at the furnace, my chum,<sup>1</sup> who knew something of factories, mentioned that if we got through the furnace we would be able to go inside the chimney and being a clear day, we might get a view behind the German lines. I suggested that he should lead the way so he crawled through the grate and I followed. We looked up through the chimney and saw the sky, and inside the chimney there were rungs placed at certain intervals, so we commenced climbing with the idea of reaching the shell hole above. My chum went first, and well I knew it, for at every step he took I got a supply of soot and dust. We reached the shell hole, and with a pair of field glasses saw the Germs a mile or so behind the firing line, some working, others walking or cycling, carts with rations or wounded men passing along the roads in rear of their lines. Altogether it was a very interesting experience.

We came down singly so as not to let the one underneath get too much soot, and returned to Headquarters for a wash and brush up, which was very necessary. But we had just got back, when the Germs sent over about a dozen shells near the factory, but they did no damage. Evidently we had been spotted and the Bosches thought that it was an observation station, and every now and again they would send a few shells at the factory, so we were instrumental in wasting the Germs' ammunition. At any rate I hope that we choose for our observation stations cleaner places than this chimney.

Towards evening the Germs became very hilarious, singing and shouting out to us. They said in English that if we did not fire they would not, and eventually it was arranged that shots should not be exchanged. With this they lit fires outside their trench, and sat round and commenced a concert, incidentally singing some English songs to the accompaniment of a bugle band. A Germ officer carrying a lantern came slightly forward and asked to see one of our officers to arrange a truce for tomorrow (Xmas Day).

An officer went out (after we had stood at our posts with rifles loaded in case of treachery) and arrangements were made that between 10.00am and noon, and from 2.00pm to 4.00pm tomorrow, intercourse between the Germs and ourselves should take place. It was a beautiful night and a sharp frost set in, and when we awoke in the morning the ground was covered with a white raiment. It was indeed an ideal Christmas, and the spirit of peace and goodwill was very striking in comparison with the hatred and death-dealing of the past few months. One appreciated in a new light the meaning of Christianity, for it certainly was marvellous that such a change in the attitude of the opposing armies could be wrought by an event which happened nigh on 2,000 years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. Dear R.I.P.

25.12.1914 (Xmas Day)

During the night two men were reported to be missing and I had to go out early in the morning on my cycle to try to find them. I went to the Dressing Station in Chappelle d'Armentières a mile or so away, but they had not been there. Later in the day the Bosches<sup>2</sup> told us that two men the night before had walked into their trench in a state which proved that they had "drunk of the loving cup, not wisely, but too well". We asked that they should be returned to us, but they refused on account of the fact that these men had seen the position of their machine guns. They promised, however, to wire to their Headquarters and see what could be done in the matter. Later we were informed that it had been decided to intern them in a Civilian Camp, and not treat them as prisoners of war, so as this seemed fair and the only course open we left it at that.

At 9.00am as I was off duty I received permission to go to Mass at a Church which I had discovered whilst hunting for the missing men. This Church was terribly shelled, and was within the range of rifle fire, as was clearly proved by the condition of the wall facing the trenches, and no effort had been made to clear the wreckage, as to attempt this would have been fraught with danger. A priest, however, had come in from Armentières to minister to the few people who were still living in the district. In this Church which would hold about 300, there were some 30 people, and I was the only soldier. It was indeed a unique service, and during a short address which the priest gave I was about the only one who was not crying, and that because I did not understand much of what was being said.

I returned to Headquarters and went on duty from noon to 2.00pm, during which time I partook of my Christmas Fare which consisted of "Bully", "Spuds", Xmas pudding, and vin rouge, which latter we found in one of the cellars on the farm.

In the afternoon I went out and had a chat with "our friends the enemy". Many of the Germs had costumes on which had been taken from the houses nearby, and one facetious fellow had a blouse, skirt, top hat, and umbrella, which grotesque figure caused much merriment. Various souvenirs were exchanged which I managed to send home. We also had an opportunity of seeing the famous Iron Cross which some of the men wore attached to a black and white riband. These crosses are very well made and have an edging of silver. The man's name is engraved on one side, and the reason of the award briefly stated on the other. I have also a number of Germ signatures and addresses on a fly leaf of my "Active Service Pay Book" and it was arranged that at the end of the War we would write one to the other if we came through safely.

The Germs wanted to continue a partial truce until the New Year, for as some of them said, they were heartily sick of the War and did not want to fight, but as we were leaving the trenches early next morning and naturally did not want them to know, we insisted on the truce ending at midnight, at which time our artillery sent over to them four shells of small calibre to let them know that the truce, at which the whole World would wonder, was ended and in its place, death and bloodshed would once more reign supreme.

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<sup>2</sup> German account incorrect. See note dated 4th November 1939.