

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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Christmas 1914

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(Mike Harding)

Christmas Eve in 1914, stars were gleaming, gleaming bright
And all along the Western front guns were lying still and quiet
Men lay dozing in the trenches, in the cold and in the dark
As far away behind the lines a village dog began tae bark

Some lay thinking of their families, some sang songs to others quiet
Playing brag and rolling fags to pass away the Christmas night
As we watched the German trenches, something moved in no man's land
Through the dark there came a soldier carrying a white flag in his hand

Then from both sides men came running, crossing into no man's land
Through the barbed wire, mud and shell-holes, shyly stood there shaking
hands
Fritz he brought cigars and brandy, Tommy brought corned beef and fags
And as they stood there quietly talking, the moon shone down on no man's
land

Then Christmas Day we all played football in the mud of no man's land
Tommy brought some Christmas pudding, Fritz brought out a German band
And when they beat us at the football we shared all our grub and drink
Then Fritz showed me a tattered photo of a brown-haired girl back in
Berlin

For four days after no side fired, not one shot disturbed the night
For old Fritz and Tommy Atkins, they'd both lost their will to fight
So they withdrew us from the trenches, sent us back behind the lines
They brought fresh troops to take our places and told the guns, Prepare to
fire

The next night in 1914, flak was beaming, beaming bright
The orders came, Prepare offensive! Over the top we go tonight
And men stood waiting in the trenches, gazed out across our football park
As all along the Western front the Christmas guns began tae bark

Sung by Arthur Johnstone from Glasgow, who used to run the city's famous
Star Club, on his album 'North By North' (1989).

[1987:] In no-man's-land, between the British and the German trenches
during the Christmas truce of that year [1914], an extraordinary event
occurred. "The night was cold. We sang, they applauded. Our lines were
only two hundred feet apart. We played the mouth organ, they sang, then we

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applauded. They produced a set of bagpipes and played their poetic tunes. Men were waving torches and cheering. We had prepared grog and drank a toast." [Letter] from a German soldier. - From both sides men came running, and soon were fraternizing "in the most genuine possible manner. Every sort of souvenir was exchanged, addresses given and received." A German N.C.O. with an Iron Cross, gained "for conspicuous skill in sniping, started his fellows off on some marching tune. I set the note for the Bonnie Boys of Scotland, and so we went on and ended up with Auld Lang Syne which we all - English, Scots, Irish, Prussians and Wurttembergers - joined in." [Diary] of a British Captain. - From some old rags and cord a makeshift foot

rough parity of forces. [...] One was to have an unspoken agreement [...] not to shell latrines nor to open fire during breakfast. Another was to make as much noise as possible before a minor raid, so that the other side could withdraw to their protected bunkers. This limitation on hostilities did not exist everywhere and was stamped on by command when it came to light. But even such informal arrangements as survived could be quickly buried, along with men killed by snipers, by the odd shell, or gas. The fraternization that did go on briefly between the lines on Christmas Day 1914 did not characterize the way the war was fought in the trenches. Violence was always below the surface, ready to explode. (J.M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I*, 133ff)

The incident is obviously deemed too unimportant to be mentioned in most histories of the Great War. So far this passing reference in Winter, who devotes part of his book to the experience of the front-line soldier, is the only one I've found, and I for one ce

[1996:] Far from kicking footballs in no man's land, the two rivals [The Times and the Telegraph] clashed over the ABC [circulation] figures. (Observer Business, 15 Dec)

[1997:] It is as much Britain as Germany that we should worry about, and we both have a common interest in building Europe. It is the football matches between the trenches on Christmas Day we should remember - not seeing off a mythical Fritz who has long since disappeared. (Will Hutton, Observer 9 Feb)

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