

A Christmas Truce

Written by Ray Clark and Mish Margison



Introduction to 'A Christmas Truce'

With Christmas in the air, two young girls are decorating the tree with their Grandma when they discover a box of old letters. The letters were written by their great-great-grandfather from the trenches of the First World War, and they offer a glimpse of a remarkable occurrence in the midst of one of the most brutal conflicts that the world has ever known. Against direct orders from High Command, British and German soldiers laid down their weapons and came together to sing songs, exchange gifts and souvenirs, swap names and addresses, and even play football. It was a hopeful moment of recognition of the two sides' common humanity and a brief but compelling rejection of the violence of industrialised warfare.

As the girls read through the letters, the play unfolds the moving, amusing and poignant story of how a generation of young men found themselves transported from life at home to war in the trenches: and how, extraordinary as it may seem, some 100,000 young men of the belligerent nations stopped fighting to celebrate Christmas 1914.

You are free to use and adapt this play for public performance - no license or fee is required.

Parents and other audience members can be invited to join in the well-known Christmas songs and carols. A PowerPoint slideshow with lyrics is available from www.mlkpc.org



The Martin Luther King Peace Committee

'A Christmas Truce' was written by Ray Clark and Mish Margison of Atkinson Road Primary Academy, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This resource has been created with the permission of the authors by the Martin Luther King Peace Committee. Rev. Dr. King came to Tyneside in 1967 to receive an honorary degree, Newcastle University having the distinction of being the only UK university to so honour him. The Committee, which began as a collaboration between chaplains in Newcastle and Northumbria universities, exists to 'build cultures of peace' by drawing on his ideas and example.

Further resources, including a whole-school teaching programme linked to the Christmas Truces, are available for free download from the website of the Martin Luther King Peace Committee (www.mlkpc.org).

CAST



Main Speaking Parts

Grandma

Mary

Beth

Simon Churchyard

Minor Speaking Parts

Carol Singers (7)

Army Officer

Army Major

Ethel

Vera

Man 1

Man 2

Soldier 1

Soldier 2

British Soldiers (4 parts)

German Soldiers (4 parts)

Non-Speaking Parts

Carol Singers

Men queuing to enlist

Soldiers

PRODUCTION OVERVIEW



SCENE	BRIEF SYNOPSIS	SONGS
<p>Scene 1: Getting Ready for Christmas</p> <p>Grandma, Mary, Beth, Carol Singers</p>	<p>Whilst decorating the Christmas tree the girls discover a box of letters from a distant relative.</p>	<p>Deck the Halls</p>
<p>Scene 2: Getting Ready for War</p> <p>Army Officer, Vera, Ethel, Simon, Man 1, Man 2, Army Major, plus non-speaking parts for men queuing to enlist</p>	<p>With the onset of war in Europe, a group of men decide or whether or not they should enlist.</p>	<p>Little Drummer Boy</p>
<p>Scene 3: A Letter from the Trenches</p> <p>Grandma, Beth, Mary, Carol Singers</p>	<p>Carol Singers pay another visit to the house, and Grandma reads one of the letters from the box.</p>	<p>Oh Come All Ye Faithful</p>
<p>Scene 4: Christmas Eve in the Trenches</p> <p>Simon, Soldier 1, Soldier 2</p>	<p>Sitting in the trenches, a group of soldiers talk about Christmas.</p>	
<p>Scene 5: Christmas Day, 1914 (Part 1)</p> <p>Grandma, Mary, Beth, Carol Singers, British Soldiers, German Soldiers</p>	<p>Another letter from the box describes scenes from the trenches and the miraculous occurrence that was the Christmas Truce.</p>	<p>Ding Dong Merrily on High</p> <p>Silent Night / Stille Nacht</p>
<p>Scene 6: Christmas Day, 1914 (Part 2)</p> <p>British Soldiers, German Soldiers, Army Major</p>	<p>British and German soldiers, brought together through their shared humanity, interrupt the war with messages of peace.</p>	<p>Merry Xmas (War is Over)</p>

SCENE 1: Getting Ready for Christmas

Small stage decorated as a modern day living room, with fire, Christmas tree, presents ready to wrap, and Grandma's chair.

GRANDMA: *(Off stage - shouting)* Children? Mary? Beth? Come down from upstairs and help me finish decorating the living room.

MARY & BETH: Coming Grandma!

Grandma, Mary and Beth appear from behind stage and enter their living room. Grandma sits in her chair and starts to wrap presents. Mary goes towards the Christmas tree; Beth sits down next to Christmas presents.

MARY: *(Putting up Christmas decorations - very excitedly)* Oh Grandma! I just LOVE this time of year! Wrapping up gifts and writing all the Christmas cards. Do you think it'll snow this Christmas?

BETH: *(Reaching into open box)* Grandma, where's my stocking for Santa? Have you got the mince pie and the carrot for Rudolph? Ooooooh - I'm so EXCITED!!

MARY & BETH: *(Grab each others hands and start jumping round in a circle)* Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg... The Batmobile has lost its wheel, and the Joker got away!

GRANDMA: *(Laughing)* Girls! Girls! Settle down! Now come over here, we have lots of presents still to wrap and I need your help. Mary, can you pass me that box that has the wrapping paper inside?

Mary brings open box to Grandma. Just then a group of carol singers walk by outside the window of the house.

BETH: *(Looking out of the living room window)* Grandma! Look! There's carol singers outside the house. *(Waving out of the window)* Excuse me...we would love to hear a Christmas carol!

CAROL SINGER 1: Sorry, we've just come from St. James's Christmas Carol Service and we've finished for the evening.

MARY: *(Looking out of the living room window)* Oh...please! Nothing's more Christmassy than singing a good old carol!

Carol Singer 2: What's it worth?

Beth: *(Walks away from window to Grandma's chair, hands on hips)* Cheek! Have they never heard of Christmas spirit!

Mary: *(Still standing at window)* Oh... please! We can give you some of my Grandma's world famous mince pies!

CAROL SINGER 1: *(Rubbing his belly and licking his lips)* In that case, come on everyone! I feel a song coming on!

Whole school sings 'Deck the Halls'

Song finishes and carol singers leave the stage. Mary looks deeper into open box and pulls out a smaller box. She looks inside, pulls out a letter and has a quick glance over it.

MARY: *(Passing box to Grandma)* Grandma? What's this box?

GRANDMA: What is it dear? *(Takes box and reads one of the letters)* Oh my! I haven't seen these letters in years! Do you know what these are?

BETH: What?

GRANDMA: These are your Great, Great Grandfather's letters written when he was in the army fighting on the Western Front in France.

MARY: France? Why did he end up there?

GRANDMA: Back in those days, after you left school most people went to work on farms, but your Great, Great Grandfather - or should I say, Private Simon Churchyard *(shows picture of soldier)* - was much more interested in playing football, just like most 17 year old boys. But in the summer of 1914 a great war suddenly broke out all across Europe.

BETH: Oh, I think I've heard about this at school. Was this the start of World War 1?

GRANDMA: That's right Beth. In June 1914 Britain, France and Russia found themselves at war with Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. Simon Churchyard, your Great Great Grandfather, like many young men at that time, signed up to go and fight the Germans over in France.

(SHOW SLIDE OF LORD KITCHENER POSTER)

MARY: Can I see his picture Grandma? *(Takes picture from Grandma)* Wow! He must have been so brave to go off and fight in the war. I wonder what made him go and do that?

End of Scene 1



SCENE 2: Getting Ready for War

Army Officer sits behind desk signing people up for the Army. Men queue at the desk. Two young ladies stand to one side eyeing up the men. Three young men appear.

Man 1: So come on then lads, are we going to do this?

MAN 2: Don't be silly, we're only 17!

SIMON: Well I don't care... The only way you're going to woo the girls is BE A MAN, not a boy (*wolf whistles at the young ladies - the young ladies giggle*).

MAN 1: So Ethel, do you... fancy coming to the music hall on Saturday?

ETHEL: I don't go out with BOYS!

VERA: Yeah, we've come to see the REAL men, the one's who are going to fight in the war. Are you signing up, Archie?

MAN 2: Yeah, I might. I tell you what... If I sign up, will you come out with me?

VERA: You never know!

Young ladies giggle, the boys start nudging each other.

ARMY OFFICER: (*A bugle or trumpet can be heard*) Come into the ranks and fight for your King and Country. Don't just stand around and stare!

SIMON: Come on lads, let's do this!!

ARMY OFFICER: Yes, son. Name and age?

SIMON: Simon Churchyard. Aged...er...19.

Little Drummer Boy plays whilst boys put on uniforms and start to march behind Army Officer.

ARMY MAJOR: (*Appears from back of hall - shouts*) ATTEN-TION!
New recruits stand to attention. Army Major marches down middle of hall, stopping in front of stage.

ARMY MAJOR: (*Shouts*) Soldiers! Fall In!

A drum marching tempo plays as Army Major leads all new recruits out to back of hall.

End of Scene 2

SCENE 3: A Letter from the Trenches

Mary is helping Grandma with wrapping a present. Beth is looking through the old box and pulls out another letter. Just then, the choir singers arrive outside Grandma's house again.

CHOIR SINGER 3: *(Knocks on the window)* Hey! Is this the mince pie lady's house? Hello??

MARY: *(Running up to the window)* Excuse me! How rude! Don't you know it's bad manners to knock on someone's window?

CHOIR SINGER 4: Sorry, but is this the house where you get the mince pies from? The last one was sooo delicious! The pastry was the flakiest I've ever had... the mincemeat was so fruity and sweet... the light dusting of icing sugar really...

BETH: *(Interrupting)* Alright, alright. This isn't the Great British Bake Off you know! *(Passes mince pies to choir singers)* Here you are, but these are your last... we need to keep some for Santa!

ALL CHOIR SINGERS: *(Chewing)* Thank you!

CHOIR SINGER 3: Now we've had some mince pies, what carol would you like us to sing?

GRANDMA: *(Sitting in armchair)* Oh Beth, tell them to sing Oh Come All Ye Faithful. That's one of my favourites!

Whole school sings 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful'

BETH: *(Grabbing another letter from the box)* Grandma, can you read us one of his letters?

GRANDMA: Why of course dear. Pass me the box. *(Looks through a few different letters)* Ah, this one must have only been written a few weeks after he'd left for France. The date on the letter is November 23rd 1914. Grandma reads letter out - copy of letter shown on projector. WW1 soldiers on stage enacting daily routine.

Dearest Mother,
I'm writing to you from the trenches and can't even move my head for fear of being shot. Every day is long sitting in this narrow ditch, all day and night. I'm getting hardly any sleep because of all the artillery noises and the terrible smells. Last night I was woken up by a giant rat trying to bite through my boot. I've never seen rats that size before in my life!

A typical day here usually starts around 5 a.m., just before sunrise. We have to take it in turns to 'Stand To', which means being on high alert in case any German's are trying to cross No Man's Land. At 5:30 we get our rum ration which helps to keep the cold away whilst on duty.

The best thing about the morning is that sometimes it can be so quiet and peaceful. Last week I ate my breakfast in beautiful sunshine, and just for a minute it almost felt like I was home. Every morning we have to clean our weapons and our trench to stop lice infesting everything. Then I'm on guard all day long. Often after tea we take it in turns to have a short nap. The rest of the night I'm busy digging trenches and putting up barbed wire.

I miss you all so much and I can't wait to get home. I'll write again as soon as I can.

All my love,

Simon

MARY: (*Shocked*) Oh, poor Grandad! That would've been horrible, living like that, not knowing whether someone was going to shoot at you. I can't believe armies...countries for that matter... go to war with each other! Especially at Christmas time when everyone should be coming together to show peace and love for one another - that's what *Christmas* is all about!

BETH: Did they even fight each other at Christmas, Grandma?

End of Scene 3



SCENE 4: Christmas Eve

in the Trenches

Christmas Eve. The sound of cannons firing can be heard in the distance. Three soldiers sit with their weapons, waiting.

SOLDIER 1: Well lads...it's Christmas Eve and instead of being snuggled up in front of the fire sipping sherry and listening to Silent Night on the wireless, I'm stuck here with you lot and a bunch of rats.

SOLDIER 2: It could be worse Jimmy. You could have trench foot! Anyway Simon, what would you be doing now if you were at home?

SIMON: I'd probably be helping me Mam put up the Christmas tree...Preparing the dinner for Christmas day. Then we'd put wor stockings up above the fire and sing carols around the piano. Have ya got anything from home?

SOLDIER 1: Aye...our Betty sent us a new pipe cos me old one got smashed the other day. It's a right beauty. What about you, George?

SOLDIER 2: Nah...I think mine must've got lost in the pigeon post (*laughs*).
Simon: Here George...me Mam sent us 2 chocolate bars, you can have one (*throws chocolate bar to him*).

SOLDIER 2: Ah thanks Simon, you're a pal. I'm glad the rain's stopped, we would be celebrating Christmas in a swimming pool if it had carried on.

SIMON: You know lads, it sounds like the firing's stopped (*goes over to the edge of the trench to look out*). That's weird...maybe they've all gone home?

End of Scene 4



Scene 5: Christmas Day, 1914 (Part 1)

Carol singers appear once more outside Grandma's house

CHOIR SINGER 5: Come on everyone, I'm sure if we sing one more song we're bound to get some more Christmas goodies! What shall we sing?

CHOIR SINGER 6: Let's do my favourite!

CHOIR SINGER 7: Good idea, this is my favourite too! Come on everyone, let's sing Ding Dong Merrily on High...

Whole school sings 'Ding Dong Merrily on High'

BETH: Look Grandma! This letter is dated December 25th - Christmas Day!

MARY: Oh, I hope no one was killed! Especially on Christmas Day! Christmas is a time when everyone should be able to get along with each other - even if they had been fighting before. Nobody should fight on Christmas Day. Christmas is a day of magic and miracles!

GRANDMA: Don't get upset Mary. But you're right, war is a terrible thing, whatever day it is. But do you know what? Something special did happen on Christmas Day in 1914. Something magical... something miraculous! Pass me the box Beth.

Beth passes box to Grandma and Grandma finds Christmas Day letter

GRANDMA: Ah, here it is! *(Pulls letter out of box)* This letter was written by your Great, Great Grandfather on Christmas Day.

Mary and Beth sit down to listen.

Stage Note: Four British soldiers and Four German soldiers sit opposite each other to represent the different trenches. As Simon reads out his letter, the following numbered actions occur.

[1] German soldier holds up sign saying 'Frohe Weihnachten'. British soldier holds up sign saying 'Merry Christmas'. They approach each other, meet in the middle (aisle) and shake hands. They then walk onto the stage.

[2] German soldier waves a white flag to audience. British and German soldier meet, shake hands and walk onto the stage.

[3] British and German soldier stand up and repeat the words, "Happy Christmas, Fritz!" and "Merry Christmas to you too, Tommy". They walk onto the stage together.

[4] British and German soldier stand up. German soldier throws a ball towards the British soldier - they head the ball back and forth, then walk onto the stage.

All 8 soldiers are now on stage standing in a semi-circle facing each other.

Dear Mother,

I am writing this in the trenches in my 'dug out'. With a wood fire going and plenty of straw it's rather cosy although the ground is frozen hard - real Christmas weather!

I think I've seen one of the most extraordinary sights today that anyone has ever seen. As dawn broke, instead of guns starting up once more there was a strange calm.

Someone in the German trenches raised a board on which they had written the words 'Merry Christmas' in German - or 'Frohe Weihnachten'! [1]

Along the line, a German officer raised a white flag. Nervously we all stood up above the trench - and nothing happened - no shots were fired. [2]

Cautiously the British began to advance, without their guns, towards German lines. The Germans, too, came forward and began to greet their enemies with warm handshakes. I could hear people laughing and shouting, "Happy Christmas, Fritz!" and "Merry Christmas to you too, Tommy". [3]

By that afternoon, thousands of soldiers on both sides were talking and laughing and singing. Some even exchanged gifts and rations, showed each other pictures of their loved ones back home, and sang Christmas Carols together. Some soldiers even found a football and had a game! [4]

Today has been a true miracle of Christmas.
Lots of love,

Simon

Whole school sings Silent Night (Verse 1 sung in German,
Verse 2 sung in English)

End of Scene 5



SCENE 6: Christmas Day, 1914 (Part 2)

BRITISH SOLDIER 1: We interrupt this war to exchange Christmas gifts, sing carols and play football in No Man's Land.

GERMAN SOLDIER 1: We interrupt this war for doctors to heal, teachers to teach and students to learn.

BRITISH SOLDIER 2: We interrupt this war to marvel at sunsets, to listen to music and to laugh.

GERMAN SOLDIER 2: We interrupt this war for poets to rhyme, sculptors to chisel and writers to paint pictures with words.

BRITISH SOLDIER 3: We interrupt this war to plant tomatoes, mow the grass and smell the roses.

GERMAN SOLDIER 3: We interrupt this war to feed the hungry, build new schools and to stamp out ignorance.

BRITISH SOLDIER 4: We interrupt this war to clean up the air, to save the whales and to find a cure for cancer.

GERMAN SOLDIER 4: We interrupt this war to wash the dishes, tickle babies and for world peace.

BRITISH SOLDIER 1: We interrupt this war for PTA meetings, handwriting practice and high school graduation.

GERMAN SOLDIER 1: We interrupt this war for Girl Guide cookies, church bake sales and the Paralympics.

BRITISH SOLDIER 2: We interrupt this war for Legoland, the World Cup and the Great North Run.

GERMAN SOLDIER 2: We interrupt this war for bonfire toffee, Christmas crackers and Bank Holiday barbeques.

BRITISH SOLDIER 3: We interrupt this war for office parties, Advent calendars and silly hats.

GERMAN SOLDIER 3: We interrupt this war to bring sons, daughters, sisters and brothers home.

BRITISH SOLDIER 4: We interrupt this war to decorate the tree and welcome the babe in the manger.

GERMAN SOLDIER 4: We interrupt this war to hear a message from our sponsor.

ALL SOLDIERS: THOU SHALT NOT KILL!

ARMY MAJOR: *(Appears from back of hall)* ATTEN-TION!

Army Major marches down middle of hall and stops at front of stage. A drum marching tempo is played

ARMY MAJOR: Soldiers! Fall in!

Whole school sings 'Merry Xmas (War is Over)'

THE END

Historical notes

The unofficial Christmas truces of 1914 were one of the most remarkable events in the annals of modern warfare. They commonly began with German soldiers and officers putting up Christmas trees, shouting or writing Christmas greetings, and singing songs recognisable to their British counterparts such as *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night). From these beginnings troops met in no-man's land to bury their dead, exchange gifts and souvenirs, share festive food and drink, sing and entertain each other, swap names and addresses, conduct joint religious services, and even, some letters home claimed, to play football.

Although they have a fantastical quality about them, and have been romanticised, they are well attested in numerous first-hand reports. Nor were they isolated incidents. Rather, they were widespread right down the Anglo-German and Franco-German fronts from the North Sea to Switzerland, and made possible by shared traditions of Christian celebration. It was a hopeful moment of recognition of common humanity and a (brief) rejection of the terrible violence of industrialised war pursued by rulers in a deadly game of global imperial competition for territories and resources. It was quashed by orders backed by threats, and by replacing troops with men 'untainted' by the Truce.



Although the most famous, the 1914 Christmas truces weren't one-off events in the war. They followed weeks of unofficial fraternization by soldiers who discovered that, rather than being the monsters portrayed in state propaganda, the other side were men like themselves with a preference for staying alive rather than dying. Indeed, throughout the entire war many combatants managed, through a 'live-and-let-live' system, to reduce risk of discomfort and death through complicated local truces and tacit understandings that angered the high commands of both sides. Nonetheless the December 1914 truces are a key moment in the history of the period that reopened the possibility of a Europe based on peace and solidarity rather than imperial violence and nationalism.

Further reading:

Ashworth, Tony. *Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*. Pan Grand Strategy. London: Macmillan, 1980.

Weintraub, Stanley. *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*. New York: Free Press, 2001.

Books to use with younger children:

Carol Ann Duffy. *The Christmas Truce*, 2011.

Michael Foreman, *The War Game: From Village Green to No-Man's Land*, 2006.

Further resources, including a whole-school teaching programme linked to the Christmas Truces, are available for free download from the website of the Martin Luther King Peace Committee www.mlkpc.org

MARTIN LUTHER KING



COMMITTEE