

The 146th Day of the Great War

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In 1914, the sun broke over Europe as it entered the 146th day of war. The people and the land they lived on changed dramatically in that short period; millions of civilians answered the call to become soldiers and cities were decimated. At the outset, many publicly expected the war to be over by the 146th day, a now seemingly misguided prediction as the countries found themselves entangled in a stalemate. Failed offensives like the Battle of Ypres, which ended with over 200,000 casualties, caused soldiers to prepare for a long winter in the trenches with diminished hopes for a prompt end. Still, there were soldiers, like Second Lieutenant Bairnsfather, who clung on to dreams of peace by the 146th day: "I should like to have suddenly heard an immense siren blowing...[and the appearance] of a small figure running across the frozen mud waiving something... 'war off, return home, --George, R.I.'"¹

Bairnsfather's dreams about the war ending on the 146th day were not unfounded. The prior night he and many others marveled at a peculiar occurrence; instead of hearing the incessant sound of firing shells, they listened keenly to German voices singing songs of peace like *Still Nact, heilige Nact*. The British soldiers responded by singing the English equivalent, *Silent Night*, from their own trenches.² Soldiers seemed determined to create a relative peace, even though greater forces prohibited them from an outright end to the war. The serene night inspired by song, lasted into the morning of the 146th day, when a more formal declaration of peace was established throughout the frozen front. On one part, an unarmed German officer daringly crossed the barren land and was met by an Englishman who, "Came forward despite shouts of warning...which did not prevent him from shaking hands with the enemy...his comrades applauded the magnanimity of the Germans."³ In other areas, Germans raised white flags, and one British Officer presented the Germans with a gift.³ While such an occurrence alone would make the day memorable, later events would make the 146th day one of the most extraordinary of the war.

Following the lead of others, many troops cautiously rose out of their trenches. Leaving the trenches for No Man's Land, the area between trenches, usually invited a barrage of bullets, but initial consternation of entering this area subsided as the enemies candidly greeted each other. For those able to speak multiple languages, jokes and stories were exchanged; others proudly shared photographs of their families.⁴ In a field that had been ravaged by the First World War's distinctive shelling, came unbelievable stories of humanity where men treated each other as friends instead of the bitter foes they had become after four months of fighting. Experiences ranged from a British soldier cutting the hair of a shaggy German, to a much fabled soccer match the British were said to have won. Soldiers distributed food rations and

exchanged a seasonable ham, while others took time to bury the fallen, some of which had lay untended in No Man's Land for months.⁷ While fighting would resume in the upcoming days, many soldiers went to sleep that night with a war experience that would be retold for years to come.

To consider the thoughts and actions recorded in diaries and discussed in letters, the 146th day was truly miraculous. This day was not only a day of peace during the war, but was also December 25th: the Christian holiday of Christmas. While hopes of peace and unity were common amongst families and friends, never before had such feelings extended so prominently on a battlefield to create a day-long truce. Yet to discuss the peace that occurred as a response to a Christian holiday overshadows the significance and power of what happened.⁸ For one day, the 146th day, hundreds of thousands of soldiers consciously chose to lay down their arms and overlooked the nationalist ambitions of their respective country. In a war remembered for its mass mobilization and high number of casualties, soldiers have often been portrayed as individually powerless. Yet for a day, regardless of their reasons or motives, soldiers stopped war's destruction, and interacted with the enemy in a way modern history had never seen. Not until the 1,561th day and tens of millions of deaths later, would generals declare a peace that soldiers had informally conducted 1,415 days prior. Many soldiers who experienced the 146th day would be not live to see peace in 1918, but through their own actions on that memorable day, they already understood what peace could feel like.

Selected Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ Bruce Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), 74.

² Malcom Brown & Shirley Seaton. *Christmas Truce*. (London: Papermac, 1994), 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Based on numerous accounts found in: Stanley Weintraub. *Silent Night*. (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 57-66.; Modris Eksteins. *Rites of Spring*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 96-97.

⁶ Eksteins, 112.

⁷ Brown, 84.; Weintraub, 54-62.

⁸ In *Rites of Spring*, Eksteins argues that the Christmas Truce was: "[A] celebration of history and tradition," and inspired by cultural norms associated with the holiday, 113.