

English Channel

BELGIUM

The Christmas Match

Ypres

A stylized map of the Western Front in 1914. The English Channel is shown at the top left. Belgium is labeled at the top right. Ypres is marked with a dashed line. A red line with star-shaped markers, representing barbed wire, winds across the map from the top right towards the bottom right.

Pehr Thermaenius



Football in No Man's Land 1914

The Christmas Match

Pehr Thermaenius

On Christmas Eve, 1914, after four months of intense, bloody fighting in Flanders between entrenched British and German soldiers, something miraculous happened. The guns fell silent as Christmas approached, and the soldiers on both sides started singing instead of shooting. Then, on Christmas Day, the two sides emerged from their trenches and met in No Man's Land. Some chased rabbits. Others, more memorably, played soccer. It was a rare moment of peace—and even beauty—amid horrible carnage.

The Christmas Match tells that story through the eyes of two soldiers—Albert

Schmidt, a Saxon, and Jimmy Coyle, a Scot—who were in units that played a Christmas Day match against each other. Pehr Thermaenius traces their stories through military archives, taking the pair from mobilization in August to the frozen mud of Flanders in December, showing the making of soldiers, the traumas of war, and the emergence—brief, but real—of hope within that Christmas Day sporting truce. A brilliantly realized account of an unforgettable moment in European history, *The Christmas Match* is history at its up-close, deeply human best.

Pehr Themaenius is a Swedish journalist.

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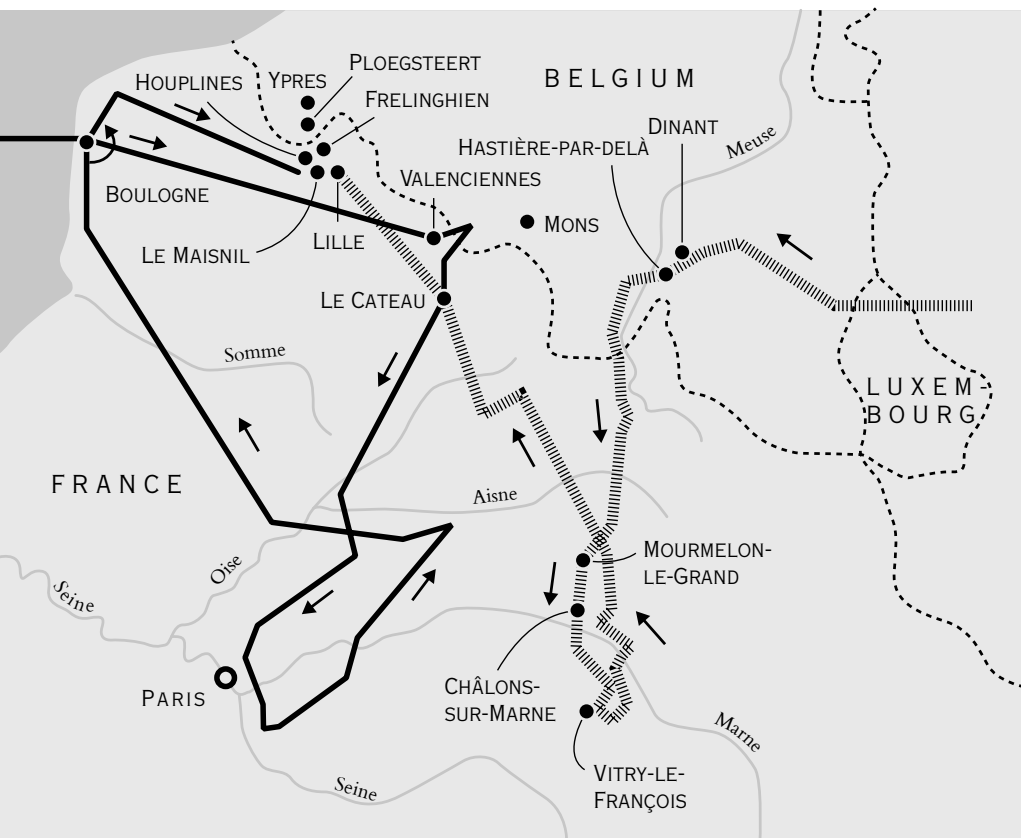
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||||| Albert Schmidt's unit. The Ninth Royal Saxon Infantry Regiment No. 133.
It was called IR133.

18 August: Into Belgium.
22 August: Hastière-par-delà.
4 September: Châlons-sur-Marne.
6-10 September: Vitry-le-François.
11 September: Back over the Marne.

Until 4 October: In trenches near
Mourmelon-le-Grand.
11 October: Near Lille.
The end of October to the end of the
year: Near Frelinghien



— Jimmy Coyle's unit. The Second Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. It was called the 93rd.

11 August: To Boulogne.
22 August: Valenciennes.
24 August: Turned to the south.
26 August: Battle of Le Cateau.
6 September: Turned to the north near
Paris.

22 September-5 October: At the Aisne.
21 October: The fight at Le Maisnil.
9-13 November: The attack at Ploegsteert
Wood.
17 November to the end of the year: Near
Houplines.

Two footballers

⊕ ALBERT AND JIMMY ⊕

The road to a field in Flanders

The war in Flanders between German and British soldiers fell silent on Christmas Eve 1914. The soldiers stopped shooting and started singing. On Christmas Day they came out of their trenches and met in No Man's Land. Some played football. This story is about two men, both footballers and soldiers, one Saxon and one Scot. They were in units that played a match in a field, between the French villages of Houplines and Frelinghien.

Albert Schmidt played inside right in the third team of Fussballclub 02 Schedewitz, a small town bordering the garrison town of Zwickau in Saxony in eastern Germany. He was a conscript soldier and Gefreiter, the equivalent of Lance Corporal, in the 9th Saxon Regiment, which was number 133 in the German Army. Albert was awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class, for his conduct in a fight in 1914. He was killed on 20 August 1916. His grave is in the German war cemetery in the French village of Villers-au-Flos.

Sergeant James Coyle was a professional soldier in the 2nd Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Regiment.



The football team of the 93rd played both in the Army Cup and in civilian competitions and leagues. This picture shows the team for the 1911-1912 season.



The team captain Jimmy Coyle is to the right of the
goalkeeper in the back row.
(Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders)



On 9 August 1914 the IR133 marched from their barrack square to the train in Zwickau. A man (with his back to the camera)



waved his hat when the fourth company passed. Did he see a friend? Or did he see his son? (Norbert Peschke)

The tramp of good German boots was heard on hundreds of roads. These boots were much sought after. Alexander Powell wrote that he had seen Belgian farmers risk their lives on a battlefield to take boots off dead German soldiers. And the soldiers seem to have had a doubly intimate relation with their boots. They gave them a pet name, Knobelbecher. This is the word for a leather mug, used for throwing dices. But Knobel is also an old word for ankle.

The German army had detailed rules for marching and for soldiers' care of their feet. These regulations were important, elaborately developed and tested, like service manuals for troop transport vehicles in a modern army. Albert Schmidt's soldiers' book of rules, *Dienstunterricht des Königlich Sächsischen Infanteristen* and the supplementary reader *Der gute Kamerad* said that his feet were almost more important than his rifle. Success depends on the ability to march and "like everything else in the world this has to be learnt".

The first thing that the soldier must learn was to look after his feet. Alexander Powell wrote that the soldier's feet did not belong to himself but belonged to the Emperor of Germany and that the Emperor expected these feet to be kept in perfect condition so that they could carry the soldier successfully through the fighting. The soldiers' books confirmed Powell's observation: "a soldier with bad feet is useless", and regulated the care of feet in detail.

The feet must be kept clean, washed if possible each day, especially in the summer and especially during hot days like there were in August 1914. The soldier must cut his toenails with scissors and scrape away corns with a knife, extremely



The American journalist Alexander Powell visited the German First army as it advanced through Belgium towards France. He wrote about marching men "far as the eye could see ...".

(Donald Thompson, from E. Alexander Powell's book *Fighting in Flanders*)

carefully. If the feet become hard the soldier should soak them in lukewarm soap water. To make his feet strong the soldier shall wash them with cold water or with "Branntwein" (schnapps). Soldiers who have sweaty feet should bathe their feet often in cold water, apply tallow and change socks or footcloths. Der gute Kamerad sets down what responsibility a soldier has for his sweaty feet. He shall care for them "like a mother cares for her sick child".

Finally the soldiers' book gives the reader a piece of insider advice, "even if it is difficult to believe": experienced soldiers

IN THE TRENCHES



German and British soldiers often stood in mud and could not dry their feet. In one British battalion the soldiers smeared their feet with leftover grease that the cooks collected and sent to the front trenches. The picture shows German soldiers during the winter 1914–1915.

(Imperial War Museum, Q63538)

At this time the regiment's strength was about 2700 men, so the loss was 7 per cent. Almost 1 per cent of the soldiers were killed. This happened while there was no fighting worth mentioning going on.

The regiment fought not only against the British but also against the enemies of all soldiers: the water, the mud and the diseases that prospered in the miserable trenches. Colds and fevers began to spread among the soldiers. When it started to rain towards the end of the year the trenches collected water and the earth at the bottom turned to mud. So instead of digging into the earth to seek protection the soldiers must build defences that stood on the soggy ground. The Germans used barrels that they had found in the brewery. They filled the barrels with earth and built a wall. It gave protection, at least against rifle bullets.

“So the end of the first year of the war came nearer and with it Christmas”, wrote Johannes Niemann. “The Emperor had promised us that we would be home with our mothers for Christmas, but unfortunately this did not happen.”



Back into the trenches

When the 93rd came out of Ploegsteert Wood on 13 November after the attack over the field, there remained 48 days of 1914. The battalion spent 32 of these days in the trenches, first 25 days, then 7 days, and during this time it lost 20 soldiers, 19 wounded and one killed. 42 of these days were free of casualties. After all

diary is missing. But the sentence probably ended something like this: "... destroyed by shells." Aidan Liddell also wrote about the farm in a letter: "We have a farmhouse just behind the trench, where the officers of the company nearest take meals, an excellent cellar vaulted over ..." He shared a cow byre with another officer, where they slept in "plenty of straw and no mud".

There is also a photograph of Henry Hyslop sitting at a table in this cellar on Christmas day. A copy of the picture is in his diary and it is also in doctor Frederick Chandler's photo album. The doctor took the picture. It was also in this cellar that the officers at the front had their Christmas dinner, so Jimmy Coyle must have been there on duty.

I believe that the Germans knew that this cellar was a British command post and that this was the reason it was practical to give it a name, the name that Johannes Niemann wrote in the map in his book.

What is certain is that it was in these fields that the Saxons in IR133 and the Scots in the 93rd spent Christmas.

Christmas Truce

A quiet Christmas

Thousands of soldiers climbed out of their trenches during the Christmas Truce. They met in No Man's Land, shook hands, offered each other something good to drink and something good to smoke. They exchanged souvenirs.

That was not strange at all. There was nothing strange with thousands of young men, who did dangerous jobs in terrible conditions, meeting for the holiday. It was quite natural that they met and wished each other Merry Christmas. What is strange is that they had tried to shoot each other to death a few days earlier. And what is even more strange is that some time later they would carry on shooting and then try to kill maybe the very men they had recently shaken hands with.

The Christmas Truce was just natural. No-one ordered the soldiers to stop shooting. No-one organized the great truce, neither the generals nor some common grass roots movement among the soldiers. But some high commanders might have contributed to enlarge the truce. Both before Christmas and when the truce was going on they sent out orders sharply forbidding fraternization. They also threatened with punishment those who sought contact with the enemy or accepted a truce



Thousands of German and British soldiers
climbed out of their trenches on Christmas
Day to meet the enemy soldiers and wish
them Happy Christmas.
(Bridgeman Art Library)



CHRISTMAS TRUCE



The photographs from the Christmas Truce are classics in the histories of both war and photography. The name of the British soldier (third from the left) was Andrew. The soldier looking over the shoulder was J. Selby Grigg. They belonged to the London Rifle Brigade. The Germans came from the Saxon army corps where also Albert Schmidt's IR133 belonged. (Imperial War Museum, Q011745)

talked, sometimes in English, more seldom in German, often with signs or with the assistance of those who could speak a bit of the opponents' language. Enemies shook hands, exchanged souvenirs, food or drinks. They showed their family photographs. It is remarkable how many had cameras. They took group pictures with German and British soldiers, sometimes wearing each other's caps. In one place British officers said they would arrange a new truce at New Year so the Germans could see if

the pictures came out well. The mail service was sometimes excellent and it was quite possible to send a film roll home for development and get the pictures back in a week. Some of the pictures survive. They are classics both in the history of war and the history of photography.

Several funny and moving stories are told about meetings in No Man's Land. One soldier from London recognized his barber among the Germans. The barber got out his scissors, placed his customer on an ammunition box and gave him a trimming. Then he finished his job with a razor. "And maybe I should cut your throat today, yes? Save ammunition tomorrow." British barbers were also busy, cropping heads of German soldiers who kneeled on the frozen mud. A German juggler, who had performed in London, drew a large crowd.

Both the barbers and the juggler found their ways into the literature of the Christmas Truce. One of the barbers was a member of the British officer Bruce Bairnsfather's machine-gun team. Bairnsfather was a cartoonist and his character Old Bill became a representative for all Tommies on the Western front. Bruce Bairnsfather, who survived the war, wrote that he remembered a patient German kneeling to have his hair cut by the machine-gun barber. In one of his cartoons Old Bill gives another soldier a haircut, but he is a British comrade and the job is done in their trench. The juggler appears in Robert Graves' short story Christmas Truce. Robert Graves came into the war after the Christmas Truce, but he heard stories about it. He also survived the war and published his story in 1962.

Many of the stories about the Christmas Truce are about food and drink. The second battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers,

CHRISTMAS TRUCE

silent agreement not to start shooting until after New Year. “We honoured this agreement and so did they over there. The staffs higher up might or might not have been aware of it.” But at New Year the 93rd was no longer in the trenches. They were celebrating in Armantières. Their successors in the trenches between Houplines and Frelinghien kept the spirit of Christmas alive for another few days.

The 93rd left the trenches on Boxing Day, when the whole of 19th Brigade was given a rest and was in reserve for six days. Frank Collier wrote that they stayed in homes in Armentières, with people “who made us very welcome and as comfortable as possible”. The news about the Christmas Truce had spread and there were those who were not pleased. Some French women stood in their doors and spat at the soldiers when they came marching from the trenches, a soldier in one of the other battalions in the Brigade wrote. The ladies shouted: “You boko kamerade Allemagne!”, the soldier noted. The soldiers answered with their worst curses.

The Match

 ALBERT AND JIMMY 

Nobody's home ground

This story ends in a field that lies on both sides of road D945 that runs between Houplines and Frelinghien in northern France (see map on page 134). Somewhere out there is the pitch where Saxons and Scots played football in No Man's Land on Christmas Day 1914.

Just west of the road, near the road that leads north to Ypres, is the place where there was a ruined farm. I believe that it was in the basement of this ruined house that some of the 93rd's officers had their command post, their straw beds and their dining table, where they had their Christmas dinner. The Germans named this ruin "Ferme la Moutarderie" and Johannes Niemann wrote this name in the map in his book. Today there is nothing left of the ruin. Where it was is now a field and when I was there in November 2013 the field was ploughed. It was not possible to walk out on the muddy, sucking earth on the field and I understood why some soldiers in the trenches did not dare wearing their boots on their feet but wore them tied together around their necks.