

Contributed by [John McCutcheon](#)

The Christmas Truce of 1914 on the Western and Eastern Fronts may well represent the last time that the face of humanity would be seen in what was rapidly becoming the ultimate nightmare of the industrial revolution. The concept of *total war* would soon replace any outdated notion of chivalry. Originally incorporated as part of the 1996 Christmas theme on the main page, John's lyrics from this 1984 song capture the spirit of that Christmas so many years ago. I thought it best to leave it up for year 'round access, lest we forget its message. *Note: Let's attribute the reference to gas in 1914 to artistic license.*

Christmas in the Trenches

by John McCutcheon

My name is Francis Tolliver, I come from Liverpool.
Two years ago the war was waiting for me after school.
To Belgium and to Flanders, to Germany to here
I fought for King and country I love dear.
'Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung,
The frozen fields of France were still, no Christmas song was sung.
Our families back in England were toasting us that day.
Their brave and glorious lads so far away.
I was lying with my messmate on the cold and rocky ground.
When across the lines of battle came a most peculiar sound.
Says I, "Now listen up, me boys!" each soldier strained to hear.
As one young German voice sang out so clear.
"He's singing bloody well, you know!" my partner says to me.
Soon, one by one, each German voice joined in harmony.
The cannons rested silent, the gas clouds rolled no more,
As Christmas brought us respite from the war.
As soon as they were finished and a reverent pause was spent,
"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" struck up some lads from Kent.
The next they sang was "Stille Nacht." "Tis 'Silent Night'," says I.
And in two tongues one song filled up that sky.
"There's someone coming toward us!" the front line sentry cried.
All sights were fixed on one long figure trudging from their side.
His truce flag, like a Christmas star, shown on that plain so bright,
As he, bravely, strode unarmed into the night.
Soon one by one on either side walked into No Man's Land
With neither gun nor bayonet we met there hand to hand.
We shared some secret brandy and we wished each other well,
And in a flare-lit soccer game we gave 'em hell.
We traded chocolates, cigarettes, and photographs from home.
These sons and fathers far away from families of their own.
Young Sanders played his squeezebox and they had a violin.
This curious and unlikely band of men.
Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more.
With sad farewells we each prepared to settle back to war.
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wonderous night,
"Whose family have I fixed within my sights?"
'Twas Christmas in the trenches where the frost, so bitter hung.
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung.
For the walls they'd kept between us to exact the work of war,
Had been crumbled and were gone forevermore.
My name is Francis Tolliver, in Liverpool I dwell.
Each Christmas come since World War I, I've learned its lessons well.
That the ones who call the shots won't be among the dead and lame.
And on each end of the rifle we're the same.
© 1984 John McCutcheon - All rights reserved

The Christmas Truce by Henry Williamson

The First Battle of Ypres was over. The deluge in the second week of November 1914 decided that. Our battalion of the London Regiment (Territorials) was out at rest, leaving a memory of dead soldiers in feld grau (field grey) and khaki lying in still attitudes between the German and British lines. 'Rest' meant no more fatigues or carrying parties; it meant letters from home, parcels, hazy nights in the estaminets of Hazebrouck with cafe'-rhum and weak beer, clouds of smoke and noisy laughter. After 48 hours clear, a daily route march, leading to nowhere and back again, with new faces of the drafts which had come up from the base. The war was now a mere rumour from afar: a low-flashing, dull booming beyond an eastern horizon of flat, tree-lined and arable fields gleaming with water in cart-rut and along each furrow. In the first week of December 1914 the King Emperor George V arrived at St Omer in northern France, headquarters of the British Expeditionary Force. Orders were given immediately at all units to prepare for a royal inspection. The King in the service uniform of a field-marshal, brown-booted with gold spurs, brown-bearded, prominent pouches under his blue eyes, passed with Field-Marshal Sir John French and various general staff officers down the ranks of silent, staring-ahead, depersonalised faces thinking that the gruff tones in which the King spoke to the commander-in-chief were of that other world infinitely remote from what really happened. Behind the King walked the Prince of Wales, seeming somehow detached from the massive power of red and gold, the big moustaches and faces and belts and boots and spurs all so shining and immaculate between the open ranks of the troops standing rigidly at attention. The slim figure of the Prince, in the uniform of a Grenadier, appeared to be looking for something far beyond the immediate scene—a slight, white-faced boy in the shadow of Father. The next afternoon the platoon sergeant walked from billet to billet, with orders that we were going into the line that evening. A waning moon rode the sky, memento of estaminet nights, moon-silvered cobble stones, colour-washed house-fronts of the Grande Place. The decaying orb was ringed by scudding vapour; a wet wind flapped the edges of rubber groundsheets fastened over packs and shoulders of the marching men. A wind from the south-west brought rain to the brown, the flat, the tree-lined plain of Flanders. Going back was by now a prospect of stoical acceptance, since marching in the rain absorbed nearly all personal memory, leaving little for coherent thought beyond the moment. We marched along a road lined with poplars towards the familiar hazy pallor thrown on low clouds by the ringed lights around Ypres -- called 'Ypriss' by the old sweats who had been out since Mons. As we came nearer, the sky was tremulous with flashes: the night burdened by reverberation of cannon heard with the lisp of rainy wind in the bare branches of trees above our heads. At last we halted, and welcome news arrived. The company was in reserve. We were to be billeted for the night in some sheds, and thatched lofts around a farm. Speculation ceased when the platoon commander said that we were taking over part of the line the following evening. The Germans, he said, had attacked down south; the battalion was to remain in brigade reserve. It was a quiet part of the line. There was to be diversionary fire from the trenches, to relieve the pressure. 'Cushy, we said among ourselves as we entered our cottage, to sleep upon the floor. There was a large stove, radiating heat. Bon for the troops! The damp December dusk of next evening was closing down as No 1 Company approached the dark mass of leafless trees at the edge of a wood. Through the trees lay a novel kind of track, firm but knobbly to the feet, but so welcome after the mud of the preceding field. It was like walking on an uneven and wide ladder. Rough rungs, laid close together, were made of little sawn-off branches, nailed to laid trunks of oak trees. As we came near to the greenish-white German flares, bullets began to crack. The men of the new draft ducked at each overhead crack; but the survivors of the original

battalion walked on upright, sometimes muttering, 'Don't get the wind- up, chum,' as the old sweats had said to them when first they had gone into the line, many weeks before. We came to a cross-ride in the wood, and waited there, while a cock-pheasant crowed as it flew past us. Dimly seen were some bunkers, in which braziers glowed brightly. The sight was homely, and cheering. Figures in balaclava woollen helmets stood about. 'What's it like, mate?' came the inevitable question. 'Cushy,' came the reply, as a cigarette brightened. These were regulars, the newcomers felt happy again. Braziers, lovely crackling coke flames! The relief company filed on down the path, and came to the luminous edge of the wood, beyond which the German parachute flares were clear and bright, like lilies. The trench was just inside the wood. There was no water in it, thank God! One saw sand- bag-dugouts behind the occupants standing by for the relief. It was indeed cushy! Thus began a period or cycle of eight days for No 1 Company: two in the front line followed by two days back in battalion reserve in billets, two in support within the wood and two more again in the front line. It was not unenjoyable: danger was negligible-a whizz-bang arriving now and again-object more of curiosity than of fear-news of someone getting sniped; work in the trench, digging by day, revetting the parapet, and fatigues in the wood by night; for the weather remained fine. One trench had a well-made parapet with steel loopholes built in the sandbags, and paved along a length of 50 yards entirely by unopened tins of bully-beef taken from some of the hundreds of boxes lying about in the wood. These boxes had been chucked away by former carrying parties, in the days before 'corduroy' paths. The trench had been built by the regulars, now no longer bearded, though some of their toes showed through their boots. It was said that a cigarette end, dropped somewhere along it, was a 'crime' heavily punished. Water to the waist ----- All form, and shape even, of the carefully- made trenches disappeared under rains falling upon the yellow clay which retained them, One was soaked all day and all night. The weight of a greatcoat was doubled by clay and water. 'We volunteered for this!' was an ironic comment among those in water sometimes to the waist. After the rains, mist lay over a countryside which had no soul, with its broken farmhouse roofs, dead cattle in no man's land, its daylight nihilism beyond the parapet with never a movement of life, never a glimpse of the Alleyman (Allemand -German)-except those who were dead, and lying motionless in varying attitudes of stillness day after day upon the level brown field extending to the yellow sub- soil thrown up from the enemy trench, beyond its barbed wire obstacles. At night mist blurred the brightness of the light-balls, the Very lights or flares as they were now generally called. The mists, hanging heavier in the wood, settled to hear, which rimed trees, corduroy paths, shed and barn; and clarified into keener air in sunlight. Frost formed floating films of ice upon the clay-blue water in shell- holes, which tipped when mess-tins were dipped for brewing tea; the daily ration of tea being mixed in sandbags with sugar. It was pleasant in the wood, squatting by a little stick fire. Movement was, however, laborious now upon the paths not yet laid with corduroy by the sappers. Boots became patterned with yellow clay. Still, we said, it might be worse-for memory of the tempest that had fallen on the last day of the battle for Ypres, of the misery of cold and wet, the dereliction of that time, was still in the forefront of our minds. One afternoon, towards Christmas, a harder frost settled upon the vacant battle- held. By midnight trees, bunkers, paths, sentries' balaclavas and greatcoat shoulders became stiff, thickly rimed. From some of the new draft came suppressed whimpering sounds. Only those old soldiers who had scrounged sandbags and straw from Iniskilling Farm at one edge of the wood, and put their boots inside, lay still and sleeping. Lying with unprotected boots outside the open end of a bunker, one endured pain in one's feet until the final agony, when one got up and hobbled outside, seeing bright stars above the treetops. The thing to do was to make a fire, and boil some water in a mess-tin for some Nestle's cafe'-au-lait. There were many shell- fractured oak-branches lying about. They were heavy with sap, but no

matter. One passed painful hours of sleeplessness in blowing and fanning weak embers amid a hiss of bubbling branch-ends. The winter agony ----- As soon as I sat still, or stood up to beat my arms like a cabby on a hansom cab, the weak glow of the fire went dull. My eyes smarted with smoke, there was no flame unless I fanned all the time. My arms were heavy in the frozen greatcoat sleeves, mud- slabbed and hard as drainpipes; while the skirts of the coat were like boards. I went back to sleep, but pain kept me awake; so I crawled out again and was once more in frozen air, bullets smacking through trees glistening with frost. I was thirsty, but the water-bottle was solid. Later, when it was thawed out over a brazier, it leaked, being split, but there were many lying about in the wood, with rifles and other equipment. We were issued with shaggy goatskin jerkins. Did it mean that the battalion was intended to be an Officers' Training Corps? That there would be no more attacks until the spring? The jerkins had broad tapes which cross-bound the white and yellow hairy skins against the chest. Officers and men now looked alike, except for the ex- pression of an officer's face, and the fact that one appeared to stand more upright: an effect given, perhaps, by the shoulder- high thumbsticks of ash many of them walked about with. Senior officers also wore Norwegian type knee-boots, laced to the knee and then treble-strapped. I thought of asking my father to send me a pair, but a thaw came at the beginning of the third week of December, and the misery of mud returned. And then, with a jump of concealed fear, orders were read out for an attack across no man's land to the German lines. It was two days after the new moon. We were in support. The company lay out on the edge of the wood, shivering and beating hands and feet, in support of a regular battalion of the Rifle Brigade. The objectives were a cottage in no man's land called Sniper's House, and thence forward to a section of the enemy front line that enfiladed our dangerous T-trench. The assault of muttering and tense- faced bearded men took place under a serried rank of bursting red stars of 18- pounder shrapnel shells, and supporting machine gun fire. Figures floundering across a root-field in no man's land, with its sad decaying lumps of dead cows and men. Hoarse yells of fear became simulated rage; while short of, into and beyond the British front line dropped shell upon shell to burst with acrid yellow fumes of lyddite from the British Long-toms of the South African war of 1902, with their worn rifling. The order came for the company to carry on the attack. Survivors, coming back through the wood, wet through and cover- ed with mud, uniforms ripped by barbed wire, were stumbling as they passed through us. When they had gone away -- away from the line, death behind them-a clear baritone voice floated back through the trees, singing Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove-far away, far away would I roam. They were wonderful, re- marked a sergeant, a rugger-playing Old Blue in peacetime. Yes, because they were going out, I thought; they were euphoric, hurrying to warmth and sleep, sleep, sleep. This local attack failed on the uncut German wire; but Sniper's House was taken. Our colonel, one heard later, had protested against the carrying on of the attack by our company. Later, it was re- ported in 'Comic Cuts', or Corps Intelli- gence sheets, that the attack had been ordered to aid the Russians hard pressed on the Eastern Front. We laughed sceptically at that; a begin- ning of disillusion with 'the well-fed Staff'. I had no fear at night, and used to wan- der about in no man's land by myself, to feel some sort of freedom. One night I was sitting down by the German wire when a flare hissed out just by my face, it seemed, followed by another, and another, while machine -guns opened up with loud directness, accompanied by the cracking air-shear of bullets passing only a few inches, it seemed, above my neck. Then up and down the line arose the swishing stalks of white lights, all from the German lines, by which one knew that they were not going to attack, but feared an assault from our lines. This was remote comfort, as I felt myself to be large and visible, sweating with fear of sorts, while bullets from our lines thudded and whanged away upwards in ricochet. The sky above me appeared to be lit by the beautiful white lilies of the dead, as I thought of them.

This was an occasion of that phenomenon known as wind-up. As before a wind, fire swept with bright yellow-red stabs of thorn-flame up the line towards the light-ringed salient around Ypres: bullets in flight, hissing, clacking or whining, crossed the lines of the hosts of the unburied dead slowly being absorbed into Flanders field. The wind of fear, the nightly wind of the battlefield of Western Europe, from the cold North Sea to the great barrier of the Alps—a fire travelling faster than any wind, was speckling the ridges above the drained marsh that surrounded Ypres, stabbing in wandering aimless design the darkness on the slopes of the Commines canal, running in thin crenellations upon the plateau of Wytschaete and Messines, sweeping thence down to the plain of Armentieres, among the coal-mines and slags of Artois, across the chalk uplands of Picardy, and the plains of the rivers. The wind of fear rushed on, to die out, expended, beyond the dark forest of the Argonne, beyond the fears of massed men, where snow-field, ravine, torrent and crag ended before the peaks in silence under the constellation of Orion, shaking gem-like above all human hope. It was still freezing hard on Christmas Eve. We had been detailed for what seemed to be a perilous fatigue in no man's land—going out between the lines to knock in posts in a zigzag line towards the German front line. Around the posts wire was to be wound. On this wire, hurdles taken from a shed were to be laid. Then drying tobacco leaves, hung on the hurdles (as the leaves had been in the shed), would give cover from view should it be necessary, in an attack, to reinforce the front line. What an idea, I thought. It would draw machine gun fire. It was about as sensible as the brigade commander's idea for the December 19 attack across no man's land, for some men to carry straw palliasses, to lean against the German wire and enable men to cross over the entanglements. As for the knocking-in of posts into frozen ground, that was utterly wrong! And in bright moonlight, 40 yards away from the Alleyman! Stab of fear -----

After our platoon commander, a courteous man in his early 20s and fresh from Cambridge, had outlined the plan quietly, he asked for questions. I dared to say that the noise of knocking in posts would be heard. There was silence; then we were told that implicit directions had come from brigade, and must be carried out. We debouched from the wood, and were exposed. After an initial stab of fear, I was not afraid. Everything was so still, so quiet in the line. No flares, no crack of the sniper's rifle. No gun firing. Soon we were used to the open moonlight in which all life and movement seemed unreal. Men were fetching and laying down posts, arranging themselves in couples, one to hold, the other to knock. Others prepared to unwind barbed wire previously rolled on staves. I was one who followed the platoon commander and three men to a tarred wooden shed, to fetch hurdles hung with long dry tobacco leaves, which we brought out and laid on the site of the reinforcement fence. And not a shot was fired from the German trench. The unbelievable had soon become the ordinary, so that we talked as we worked, without caution, while the night passed as in a dream. The moon moved down to the treetops behind us. Always, it seemed, had we been moving bodilessly, each with his shadow. After a timeless dream I saw what looked like a large white light on top of a pale put up in the German lines. It was a strange sort of light. It burned almost white, and was absolutely steady. What sort of lantern was it? I did not think much about it; it was part of the strange unreality of the silent night, of the silence of the moon, now turning a brownish yellow, of the silence of the frost mist. I was warm with the work, all my body was in glow, not with warmth but with happiness. Suddenly there was a short quick cheer from the German lines—Hoch! Hoch! Hoch! With others I flinched and crouched, ready to fling myself flat, pass the leather thong of my rifle over my head and aim to fire; but no other sound came from the German lines. We stood up, talking about it, in little groups. For other cheers were coming across the black spaces of no man's land. We saw dim figures on the enemy parapet, about more lights; and with amazement saw that a Christmas tree was being set there, and around it Germans were talking and laughing together. Hoch! Hoch! Hoch!, followed by

cheering. Our platoon commander, who had gone from group to group during the making of the fence, looked at his watch and told us that it was eleven o'clock. One more hour, he said, and then we would go back. 'By Berlin time it is midnight. A Merry Christmas to you all! I say, that's rather fine, isn't it?', for from the German parapet a rich baritone voice had begun to sing a song I remembered from my nurse Minne singing it to me after my evening tub before bed. She had been maid to my German grandmother, one of the Lune family of Hildesheim. Stillle Nacht! Heilige Nacht! Tranquil Night! Holy Night! The grave and tender voice rose out of the frozen mist; it was all so strange; it was like being in another world, to which one had come through a nightmare: a world finer than the one I had left behind in England, except for beautiful things like music, and springtime on my bicycle in the country of Kent and Bedfordshire. And back again in the wood it seemed so strange that we had not been fired upon; wonderful that the mud had gone; wonderful to walk easily on the paths; to be dry; to be able to sleep again. The wonder remained in the low golden light of a white-rimmed Christmas morning. I could hardly realise it; but my chronic, hopeless longing to be home was gone. The post arrived while I was frying my breakfast bacon, beside a twig fire where stood my canteen full of hot sugary tea. I sat on an unopened 28-lb box of 2-ounce Capstan tobacco: one of scores thrown down in the wood, with large bright metal containers of army biscuits, of the shape and size and taste of dog biscuits. The tobacco issue per day was reckoned to be 5,000 cigarettes at this time, or '14 lbs of tobacco. This was not the 'issue' ration, but from the many 'Comforts for the Troops' appeals in newspapers, all tobacco being duty free to our benefactors at home. There was a Gift Package to every soldier from the Princess Royal. A brass box embossed with Princess Mary's profile, containing tobacco and cigarettes. This I decided to send home to my mother, as a souvenir. 'There's bloody hundreds of them out there!' said a kilted soldier to me as I sat there. Face to face ----- I walked through the trees, some splintered and gashed by fragments of Jack Johnsons, as we called the German 5.9-inch gun, and into no man's land and found myself face to face with living German soldiers, men in grey uniforms and leather knee-boots-a fact which was at the time for me beyond belief. Moreover the Germans were, some of them, actually smiling as they talked in English. Most of them were small men, rather pale of face. Many wore spectacles, and had thin little goatee beards. I did not see one pickelhaube. They were either bare-headed, or had on small grey pork-pie hats, with red bands. Each bore two metal buttons, ringed with white, black and red rather like tiny archery targets: the Imperial German colours. Among these smaller Saxons were tall, sturdy men taking no part in the talking, but regarding the general scene with detachment. They were red-faced men and their tunics and trousers above the leather knee-boots showed dried mud marks. Some had green cords round a shoulder, and under the shoulder tabs. Looking in the direction of the mass of Germans, I saw, judging by the serried rows of figures standing there, at least three positions or trench lines behind the front trench. They were dug at intervals of about 200 yards. 'It only shows,' said one of our chaps, 'what a lot of men they have, compared to our chaps. We've got only one line, really, the rest are mere scratches.' He said quietly, 'See those green lanyards and tassels on that big fellow's shoulders? They're sniper's cords. They're Prussians. That's what some Saxons told me. They dislike the Prussians. "Kill them all," said one, "and we'll have peace".' 'Yes, my father was always against the Prussians,' I told him. One of the small Saxons was contentedly standing alone and smoking a new and large meerschaum pipe. He wore spectacles and looked like a comic-paper 'Hun'. The white bowl of the pipe bore the face and high-peaked cap of 'Little Willie' painted on it. The Saxon saw me looking at it and taking pipe from mouth said with quiet satisfaction: 'Kronprinz! Prachtiger Kerl!' before putting back the mouthpiece carefully between his teeth. Someone told me that Prachtiger Kerl meant 'Good Chap' or 'Decent Fellow'. Of course, I thought, he is to them as the Prince of Wales is to us. A

mark of German efficiency I noted: two aluminium buttons where we had one brass button on our trousers. Men were digging, to bury stiff corpses. Each feld grau 'stiffy' was covered by a red-black-white German flag. When the grave had been filled in an officer read from a prayer-book, while the men in feld grau stood to attention with round grey hats clutched in left hands. I found myself standing to attention, my balaclava in my hand. When the grave was filled, someone wrote, in indelible pencil, these words on the rough cross of ration-box wood: Hier Ruht In Gott ein Unbekannter Deutscher Held. 'Here rests in God an unknown German hero', I found myself translating: and thinking that it was like the English crosses in the little cemetery in the clearing within the wood. I learned, with surprise, that the German assaults in mass attack through the woods and across the arable fields of the salient, during the last phase of the Battle for Ypres, had been made by young volunteers, some arm in arm, singing, with but one rifle to every three. They had been 'flung in' (as the British military term went) after the failure of the Prussian Guard, the elite Corps du Garde, modelled on Napoleon's famous soldiers, to break our line. And here was the surprise: 'You had too many automatische pistolen. in your line, Englische friend!' As a fact, we had few if any machine guns left after the battle; the Germans had mistaken their presence for our 'fifteen rounds rapid' fire! Every infantry battalion had been equipped with two machine guns, of the type used in the South African War of 1902; with one exception. That was the London Scottish, the 14th Battalion of the London Regiment, which had bought, privately before the war, two Vickers guns. These also were lost during the battle. Another illusion of the Germans appeared to be that we had masses of reserve troops behind our front line, most of them in the woods. If only they had known that we had very few reserves, including some of the battalions of an Indian Division, the turbaned soldiers of which suffered greatly from the cold. The truce lasted, in our part of the line (under the Messines Ridge), for several days. On the last day of 1914, one evening, a message came over no man's land, carried by a very polite Saxon corporal. It was that their regimental (equivalent to our brigade, but they had three battalions where we had four) staff officers were going round their line at midnight; and they would have to fire their automatische pistolen, but would aim high, well above our heads. Would we, even so, please keep under cover, 'lest regrettable accidents occur). And at 11 o'clock—for they were using Berlin time—we saw the flash of several Spandau machine guns passing well above no man's land. I had taken the addresses of two German soldiers, promising to write to them after the war. And I had, vaguely, a childlike idea that if all those in Germany could know what the soldiers had to suffer, and that both sides believed the same things about the righteousness of the two national causes, it might spread, this truce of Christ on the battlefield, to the minds of all, and give understanding where now there was scorn and hatred. I was still very young. I was under age, having volunteered after the news of the Retreat from Mons had come to us one Sunday in the third week of August 1914. Our colonel had made a speech to the battalion, then in London, declaring that the British Expeditionary Force of the Regular army was very reduced in numbers after the 90-mile retreat which had worn out boots and exhausted so many, and was in dire need of help. And now the New Year had come, the frost was settling again in little crystals upon posts and on the graves and icy shell holes in no man's land. Once more the light-balls were rising up to hover under little parachutes over no man's land with the blast of machine guns, and the brutal downward droning of heavy shells. And the rains came, to fall upon Flanders field, while preparations were in hand for the spring offensive.