

# The Christmas Truce, December 1914

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## Introduction

Christmas Eve 1914, an official ceasefire has silenced the guns for twenty-four hours. As the sun rose early on Christmas day dozens of soldiers from both sides, who had spent the previous few months trying kill each other, left their trenches and began to fraternise in no-mans land - sharing drinks, smoking cigars, and in some places playing football.

## Overview

This unit is designed to introduce students to this event and to discuss the tensions and historical significance. The session involves inquiry - looking at photographs, asking questions, discussing implications - drama - enacting moments from the day using the conventions of a film which can stopped and started - a study of the history - using video documentaries - and a writing task. There are no timings, these are left to you.

It is recommended that you print out the planning and have it close by during the session so you can refer to the language used. The words and the language register are important.

## Resources

- Copies of the photographs below ready to show on the whiteboard.
- A stack of A5 paper for the students to use in steps 6 and 7.
- Documentaries on YouTube for Step 11. (Watch these in preparation for teaching the session).

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## Sequence

**Step 1:** Share this photograph with the students:

Ask them: *“What do you notice about this photograph?”*

Give them a little time to say what they see. They might notice the guns piled on the



floor, the soldier staring at the camera, the soldier at the back looking up into the sky.

They might notice that the two soldiers sharing a cigarette are from opposite sides. Don't hesitate to point these things out and add your own comments, but don't ask leading questions you already know the answer to - such as "Who can tell me..." etc

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**Step 2:** Once they've had a enough time to talk, show them this next picture:

Ask, "How about this picture?"

Give them a bit more time to talk, then say:  
*"On the first Christmas day of World War I the two enemies - the British and French on one side, the Germans on the other - decided to have a truce - that is a ceasefire and a temporary halt to all hostilities. The generals thought the soldiers should stay in their trenches, but the soldiers had other ideas - as you can see here."*



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**Step 3:** *"I wonder how they communicated to one another? I mean, both sides knew there is a ceasefire. The heavy guns - a constant boom along the front - have stopped firing. For the first time in months the soldiers can hear the sound of birds chirping, a dog barking in the distance. Who I wonder made the first move? Which side? If we were there, how would we do it? Let's imagine we are the soldiers in the trenches, how might we go about communicating to the other side across no-mans land. It's quite a long distance - about the length of a football pitch - and covered in barbed wire and bomb craters."*

Give the students a bit of time to discuss the task: How did they communicate to one another? How did they make the other side trust them?

Note: this is not about 'pretending' to be the soldiers. At the moment the task is just to discuss what they might do if they were the soldiers in that place at that time.

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**Step 4:** In this next step the students are going to represent 'enactively' the moment when one side took the risk. It will be done using the convention of a photograph. You may have to remind the students that photographs are still and silent.

Say: *"Could you please stand up. With a partner, have a quick discussion and decide how you are going to attract the attention of the other side. We're going to see this moment as though it was a photograph taken at the time of the event."*

Give the students a bit of time to talk and get ready, then say: *"Are you ready? Here we go... 3,2,1... hold it there. Remember this is a photograph, so no talking and no movement. These people are putting their lives at risk, if they get it wrong, it could be fatal. Don't do it lightly, there would have been no laughter at this stage, no smiles, just the hope that you would be understood, the hope that the other side wasn't going to misinterpret your actions."*

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**Step 5:** Choose one photo enacted by the students and ask everyone else to relax and come and take a look.

*"Let's gather round and look at this image."*

Check in to make sure the students representing the image are happy to be stared at: *"We're going to be looking at you for a while, is that alright? You'll have to ignore us, imagine we're not here."*

Build up the narrative by asking those looking at the image: *"What do you suppose the weather was like on that day? It was early in the morning - the sun was only just coming up over the horizon - was it raining? Perhaps there was snow on the ground. I expect they were wrapped up in their great coats, and their hats and scarfs against the wind. The ground was probably as hard as stone."*

Then switch to the narrator's voice, narrating what's happening in the image created by the students: (something like) *"As the sun came up over the horizon, one side saw a figure in the enemy trench waving across the blasted mud and twisted metal of no-man's land..."*

Ask: *"What do you suppose a soldier might have in their hand that would reassure the other side that they had peaceful intent?"* Discussion.

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**Step 6:** In this step the students create images of things that would have been important to the soldiers fighting on the front a long way from home. The idea is to humanise the young men on both sides.

Say: *“We’ll just pause the story for a moment. Can I ask you all to think of something you might have carried with you since the start of the war. Something personal, something you can’t bare to apart from. Perhaps it was a gift, perhaps it is a lucky charm, perhaps it was found it in the mud of no-mans land, perhaps it is photograph, or a letter.”*

Task: *“Could you now go back to your tables and draw a picture of this thing that you carry with you. It’ll have to be small enough to fit in your pocket or hang round you neck or fit on one of your fingers or round your wrist.”*

Give the students time to draw. Remind them if necessary that whatever their object is it has to be something that was around in 1914. If they struggle you might want to show them this short film on BBC - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-26889239>

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**Step 7:** In this step the students write about why the object is so important to them, as the soldier in the story.

*“When you are ready, could I ask you all to write on the back a few words, explaining why this item is so special and important to you. Was it a gift, was it something given to you on the day you left for the front, is it something you’ve owned all you life, or it something you found recently?”*

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**Step 8:** In this step the students go back into the story and represent the two sides coming together in no-man’s land. There is no need for them to carry the bits of paper with their drawings on, ask them to keep the objects in their minds.

*“Could I ask you stand up and move to the edge of the room, one side over here, the other over here.*

*“What we’re going to see next is the two sides - the two enemies - coming slowly together across no man’s land. As you get nearer can you make a signal to welcome your enemy, something to put their mind at rest. There is no need to bring your drawings, but can you keep in mind the object you have just created. It’ll be somewhere on you, in your pocket or round your neck, or somewhere else.”*

Note: In this next part of the sequence you will break this step down into five mini-steps, using voice of a narrator to facilitate. As you speak the words ask the students to enact the soldiers' actions.

Something like:

I. *"We're going to see this event in five parts, imagine it like a film happening slowly - a black and white film, now aged and scratched with age, silent of course. It will start with the soldiers from both sides in their trenches. Let's see that, everyone crouched down, sitting waiting for another day, the wind whistling over their heads, their toes and fingers numb with cold, their breath coming out in clouds of cold condensation."*

II. *"They notice the guns have stopped, there is no sound but the sound of nature, the truce has started, there had been rumours. Cautiously - they didn't want to get their head blown off (they had been told the enemy were not to be trusted) - the soldiers on both sides stood up and looked over the edge of their trench, across no-mans land."*

III. *"On the other side, over a field of broken ground, muddy and twisted with barbed wire, they suddenly saw signs of the enemy trying to attract their attention - there were hands waiving in the air, one of them had a bottle of whiskey!"*

IV. *"Tentatively, the soldiers on both sides climbed out of their trench and walked slowly and carefully across no-mans land. Their guns left behind. Instead they carried gifts - food parcels, bottles of beer, a Christmas tree, one of the soldiers had a football in his hands."*

V. *"When they came together they shook hands and exchanged gifts. They talked as best they could in the broken words they had of each others' language."*

VI. *"There was a war reporter who set up a camera and took photographs."*

Ask the students to represent the soldiers in the photographs: *"Let's see the photographs taken that day, some of them might be like the ones we saw earlier."*

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**Step 9:** In this step the students have a decision to make on behalf of the soldiers they represent.

*"As you talk and share your gifts with the enemy, I wonder would you let them know about the thing you carry with you of special importance? Would you show to them, and talk to them about it?" Discussion.*

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**Step 10:** *“As the sun went down at the end of the day the soldiers had to make their way back to the own trenches. They took the opportunity to carry back the bodies of fallen comrades who had died in previous battles.*

*“Later that night, as the clock ticked past twelve, the heavy guns started up again, pounding them and the trenches of those they had befriended the day before.”*

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**Step 11:** In this step you share with the students information about the real historical events. Bring them back to the chairs.

*“The story we just created was a fictional representation of real historical events. There really was a Christmas truce on December 25th 1914 and soldiers from both sides really did cross over no-man’s land and spend time with one another. Here is some more information for you:*

(Share as much of the following as you deem appropriate). Three videos:





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**Step 12:** In this step the students write letters home that might have been ‘redacted’ by the army censors under the official secrets act.

*“Soldiers were told to be careful about what they put in their letters home. The army were worried about sensitive information falling into the hands of the enemy and sometimes letters home were either redacted (that is sections blacked out) or censored entirely.”*

*“I wonder what the soldiers said in their letters about the Christmas truce and what parts of their letter might have been considered too sensitive by the censor? The Generals were, so are we told, concerned about fraternisation and the soldiers’ fighting spirit.” Discussion.*

*“Let’s have a go at writing some shall we? Shall we start by describing conditions in the trenches? Do you think the soldiers did their own censoring, keeping the worst aspects away from their loved ones?”*