

# *The Christmas Truce Concert*

*by Alan Cleaver*

**Proposal:** A concert of words and music based around the Christmas Truce of 1914. Extracts from letters written by the soldiers who took part are interspersed with carols, hymns and songs sung by the men during the truce.

**Background:** In the last few months, volunteers have been transcribing dozens of letters written by soldiers who took part in the truce from the archives on the UK's regional papers. This has revealed many astonishing first-hand accounts of the truce. It has also, for the first time, produced a comprehensive list of the songs sung during the truce.

**The songs:** These include carols, folk songs, music hall songs, hymns and light classical. Such songs as - Come Let Us All Sweet Carols Sing (Champneys); Good Christian Men Rejoice (traditional); The Manger Throne (Steggell); Sleep Holy Babe (Dykes); See Amid The Winter Snow (Goss) ; Good King Wenceslas (Helmore's Collection); Stille Nacht/Silent Night; Minuit, Chretiens, c'est l'heure solenelle; Adeste fideles/O Come All Ye Faithful; Les anges dans nos campagnes; Schumann's The Two Grenadiers; Die Wacht am Rhein; Christians Awake; My Little Grey Home in the West; God Save The King; O Tannenbaum; We are Fred Karno's Army sung to tune of The Church's One Foundation; It's a Long Way To Tipperary; Home Sweet Home; The First Nowell; O du Frohliche; Auld Lang Syne; Deutschland Uber Alles; Rule Britannia; Get Out And Get Under; Let's All Go Down The Strand; Old Folks at Home; Onward Christian Soldiers; While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night; Who Were You With Last night; The Boys of Bonnie Scotland, where the heather and the bluebells grow (My bonnie, bonnie Jean?); Handel's Largo; Heil dir im Siegerkranz; Dies ist der Tag, den Gott gemacht.

**The Letters:** These have been collated by volunteers (under the leadership of myself and my partner Lesley Park). There is a wide selection of letters covering all aspects of the truce. They can be found at [www.christmastruce.co.uk](http://www.christmastruce.co.uk).

## **Outline of the concert**

**FIRST HALF: Christmas Eve.** Setting the scene; the songs of Major Buchanan-Dunlop that kicked-off the truce; Christmas Eve in the trenches; Stille Nacht

**SECOND HALF: Christmas Day** as described in the letters of the soldiers; The aftermath - reaction at home; Stille Nacht.

## **THE PROGRAMME**

Stage with minimal props to give a suggestion of the Western Front during World War One. Slide show of images showing at the back of scenes from the war. On stage a hand-painted sign on old wood reads: "CONCERT OVER HERE TONIGHT. ALL BRITISH TROOPS WELCOME".

**Concert begins** with solitary voice (off-stage) whistling chorus of We Are Fred Karno's Army. This merges with voices singing the words and the choir marching on to stage. Song ends.

**Choir sings:** Let's All Go Down The Strand

**Narrator sets the scene:** World War One had begun with a wave of optimism and a misguided view that it would be all over by Christmas. Indeed, many soldiers were genuinely worried that the war would be over before they could even get to France. A sweeping German advance across France had been halted by the French and Allied troops resulting in the nightmare of trench warfare. While Generals still spoke of a swift victory, the ordinary soldier - the Tommy Atkins - knew that in reality this had turned into a war of attrition: Victory would only be decided when one side ran out of bullets - or ran out of men.

So Christmas 1914 drew near with opposing forces trying to survive in trenches often waist-deep in mud and water. No side was making any advance and the only 'victories' were achieved by cowardly snipers picking off the occasional soldier who forgot to stoop and keep his head below the parapet. Since the troops were within shouting distance of one another, they could call out Christmas greetings. And if the Allies sang the National Anthem at the Germans, there would be a hearty chorus of Deutschland Uber Alles in response.

No one person started the truce but Major Buchanan-Dunlop of the 1st Leicestershires certainly hastened it. Just before Christmas he received a copy of the hymn sheet used at his old school's carol concert and on Christmas Eve he led his men in a rendition of some of the songs. With a winter frost now descending on much of the front line, the scene was set for one of the most remarkable events in military history....

**Choir sings:** Come Let Us All Sweet Carols Sing (Champneys);

**Narrator reads:** Private Frederick Heath: "The night closed in early - the ghostly shadows that haunt the trenches came to keep us company as we stood to arms. Under a pale moon, one could just see the grave-like rise of ground which marked the German trenches two hundred yards away. Fires in the English lines had died down, and only the squelch of the sodden boots in the slushy mud, the whispered orders of the officers and the NCOs, and the moan of the wind broke the silence of the night. The soldiers' Christmas Eve had come at last, and it was hardly the time or place to feel grateful for it."

**Choir sings:** See Amid The Winter Snow

**Narrator reads:** "Memory in her shrine kept us in a trance of saddened silence. Back somewhere in England, the fires were burning in cosy rooms; in fancy I heard laughter and the thousand melodies of reunion on Christmas Eve. With overcoat thick with wet mud, hands cracked and sore with the frost, I leaned against the side of the trench, and, looking through my loophole, fixed weary eyes on the German trenches. Thoughts surged madly in my mind; but they had no sequence, no cohesion. Mostly they were of home as I had known it through the years that had brought me to this. I

asked myself why I was in the trenches in misery at all, when I might have been in England warm and prosperous. That involuntary question was quickly answered. For is there not a multitude of houses in England, and has not someone to keep them intact? I thought of a shattered cottage in -- , and felt glad that I was in the trenches. That cottage was once somebody's home."

**Choir sings:** Home Sweet Home or The Manger Throne (Steggell); Sleep Holy Babe (Dykes);

**Narrator reads:** "Still looking and dreaming, my eyes caught a flare in the darkness. A light in the enemy's trenches was so rare at that hour that I passed a message down the line. I had hardly spoken when light after light sprang up along the German front. Then quite near our dug-outs, so near as to make me start and clutch my rifle, I heard a voice. There was no mistaking that voice with its guttural ring. With ears strained, I listened, and then, all down our line of trenches there came to our ears a greeting unique in war: "English soldier, English soldier, a merry Christmas, a merry Christmas!"

Following that salute boomed the invitation from those harsh voices: "Come out, English soldier; come out here to us." For some little time we were cautious, and did not even answer. Officers, fearing treachery, ordered the men to be silent. But up and down our line one heard the men answering that Christmas greeting from the enemy. How could we resist wishing each other a Merry Christmas, even though we might be at each other's throats immediately afterwards? So we kept up a running conversation with the Germans, all the while our hands ready on our rifles. Blood and peace, enmity and fraternity - war's most amazing paradox. "

**Choir sings:** Good King Wenceslas (Helmore's Collection); Good Christian Men Rejoice (traditional);

**Narrator reads: (Rifleman Graham Williams: )** "I was standing on the firestep, gazing towards the German lines and thinking what a very different sort of Christmas Eve this was from any I had experienced in the past. In the ordinary way of things, my father would be making rum punch from an old family recipe, which had been written out by his grandfather and was kept, of all places, in the family Bible! Earlier, after the evening meal, we would have decorated the living rooms and hall with the traditional greenery and

would now be looking forward to wishing one another a Happy Christmas and toasting the occasion in the result of my father's labours. Instead of this, here was I, standing in a water-logged trench, in a muddy Flemish field, and staring out over the flat, empty and desolate countryside, with no signs of life. Then suddenly lights began to appear along the German parapet, which were evidently make-shift Christmas trees, adorned with lighted candles, which burnt steadily in the still, frost air! Other sentries had of course seen the same thing and quickly awoke those on duty, asleep in the shelters, to 'come and see this thing which had come to pass'. Then our opponents began to sing *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*. This was actually the first time I heard this carol, which was not then so popular in this country as it has since become. They finished their carol and we thought that we ought to retaliate in some way. So we sang *The First Nowell* and when we finished that they all began clapping and then they struck up another favourite of theirs, *O Tannenbaum*. And so it went on. First the Germans would sing one of their carols and then we would sing one of ours, until when we started up *O Come All Ye Faithful* the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words *Adeste Fideles*. And I thought, well, this was really a most extraordinary thing - two nations both singing the same carol in the middle of a war.

**Choir sings:** O Tannenbaum and O Come All Ye Faithful.

**Narrator reads:** Rifleman C H Brazier: "On Christmas Eve the Germans entrenched opposite us began calling out to us 'Cigarettes', 'Pudding', 'A Happy Christmas' and 'English – means good', so two of our fellows climbed over the parapet of the trench and went towards the German trenches. Half-way they were met by four Germans, who said they would not shoot on Christmas Day if we did not. They gave our fellows cigars and a bottle of wine and were given a cake and cigarettes. When they came back I went out with some more of our fellows and we were met by about 30 Germans, who seemed to be very nice fellows. I got one of them to write his name and address on a postcard as a souvenir. All through the night we sang carols to them and they sang to us and one played 'God Save the King' on a mouth organ. "

**Choir sings:** Good Christian Men Rejoice

**Narrator reads:** "As I sat in my little dug-out, writing, my chum came

bursting in upon me with: "Bob! hark at 'em!" And I listened. From the German trenches came the sound of music and singing. My chum continued. "They've got Christmas trees all along the top of their trenches I never saw such a sight!". Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole of their line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description, many of them in such positions as to suggest that they were hung upon Christmas trees. And as I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us - *The Watch on the Rhine*. Our boys answered with a cheer, while a neighbouring regiment sang lustily the *National Anthem*. Some were for shooting the lights away, but almost at the first shot there came a shout in really good English: "Stop shooting!". Then began a series of answering shouts from trench to trench. It was incredible. "Halloo! Halloo! you English; we wish to speak." And everyone began to speak at once. Some were rational, others the reverse to complimentary. Eventually some sort of order obtained, and lo! A party of our men got out from the trenches and invited the Germans to meet them half-way and talk. And there in the searchlight they stood, Englishman and German, chatting and smoking cigarettes together midway between the lines. A rousing cheer went up from a friend and foe alike. The group was too far away for me to hear what was said, but presently we heard a cheery "Good-night." A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all," with which the parties returned to their respective trenches. After this we remained the whole night through singing with the enemy song for song. "Give us Tipperary", they cried. Whereupon an adjacent Irish regiment let loose a tremendous "whoop," and complied with the request in a way as only Irishmen can.

**Choir sings:** It's A Long Way To Tipperary

**Narrator reads:** Albert Moren, then in the front-line trenches held by 2/Queen's near the village of La Chapelle d'Armentieres: "It was a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere, and about seven or eight in the evening there was a lot of commotion in the German trenches and there were these lights - I don't know what they were. And then they sang *Silent Night - Stille Nacht*. I shall never forget it, it was one of the highlights of my life. I thought, what a beautiful tune."

**Solo male voices off-stage sings Stille Nacht**

## INTERVAL

### PART TWO

**Narrator reads:** "Christmas in the trenches! What a time? "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men." It is hardly to be believed, but nevertheless it is quite true that such was the case this Christmas. Who can realise it? It will astound everyone who hears about it, which everyone will do in good time. Of course I am speaking about the part of the firing line we are situated in. On Christmas Eve at four p.m. we had orders that unless the "enemy" advanced we were not to fire, and the same applied to Christmas Day. Whether the Germans had the same order or not I don't know but no shot was fired on either side. In Christmas Eve we shouted "Compliments of the Season" to each other, and passed pleasant remarks. We sang the "Austrian Anthem" and they replied with "God save the King." On Christmas Day after service in the trenches, we went halfway and we shook hands, and had a fine crack with them. Quite a number of them speak English. I got one's autograph and he got mine, and I exchanged a button with another, and exchanged cigs and got cigars galore. Altogether we spent a very pleasant two hours with them, and found them a nice lot of fellows. Men, every one of them - and white ones, too."

**Choir sings:** Good King Wenceslas

Narrator reads: "On Christmas morning I was sitting in our trenches having breakfast when the word came along 'The Germans are out of their trenches'. I could not credit it at first but on looking over the top of the trench I was amazed to see large numbers of the Germans standing out in front of their trenches all without arms. Of course we did not fire and when some of the German officers approached some of ours got out and went over to them to inquire, I suppose, the reason why their men were out of their trenches. The German officers then said that they wish an armistice in order to bury their dead. After some conference it was agreed to grant the armistice, the reason being that we also had dead to bury. Other sentiments also had something to do with it I think for was it not Christmas Day, the day of peace and goodwill towards men? We were all glad of the halt anyway and soon we got started burying the dead. Our padre, who very fortunately happened to come up to the trenches that morning to wish us a Merry Christmas, arranged to have a service. After the burials were completed we lined up on

appointed sides of the ditch, officers in front and burial parties in rear. I was very proud to be one of our party on such an occasion. Our padre then gave a short service, one of the items in which was Psalm 23. Thereafter, a German soldier, a divinity student I believe, interpreted the service to the German party. I could not understand what he was saying but it was beautiful to listen to him. The service over, we were soon fraternising with the Germans just as if they were old friends. We have all heard of the terrible atrocities perpetrated by the Germans but really from our intercourse with some of them on Christmas Day, one could hardly believe them capable of the terrible acts that have been laid at their door. Some of them could speak English fluently - one had been a waiter in the Hotel Cecil, London and I gathered from them that they were pretty well tired of this horrible business. Through the day several of our men had shaves from the Germans and souvenirs were continually passing. We left the trenches that afternoon and today I hear, the armistice still continues, each side evidently refusing to start firing. This can't last of course but I hear that we are going to have an armistice again on New Years' Day, which is our day. This comedy - for it has now developed into such - is only occurring along our immediate front of course."

**Choir sings:** The Boys of Bonnie Scotland or Annie Laurie

**Narrator reads:** A hundred yards or so in the rear of our trenches there were houses that had been shelled. These were explored with some of the regulars and we found old bicycles, top-hats, straw hats, umbrellas etc. We dressed ourselves up in these and went over to the Germans. It seemed so comical to see fellows walking about in top-hats and with umbrellas up. Some rode the bicycles backwards. We had some fine sport and made the Germans laugh.

**Choir sings:** Les anges de nos campagnes

**Narrator reads:** "We gave each other cigarettes and exchanged all manner of things. We wrote our names and addresses on the field service postcards, and exchanged them for German ones. We cut the buttons off our coats and took in exchange the Imperial Arms of Germany. But the gift of gifts was Christmas pudding. The sight of it made the Germans' eyes grow wide with hungry wonder, and at the first bite of it they were our friends for ever. Given a sufficient quantity of Christmas puddings, every German in the

trenches before ours would have surrendered. And so we stayed together for a while and talked, even though all the time there was a strained feeling of suspicion which rather spoils this Christmas armistice. We could not help remembering that we were enemies, even though we had shaken hands. We dare not advance too near their trenches lest we saw too much, nor could the Germans come beyond the barbed wire which lay before ours. After we had chatted, we turned back to our respective trenches for breakfast. All through the day no shot was fired, and all we did was talk to each other and make confessions which, perhaps, were truer at that curious moment than in the normal times of war. "

**Choir sings:** O du Frohliche

**Narrator reads:** "On Christmas Day there wasn't a single shot fired in the whole of the Division. There was a kind of truce declared. By means of a megaphone one of our officers wished the German in the opposite trench a merry Christmas. They returned the compliment and added that any of the troops who wished to visit them in their trenches were at liberty to do so. Several of our chaps accepted the invitation and were well received. The Germans were not allowed into our trenches but two men walked right into our lines and then refused to go back. They had to be made prisoners, and an officers of ours explained the circumstances. I expect these two men dare not go home after the war, they will certainly get the shot. A German officer also asked permission to visit the grave of a brother officer which was situated well within our lines and on the outskirts of a town now in our possession. Permission was given and the officer was led blindfolded through our lines to the graveside. He stayed here a little while, then the bandage was put over his eyes and he was taken to his own lines. In the afternoon there was a football match played beyond the trenches, right in full view of the enemy. They kept the truce honourably, and concluded the day with what I suppose were German carols. Everyone spent a jolly day under the circumstances."

**Narrator reads:** A letter to the Aberdeen Daily Journal, January 9th 1915 from an anonymous correspondent: 'Sir, I have read in your issue of the Journal about the fraternising of the British and German troops on Christmas week. If some of the details had not been written by men of my own acquaintance I could scarcely have credited them. I am surprised and disappointed to think that British soldiers would have agreed to shake hands

with murderers and thieves. Was all this done with the concurrence of their officers and will it be mentioned in Sir John French's next dispatch? I doubt not. In the same issue of your paper where the handshaking is mentioned we read report of the French Commission appointed to investigate acts committed by the enemy in violation of international law that 'outrages on women and girls have been of unprecedented frequency' and 'the soldiers and officers' finished off the wounded and mercilessly killed the un-offensive, sparing neither women nor children'. Fie on ye, Scotsmen! There is not much of the boasted Highland Pride left in you when you would sell it for a German souvenir.'

**Choir sings:** When This Blasted War Is Over

**Narrator reads:** "This turned out to be another day of peace. About 10 a.m. some more German troops came forward (two or three lots), and I honestly think they wanted to surrender. They came up within hearing distance, and kept shouting "Me come with you." but our officers sent them all back. We played a straight game with them, and they did the same with us. I thought at the time if only Kaiser Bill and other big chiefs could only agree the same as Tommy Atkins and the German soldiers we could soon have peace all the world over. The alarm went about midnight, and we stood up till daybreak, when we found that our pals of the previous two days had tried to rush our position, but they got cut up as usual, and the next morning the ground where we had been so chummy, and where Germans had wished us a merry Christmas, was now covered with their dead."

**Solo voice off-stage sings Stille Nacht**

**end**