

FOOTBALL IN THE SNOW

It was Christmas Eve 1914. In Flanders young British soldiers fighting the First World War tried to keep warm in their trenches. A short distance away across "No Man's Land", their enemies, the young German soldiers, shivered behind the mud walls of their trenches.

Normally anybody who dared to lift his head above the ground would be shot at, but tonight was quiet. The soldiers were thinking of home and of their families who were missing them so much as they prepared for Christmas.

Suddenly, in the dark stillness, a German voice was heard singing. Other voices joined in and the sound of "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" (Silent Night, Holy Night) drifted over to the British trenches. When the carol was finished the British soldiers sang "The First Noel", and then everybody joined in with "Adeste Fideles" (O Come, All Ye Faithful). As they did so, they saw lights flickering out in No Man's Land. The German soldiers had decorated some little Christmas trees with candles and they were planting them in the snow.

A sign went up saying "Don't shoot!" and then, timidly at first, one, and then another soldier climbed out of the trench to go and meet the Germans. Soon British and Germans were all out in No Man's Land, shaking hands, exchanging gifts of chocolate and tobacco, and wishing each other "Happy Christmas".

The next day there were more celebrations and in several places along the front line soldiers came out of their trenches to play football together. They talked about their families, took pictures of one another, and promised to have another party on New Year's Eve to see the developed photographs.

But the generals were furious when they heard about such a gathering. How could you fight a war when soldiers made friends with their enemies? In areas where carols had been sung and football played the soldiers were moved and replaced by others from other regiments. Fighting resumed and the war went on for another four years. But none of those soldiers forgot that at Christmas 1914 at least, there had been a glimpse of peace on earth.