

Censored: the second festive truce

The ceasefire of Christmas 1914 is legendary – so why were similar events the following year hushed up, asks *Joe Shute*

As night descended over the Western Front on Christmas Eve, the guns fell silent and carols drifted across no-man's-land. The Germans opened up first, singing hymns learnt in their native Rhineland and Bavaria, before the British responded, belting out *Good King Wenceslas*.

At first light on Christmas Day, the soldiers emerged unarmed from the trenches and met halfway across the muddy killing fields, shaking hands, exchanging buttons, sausage and tins of bully beef. There was even a raucous football match, 50-a-side. That night fairy lights and braziers were hauled over the parapets as the singing continued.

This is, of course, a story we are all familiar with. But these events did not take place during the Christmas Truce of 1914 – one of the most famous and well documented events of the First World War which ended up plastered across the pages of the British press (including *The Daily Telegraph*).

Despite the strict orders of British and German commanders to the contrary, the same thing occurred

the following year. But this second unofficial truce was suppressed in its entirety; an act of defiance and humanity whitewashed from history. There has been some anecdotal evidence, but not until now has the full story of one unit's experience – and the recriminations that followed – been revealed.

It has been compiled by Lieutenant General Jonathon Riley, who during his 39-year military career served as deputy commander of Nato troops in Afghanistan (2007-2009) and commanding general of British coalition forces in southern Iraq (2004-2005). Riley is also a historian and chairman of trustees at the Royal Welch Fusiliers regimental museum, which boasts one of the largest archives in the country.

He has been poring over the diaries of members of the 15th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers which found itself on the frontline on Christmas Day, 1915. But the missing link in his research has been provided by a previously unseen diary belonging to Robert WJ Keating, a private with the Royal Welch, donated to the collection by a friend of his just three months ago.

It gives, says Riley seated in front



ROYAL WELCH FUSILIERS MUSEUM

of the fire in his office in the farmhouse where he lives in South Wales, "a remarkable blow by blow account" of the truce high command never wanted anybody to read.

The order went along the lines in December 1915, following the appointment of the controversial General Sir Douglas Haig as Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Force. There was to be no repeat of the "unauthorised truce" of 1914, soldiers were warned, "nothing of the kind is to be allowed this year". The Germans, meanwhile, explains Riley, were told any fraternising with the enemy would result in execution.

It had been a brutal year: 1915 saw the disaster of Gallipoli, the first Zeppelin raids on Britain, the first use of poison gas, and a worsening stalemate across the Western Front. With ever more raw recruits swelling the ranks of the British Army, senior commanders were concerned the men should become battle-hardened quickly.

It is ironic, bearing in mind his predecessors worked so hard to prevent – and then suppress – the truce, that the man now revealing the story is himself a former Army officer. But Riley says he can sympathise with Haig's actions in banning any halt to the bloodshed.

"They had figured out they were in a war from which only one side would emerge victorious," he says. There was no room for being nice. You can't allow your soldiers, particularly when they are not professionals, to think of the other lot as decent blokes. They have to be seen as the enemy and an obstacle to victory."

Trenches where the truce took place in 1915; below, Lieutenant General Jonathon Riley

The 15th Battalion Royal Welch had only arrived in France in late 1915 and were sent to the line at Laventie, just a few miles from Frelinghien, where the 1914 truce took place. The battalion counted among its ranks some notable authors: Llewelyn Wyn Griffith (*Up to Mametz*), David Jones (*In Parenthesis*) and Bill Tucker (*The Louisa War*) and numerous accounts in the regimental archive reveal the carol singing on Christmas Eve.

The diary of Private Keating takes up the story on the morning of

'You came out to fight the Hun, not to make friends with them'

December 25. "Had breakfast after which we shouted greetings to the Germans over the way," he writes. "We shouted come over – they shouted come over... The officer was shouting come back! But we took no heed and went on."

The men met in no-man's-land and swapped souvenirs and stories of home. Keating writes that over the roar of artillery bombardments elsewhere on the line, both sides promised they would not fire a shot until the end of Boxing Day. As well as the

impromptu football match, the British troops – including Keating – also attempted to bury some of the bodies rotting between the two sets of trenches.

Yet that temporary peace he described proved fragile.

At some point mid-morning Brigadier-General Lord Henry Seymour, the commander of 2 Guards Brigade came spluttering up the line threatening court martials and shouting to his men: "You came out to fight the Hun, not to make friends with them." British 18-pounders erupted on cue, and the men raced back to their trenches.

None the less, Keating records, by Christmas night the two warring sides were back making peace in no-man's-land. The British strains of *Land of Hope and Glory* and *Men of Harlech* sung around crackling braziers lasted long into the evening.

By Boxing Day, the recriminations started. "Most of the units in the line were relieved and those who came forward were all told quite clearly there was not to be a repeat of what had happened," says Riley.

Capt Sir Ian Colquhoun – a company commander – and the commanding officer of 1st Scots Guards, Miles Barne, were both hauled before a court of inquiry. On January 16, they faced a

court martial. Barne was acquitted of all charges and Colquhoun received a reprimand – although this had to be confirmed by Haig to take effect, something the General never followed through with.

"Their defence was that they did their best to control their men," Riley says. "All they had done was to try and bury the dead. They had not encouraged any fraternisation."

Riley, the author of 18 books on military history and a visiting professor in war studies at King's College London, hopes to publish his research in *Welsh Historical Review* or the *Proceedings of the Cymrodorion* (a London-based Welsh learning society). The original documents will also be made available for public access at the Royal Welch Fusiliers archive in Wrexham.

The story of the Royal Welch gives further credence to other diaries and letters of soldiers published long after the war. In 1964, the poet Robert Graves published a "fictional" short story of Christmas in the trenches which described a second truce in 1915. During interviews prior to his death, aged 106, in 2001, Private Bertie Felstead, the last survivor of the truce, also spoke of the football match and unofficial ceasefire.

On December 27, the bayonets were re-fixed and the fighting resumed in earnest. By 1918, 10,500 of the 40,000 who served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers during the war had been killed. Christmas 1915 was the last flicker of mass humanity on this stretch of wasteland. It has taken a century more for that temporary peace to be fully recognised.

The truce of 1915 included a kickabout in no-man's-land

