



## Christmas Truce

Harold looked down at his feet and, with a gruff grunt, flicked the heavy mud from the soles of his boots. It didn't matter what he did; he couldn't shake the melancholy that wracked his mind. "They told us it would be done by Christmas," he muttered to another soldier, leaning awkwardly against the damp sandbags that made up the wall of the trench. "It's Christmas Eve, and we're stuck here in the mud."

"They lied," the soldier replied bluntly. "Soldiers like us are always lied to. The only ones who tell us the truth are them lot over there," he pointed in the general direction of the Germans, "when they tell us we're all going to die."

Carl had been Harold's friend since school; they'd joined up together and, by sheer dumb luck, had ended up in the same division and the same trench. In some ways, Harold thought it made it worse, knowing whether your best friend was alive or dead. At least he had somebody with him over Christmas - more than many of the others had. He was right about the Germans, trading insults and threats over no man's land had become commonplace now. It was a way to pass the time.

"They've got more trees up now," Carl said, craning his neck to peer over the top.

Muddy water splashed up Harold's leg in his eagerness to see for himself - it didn't make a lot of difference; his clothes were already soaked through. "That's a dozen now, I reckon," he said.

Counting the sparse Christmas trees that the Germans were erecting along the edge of their trench had become something of a past-time for the two of them. It somehow made them feel closer to home. When the sound of carols sung in German drifted across the deadly divide, Harold and Carl joined in with their own soldiers, echoing the same carol in English.

It had been the same for a few nights now. Normally, it was Silent Night or O Tannenbaum; the sound of hundreds of soldiers singing out of tune but filled with something approaching happiness had become as familiar as standing-to-arms.

"Maybe they don't want to be here, either," Harold said.

"None of us do."

Then, they heard a voice speaking in broken English. It shouted out louder than the rest, "If you don't fire, we don't fire."



Harold and Carl looked at each other wide-eyed, listening to the buzz working its way through the trenches quicker than any gas attack. The whispered voices came from all quarters: Is it really a truce? Do we trust them? What shall we do?

Something gripped Harold, compelling him to make the most of this opportunity. Before Carl could stop him, he scrambled up a ladder and stepped out into the desolate waste that lay between the two trenches. Thirty yards of barbed wire, concrete blocks and dead bodies were all that stood between him and a German bullet. He held his breath and waited.

No bullet came. For a few seconds that seemed to stretch all the way back to his wife waiting at home, nothing happened. And then, movement.

A head appeared cautiously from behind one of the Christmas trees, followed by the rest of the body. Tentatively, perhaps expecting Harold to attack at any moment, a German soldier edged his way through the debris until he stood, shaking, in front of Harold. He extended his hand.

For the first time ever, Harold shook the hand of a German. Within minutes, no man's land was filled with the sound of men laughing and hugging, shaking hands and sharing food.

They all knew deep down that it wouldn't last forever, perhaps not even through the night, but for a brief moment, they knew what it meant to be at peace.

## INFERENCE FOCUS

1. How do you think Harold is feeling at the beginning of the story? Why?
2. What evidence is there that the soldiers were bored?
3. How did Harold and Carl feel when they heard the German soldier speak?
4. How do you think Harold felt when he emerged into no man's land? What makes you think this?
5. How do you think the soldiers felt at the end of the story?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

Find and copy a word that means "thinly scattered".

**V**

Which word in the text has a meaning closest to "feeling forced to do something"?

**V**

What image do you get about no man's land from the phrase "desolate waste"?

**R**

Which carols were most commonly sung?

**P**

This is a retelling of an event that actually happened. How do you think you would have felt if you were one of the soldiers involved?