

'Dawn broke on December 25 with a thick mist...but the sound of bombardment was notably absent...'

The day the First World War guns fell silent has fallen into folklore but heart-rending letters from Lancashire soldiers on the frontline reveal the poignant reality of the Christmas Day truce of 1914. Mike Hill reports.

By December 1914 three battalions of Lancashire soldiers were deployed to the battlefields of France to face the German onslaught. Nicknamed the 'Old Contemptibles', the 1st Loyals and 1st and 2nd East Lancshires were all regular Army battalions with their regimental headquarters at Fulwood Barracks in Preston.

The East Lancs were based on the west side of the barracks' square which lies beyond the imposing gate, with the Loyals housed on the east.

When December 25 arrived, the 1st Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regiment was out of the trenches and resting in billets at Essars, in northern France.

These were the soldiers drawn mainly from Preston and considered the district's own regiment, while the East Lancs battalions came from Chorley, Blackburn, Burnley and Accrington.

For the men of the 1st East Lancs there was no such respite expected.

They had left for France on August 21 soon after the declaration of war and by December were dug in on the front line at Le Gheer, near Ploegsteert Wood, dubbed "Plugstreet" by the Tommies, south of Ypres.

Meanwhile, the 2nd East Lancs were in the trenches close to Neuve Chappelle which was to be the site of the first great battle of the First World War three months later.

For them there was no fraternising with the enemy on Christmas Day.

As the regiment's official history records: "Christmas Day was spent in the trenches and was uneventful. No attempt was made by either side to inaugurate an 'Unofficial

Armistice'.

"There was a considerable amount of singing in the German lines, but the battalion was unable to join in the concert, for no gramophone records of the 'Hymn of Hate', with which it was intended to regale the Hun, were obtainable."

But for the soldiers on Plugstreet the day saw a remarkable display of humanity which has gone down in history.

Dawn broke on December 25 with a thick mist shrouding the battlefield but the sound of military bombardment was notably absent from the morning area.

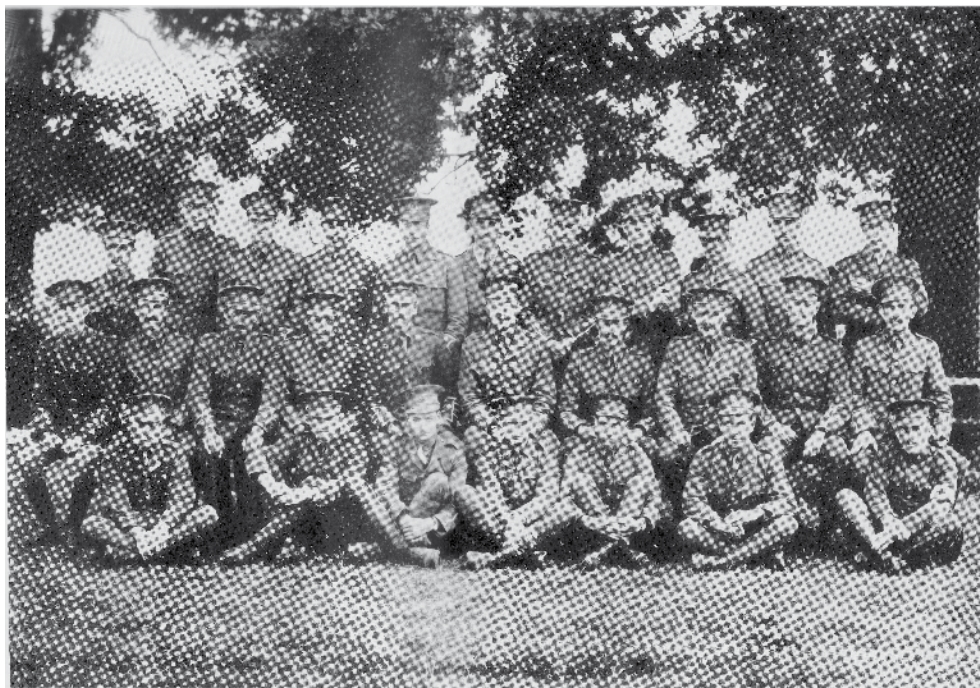
By 10am, as the view cleared, sporadic truces broke out along stretches of the Western Front.

One such tale was told by the commanding officer of the 1st East Lancs, Colonel Lawrence, who wrote the following on Christmas Day.

"This morning I went up to the trenches and wished every man a Happy Christmas. As I was coming away, at noon, there was a sudden hurrah and rush and our men and the Germans both started running to one another and met halfway and shook hands.

"I did not like it at first and ordered my men back but was told they wanted a truce for the day to bury their dead. I agreed to that and, after ordering half the men to keep a smart look out in the trenches with their rifles ready, I went forward and joined the crowd. I met a Saxon who talked English well and who interpreted for me while I held a court of admiring men and NCOs.

"I said if they would have an armistice on New Year's Day we would play them at football between our lines. A lot of their dead were lying about



1st BATTALION,
OFFICERS OF THE BATTALION ON EMBARKATION.
(Back Row) 2nd Lt. W. A. Salt, 2nd Lt. R. Y. Parker, Lt. I. D. Hughes, Lt. H. T. MacMullen, Capt. A. St. L. Goldie, Lt. F. B. M. DeMege, Lt. J. F. Dyer, Lt. W. E. Dowling, Lt. N. A. Leeson, Lt. H. W. Canton, 2nd Lt. W. R. Tosswill.
(Middle Row) Capt. C. B. Walker (A.S.C.), Capt. E. E. Coventry, Capt. G. Chydhills, Lt. P. E. Bulcher, Major I. S. Lambert, Lt.-Col. I. St. G. Le Marchant, D.S.O., Major E. R. Collins, Major J. E. Green, Capt. G. T. Scabellie, Lt.-Q.M.R. Longstaff.
(Front Row) 2nd Lt. G. H. T. Wade, Lt. C. E. M. Richards, 2nd Lt. K. Hooper, 2nd Lt. T. H. Matthews, Lt. E. C. Hopkinson, Lt. W. M. Chisholm, Lt. R. A. Flood (R.A.M.C.).

Pictured above are the officers of the 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment who embarked for France on August 21, 1914. Lieutenant C.E.M. Richards is pictured inset. Image courtesy of Lancashire Infantry Museum



The entrance to Fulwood Barracks pictured about the time of the First World War

in front of our trenches and they thanked us for allowing them to bury.

"All the German dead were collected and buried and their Captain read a burial service over them in German and in English as many of our men were looking on. At 2pm he blew a whistle and all the Germans bolted back to their trenches.

"In the afternoon at 3pm our doctor thought he would go and see the Germans so boldly walked down the road to their trenches and talked to them; they were very full of the football idea of mine on New Year's Day. I said if they would like another armistice then I would turn out a team and play them among the shell holes and they were quite keen. Happily there won't be any obstacles like dead Germans lying about unless they try on another attack before then. I wonder if the game will come off.

"These Saxons are the same crowd we have always had opposite us. Most of them are quite young, 18 to 25. The trenches that our men went into were up to the knee in water so they are far worse off than our men."

But not all of Col Lawrence's men were thrilled by the Christmas Truce.

Records show Lieutenant C.E.M. Richards, an officer in 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment, welcomed the "return of good old sniping" late on Christmas Day, "just to make sure that the war was still on."



CHRISTMAS TRUCE



Soldiers of the 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment in Armentieres pictured on their way to the trenches at Le Gheer in 1914. It is highly likely that some if not all of these men were among those who took part in the Christmas Truce. This picture was taken by Major T.S. Lambert (inset) Image courtesy of Lancashire Infantry Museum



That evening, however, Lt Richards received a signal from Battalion Headquarters - quite possibly from Col Lawrence - telling him to make a football pitch in No Man's Land by filling up shell holes etc. and to challenge the enemy to a football match on January 1.

Richards recalled, "I was furious and took no action at all."

But over time his views mellowed.

"I wish I had kept that signal," he wrote years later. "Stupidly I destroyed it, I was so angry. It would now have been a good souvenir."

Fellow officer Second Lieutenant P. H.T. Hoare recalled a rather amusing moment during the ceasefire in a letter to his family.

He wrote: "This has been the most extraordinary Christmas I've ever had. This morning after putting wire out in the night in front of the trenches, I slept from 4 to 6 and from 7 to 8. I had breakfast. There was a thick fog this morning so we could walk about anywhere without being sniped at."

"As we were fixing up our trenches and putting out more wire and the fog was getting thinner, we saw the Germans doing the same and we both looked on. No shots fired. Then somehow we all came out of the trenches and walked to each other. It was a most extraordinary sight."

"We talked to their officers, exchanged cigarettes and shook hands, they were Saxons, and awfully nice. They buried some of their dead. They looked simply awful, it nearly did for me. They had been there a long time, luckily it was freezing, or they would have fallen to pieces."



Convent at Le Gheer, south east corner of Ploegsteert Wood. Taken by Captain E. C. Hopkinson (below), of the 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment, on Christmas Day, 1914, during the unofficial truce. The trench in the foreground is the British front line. Image courtesy of Imperial War Museum

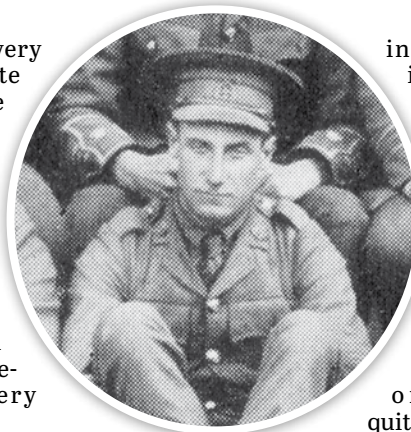
that happened was when a hare was put up and both armies chased it shouting and laughing. It is odd after they have both been here for weeks fighting each other.

"They looked very fit. Not a shot has been fired since. I am writing this in our cellar which is company headquarters. Tea is just coming. I am going to be put on machine gun in a day or two I believe."

"It is much colder today which is better, as the mud gets hard and one can keep dry. Some trenches, communication ones, are nearly knee deep in mud and water and one's feet are never dry, and

generally very cold in spite of all the clothes we wear. We all look most odd covered with mud and unshaved and unwashed till we are relieved every four days.

"But as I shall be machine gun officer I shall always be here I suppose. Everybody is sick of it all, simply long for peace. I sleep



in a trench in a little dug out about 6' x 4' cut in the side of the trench with a roof and a b o u t 4'6" high on straw quite comfortable with a macintosh-sheet and one blanket. I must stop for tea now. I've had tea and am now writing this in my dugout. I go

back to the cellar for drinks about 8 pm. No shots are being fired at all here. I can hear some big guns firing miles away every now and then."

Lt Hoare's diary carries added sadness as The History of the East Lancashire Regiment records he was fatally injured the following month, one of 21 men to die in January.

The diaries of Private Edward Roe, of the 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment, paint perhaps the most poignant picture of the day.

He wrote: "Christmas Eve. Both sides sang Christmas carols in their respective trenches. The carols were ac-

companied by uncalled for bursts of machine gun and rifle fire. It looks bad for the morrow as we were hoping to have a peaceful Christmas Day.

"Old Jim gets 'seen off' just after 11pm by a stray bullet. What a Christmas for his wife and kiddies. Has mankind forgotten the Shepherds, the Maji and the Child that was born in the manger because there was no room for him in the inns of Bethlehem?"

"At midnight firing ceased as if by mutual consent. As I stood on the fire step, gazing out into No Man's Land with the point of a spare bayonet underneath my chin in case I might doze, I prayed to God (if there was a God) in his infinite goodness and mercy to end this slaughter and misery and bring peace and goodwill to all mankind."

"Someone has started playing 'Home Sweet Home' on a mouth organ, away down the trench on my right. Another fellow starts 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' on my left. They join in the chorus - the mockery of it all."

"At 5am word has passed down the trench that the Hampshires and the Germans were out fraternising in No Man's Land. 'Impossible, whose leg are you pulling?' 'If you don't believe me, go down and see for yourself'. And there they were, sure enough, British and German warriors in No Man's Land, unarmed, talking to each other and exchanging souvenirs. There is a Christ after all."