

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...**

### **THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE**

By rights, thirty-two-year-old William Ashley should be at home in Brandon, celebrating Christmas with his wife, Ella. However, due to circumstances beyond his control, he finds himself sat in a freezing damp trench, in a foreign field, and in mortal fear of an enemy determined to kill him. It is so cold that some of William's comrades, including William Vail, also of Brandon, have been taken from the Front due to frostbite. One metaphorical ray of sunshine is the delivery of woollen socks, scarves and balaclavas which have been knitted by the women of Brandon and sent to the Brandon lads serving at the Front. Apart from that, William is facing a grim Christmas.

William cannot complain, after all he has served in the army for over sixteen years. He saw action in the Boer War, for which he received the South African Medal, and four years ago, upon finishing his career in the Rifle Brigade, he elected to remain as a Reservist. Being a Reservist meant he could return to Brandon to settle down and raise a family, which is what he did. He married Ella, incidentally it will be their fourth wedding anniversary in two days' time, and together they have two sons – Charles and George; the latter is barely three months old. However, being a Reservist, William has not totally turned his back on the army and has committed to attending the occasional training camp in the summer. He also knows Reservists are among the first called up in the event of war, which is why he is not at home with his family and instead sat in the trench. This is the choice he made. This is Flanders, Christmas Eve of 1914. William, despite being an experienced soldier, is about to take part in an event that will astound him. It is one that will become legendary.

The war has already proven to be like nothing William has experienced in his military career so far. He knows the enemy are just a few hundred feet in front of him, but they are doing like him, sat in their own trenches, meaning no one is attacking. In fact, the enemy are so close that William has heard their bugler sound Reveille. Perhaps it is from fear of being a sniper's next victim, or perhaps the sides want to have a peaceful Christmas, but tonight it seems eerily quiet. Then something bizarre happens. The Germans start shouting Christmas greetings in English, which can only mean they are aimed toward William and his comrades. William is cautious. It may be a trap. A deception that sees a curious but misplaced head rise above the trench only to be taken off by a sniper's bullet. Nonetheless, William and his comrades shout back similar Christmas greetings, although keeping out of harm's way as they do so. It doesn't stop there. The Germans are now singing Christmas Carols. The British trench joins in. From the depravations of war, with all the slaughter and violence it has brought so far, two enemies are singing and sharing their Christmas Eve experience.

Having sown the seeds of cordiality, the following day, Christmas Day, the Germans continue to be friendly, which is reciprocated by William and his comrades. Both sides are now heads up over the trench shouting greetings to each other. Today it feels safer and there is a real sense both sides want to reach out, rather than shoot

and bomb. It is the Germans who take the boldest step. Some of them clamber over the top of their trench and stand up in 'No Man's Land' with hands aloft, signalling they mean no harm. If any British 'Tommy' wanted to claim a German scalp, then there would be no easier opportunity than now. It would take just one pot-shot. One crack of a rifle. After all, William has spent over a decade being trained in how to kill in battle, so maybe he would have no qualms about taking a life so easily and in all honesty, no one would blame him because the enemy have taken the lives of many of his comrades. Perhaps one of the men stood in front of him was involved? William does not shoot. Neither do any of his comrades. The German's initial nervousness passes and they walk slowly toward the British trench. Someone from William's trench follows the German's lead, climbing up a ladder to make his way into No Man's Land. He is closely followed by others, including William. Finally, at midday, on Christmas Day 1914, the two enemies meet and shake hands. They chat, while exchanging tobacco and cigarettes, with one of the Germans telling William he is already fed up with the war. Eventually the men are recalled back to their trenches and what will later become known as 'The Christmas Truce' is over, although both sides will not fire upon each other for the rest of the day, at least not where William is. The 'Christmas Truce' is never repeated.

It is the only Christmas that William will see in the trenches. Eight months later, he will be demobbed, with his Army Record describing his career as "exemplary", although he will return to France before the end of war as a labourer to help rebuild infrastructure behind the lines. His war will finally finish four months after the Armistice, when he will return home a second time, but by then his body has suffered with arthritis in his right shoulder. Mind you, he will live a good life, until his death in 1958.

When William returned to his trench after meeting the enemy, he set about writing a letter to his wife. He finished it with these words,

*"So, you see it wasn't such a bad Christmas after all. But of course, that sort of game is finished and we are settling down to the realities of war. I must say it was a treat to leave the trenches without being shot at."*