

JOYEUX NOEL
(French, 2005, 116 Minutes, Subtitled)

For the troops who marched to war in August 1914 intending to be home by Christmas, the reality of nearly 1,000,000 casualties by the end of the year in the mud and rain of Northeast France and Belgium provided a different perspective. Although both sides initially viewed trench warfare as a convenient expediency pending creation of fresh forces for mobile and decisive operations, by the end of November the German armies in the West began to establish firm defensive positions presaging position warfare.

Out of this stalemate and the reality of the trenches came the famous Christmas truce, primarily between British and German units but also including some French troops, during and after Christmas 1914. The Christmas truce included actual fraternization, real exchanges of gifts, singing, a soccer game, as well as burying the dead. Governments on both sides attempted to suppress news of the truce, generally to no avail because of the volume of participants.

De facto front line cooperation to retrieve the dead and bring in the wounded had been going on for some time prior to December 1914. With the average width of no-man's-land at 250 to 300 yards and some positions as close as ten feet, "live and let live" was essential between offensives because casual violence in such close quarters was suicidal. Shelling ceased at mealtime, patrols mostly stayed in their lanes between the lines, and burial details were usually unmolested. But "live and let live" also coexisted with extensive sniping and prisoner killing. And the attrition in the trenches (on average 900 French and 1300 Germans died for each day of the war) generated an appetite for vengeance. "Live and let live" ended in

late 1915 when Douglas Haig became commander in chief of British forces and instituted a policy of “ceaseless attrition” with extensive trench raiding and mining.

French director Christian Carion grew up in northern France surrounded by the permanent memory of World War I. *Joyeux Noel* was his attempt to portray “those men who taught us a lesson in humanity” in 1914. His protagonists include Scots, Germans (primarily Saxons) and French. The film was France’s nominee for Best Foreign Film at the 78th Academy Awards.