

World War I Soccer Truce: Last 'soccer truce' survivor dies

LONDON, England -- Bertie Felstead, the last known survivor of World War 1's legendary "Soccer Truce," has died in England, aged 106.

The brief truce on Christmas Day 1914, when British and German soldiers emerged from their trenches on the Western Front and played football together in no-man's land, became one of the abiding images of the "war to end all wars."

Felstead was one of the infantrymen who took part in the unofficial ceasefire, exchanging cigarettes and greetings with men who only a few hours before had been trying to kill him.

"The Germans started it," Mr. Felstead recalled. "They just came out of their trenches and walked over to us. "Nobody decided for us -- we just climbed over our parapet and went over to them. We thought nobody would shoot at us if we all mingled together."

Born in Highgate, London, on October 28, 1894, Mr. Felstead joined the Royal Welch Fusilliers at the outbreak of World War 1. He was spending his first Christmas on the Western Front, in a trench near the northern French village of Laventie, when the famous truce took place, one of several that were reported between British and German troops at that time.

Although it lasted for less than an hour, it became the defining event of his life.

In an interview two years ago he recalled how the previous night, Christmas Eve, he and his comrades had heard the German soldiers singing carols less than 100 yards away. The British soldiers had responded with carols of their own. "You couldn't hear each other sing like that without it affecting your feelings for the other side," he said.

On Christmas Day "all the soldiers were shouting to one another: 'Hello Tommy! Hello Fritz!' And we gradually got to know each other this way." After they had emerged from their trenches and greeted each other a ball was produced and they all played football in the snow.

"It wasn't a game as such," remembered Felstead. "More a kick-around and a free-for-all. "There could have been fifty on each side for all I know."

The impromptu armistice came to an abrupt end when an irate British officer ordered the soldiers back to their trenches. Within a matter of hours the two sides were firing at each other again.

Felstead was subsequently wounded at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. After recovering he was posted to Salonika in Greece before eventually being returned home with acute malaria.

After the war he worked as a civil servant with the Royal Air Force, and later with the General Electric Company. His wife of 65 years, Alice, died in 1983.

He is survived by two children, five grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren and two great-great grandchildren. In 1997 he was included in the book "Centurions" about the most culturally influential people of the 20th Century.

"He lived a very good, full and active life," said his daughter Barbara McIntosh, 73. "He will be sorely missed."

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