

*Taff Gillingham's tweets from 13<sup>th</sup> November 2014. Gillingham was the historical advisor on the Sainsbury's advert. This source is a direct copy of the tweets at <https://storify.com/typejunky/christmas-truce> but has been formatted into prose paragraphs to make them easier to read.*



We put a great deal of thought into whether to be involved or not. I had a long chat with the director and he agreed that football shouldn't be allowed to override all the other aspects of the Truce, hence the men being shaved, swapping souvenirs, taking photos, etc. Sadly the client wanted to push the football hard and play to the current trend for football to swamp the rest of the Truce activities (you can see many of the other activities they filmed in the 'making of' programme).

Having said that, we would not have been involved at all if it was just going to be a fantasy. As some of you may know, I have been researching the 1914 Truce since 1999. Over the years I have been interviewed about it on documentaries, TV shows (including a surreal afternoon on 'Richard & Judy' with Malcolm Brown who co-wrote The Christmas Truce, I was even flown to Washington in August 2001 to talk about it on a programme with Stanley Weintraub who wrote Silent Night.

I have continued to amass copies of letters, war diaries, recordings & press cuttings featuring the Truce. There are plenty of mentions of football, but nearly all of them saying they wanted to play but didn't have a ball, or the CO wouldn't let them, or they arranged a game for New Years Day but were fighting again by then. There are also accounts by frauds and fantasists. The most notable being 'Captain Peter Jackson' who was, in fact, a complete fraud with a different name & never rose past L/Cpl. Shamefully, the IWM have still not marked his account as fraudulent and it is now being used as a genuine resource.

What has always been obvious is that football played an insignificant role in the 1914 Truce. [@1418research](#)'s [military historian Chris Baker] new book makes that very clear. Sadly the Belgian TO and UEFA were hell-bent of putting up a new memorial at Plugstreet to commemorate a match that certainly never took place there. The need to create a fantasy for tourism has been allowed to swamp the true story. The site at St Yvon should have been designated a site of special scientific interest. Bairnsfather's account, written very soon after the event, includes a map showing exactly where he met the Germans on Christmas Day 1914. It is the only place where we know exactly what happened in one specific location on the day. The tragedy of ruining this special site for a few hours hobnobbing with Beckham & some Royalty should never have been allowed to happen.

The 'evidence' to support the Plugstreet claim is like a colander. CSM Beck of 1/R. Warwick's diary which says the Germans shouted a challenge on Christmas Eve (in the dark), never mentions football again; Captain Robert Hamilton's diary states, "A Coy were to have played the Saxon Corps, but were relieved"; Bairnsfather's throwaway comment in a Canadian TV interview 40 years later is used to trump the superb account he wrote at the time; and Kurt Zehmisch of IR134's account has been regularly distorted. His diary was written in an old German language which even his own Son couldn't read. In fact, his son Rudolf, taught himself the language in order to translate his Father's diary. In one passage Zehmisch says that the English are happy now that they have a ball to play with.

In 2002 I was privileged to meet Rudolf Zerhmisch, along with Barbie Littlejohn, the daughter of Bruce Bairnsfather, at St Yvon where both men took part in the Truce. It was a real pleasure and as you might expect, I spoke with them both about their Fathers. Rudolf and I discussed football and he was adamant his Father was referring to the Brits having a game on their own, just like the Queen's Westminster Rifles did further down the line. I have asked [@GERArmyResearch](#) [military historian Rob Schäfer] his opinion of Zerhmisch's account and he told me he agrees with Rudolf Zerhmisch. So that covers Plugstreet where there is no evidence of a game.

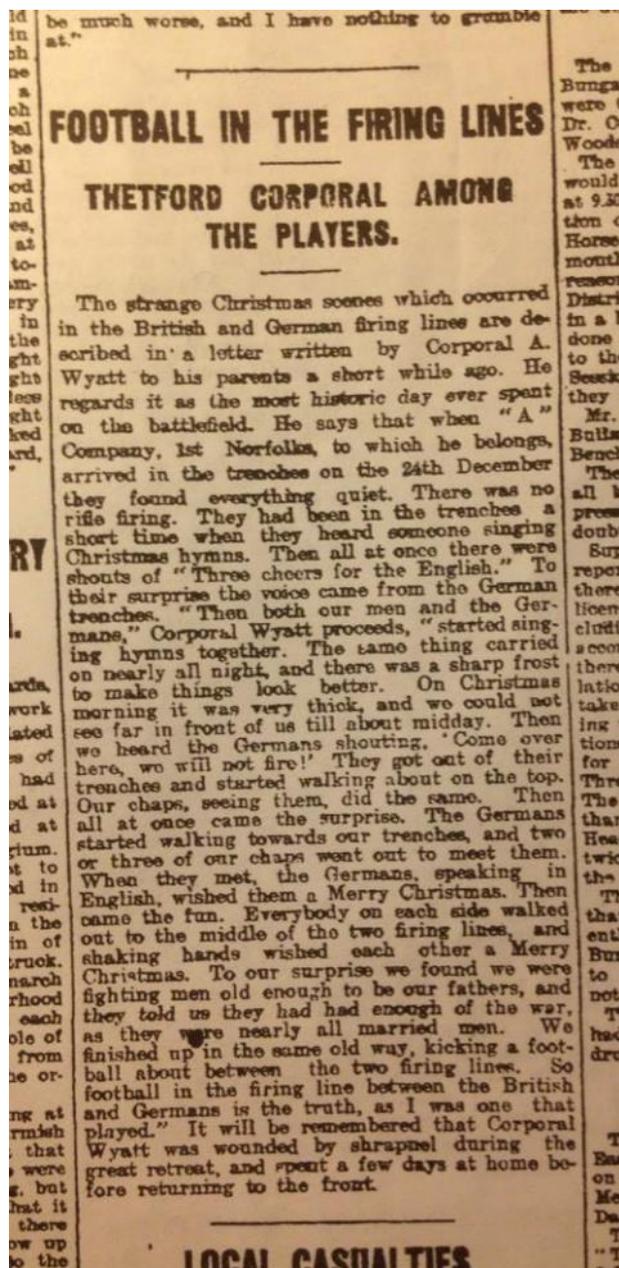
What hard evidence is there for games? Allowing for fraudsters and old soldiers just making stuff up, what is really needed are accounts of at least two men, in the same unit, in the same place at the same time. If the accounts were written independently it is fair to say that football was played by them. Sadly, there is nowhere along the entire front where there is any corroboration between British & German units who played each other.

However, Johannes Niemann, an officer of IR133 left an account of his men playing killed soldiers on a "frozen meadow" at Frelinghien. This always sounded very plausible as, in most places, the fields were still filled with unharvested crops, with deep plough ruts. The ground was frozen like concrete too; ideal for breaking ankles on men in heavy boots. It is most likely that men of IR133 played men on 2nd A&SH although there is no corroboration by the Argylls. Then, a few months ago, another account of a game was found by [@GERArmyResearch](#). It was written by a soldier of IR133 to his Mother and he mentions playing ball with the English (all Brits were English to the German Army at the time). Suddenly we had two independent accounts by men in the same unit, at the same place at the same time, both saying that there was a match at Frelinghien. It would be nice to have corroboration from 2/A&SH but it is enough to demonstrate a game took place.

The guys making the Sainsbury's ad were very keen to make it historically accurate and we spoke about which British unit to portray. I was still uneasy as there was still no corroborated accounts by British soldiers. After my first meeting with ad director Ringan Ledwidge I was still unsure whether I wanted to commit to the project. Then fate took a hand. One account has always interested me; Territorial Sgt Frank Naden served with 1/6th Cheshires. He wrote a letter home recounting a game of football he had taken part in. It was

published in at least two newspapers and included the line, "...we had a rare old jollification, which included football, in which the Germans took part".

1/6th Cheshires had only recently arrived in France and had been split up for trench assimilation. Naden's Company were attached to the Regulars of 1st Norfolk. I had spent many tedious hours looking for Norfolk Rgt Truce accounts. I have a few and all say that there was no game. At least one says it was due to having no ball. Another because the CO wouldn't allow it. I had asked Dick Rayner, the top historian of the Norfolk Regiment, if he had anything in his extensive archive. I had asked him some time before I was approached to advise on the ad and, to be honest, I had forgotten I had asked him. A week after my first meeting with the director I received a brown envelope from Dick containing several photocopied newspaper articles. Three were of 1/Norfolk accounts stating that there was no football but the last sheet had a note written on the top: "I think this is what you are after". This is the cutting:



It is a letter from Cpl A Wyatt of 1st Norfolk and he makes it clear that he played football. Near the end he says, "We finished up in the same old way, kicking a football about between the two firing lines. So football in the firing line between the British and Germans is the truth, as I was one that played".

At last this puts two British soldiers in the same place, at the same time, on the same day, both saying they played a game with the Germans. It would be great if there was corroboration with a German soldier who also played at Wulverghem but two independent accounts by Brits, like the two men in IR133, is enough evidence to prove a game took place there. Hence my decision to work on the ad and my decision to portray the fellas in the ad as men of 1st Norfolk and 1/6th Cheshire.

So, to go back to the original question yes, the Sainsbury's Christmas Advert is historically accurate.