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## SHOOTING AT THE STARS: THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE OF 1914

## by John Hendrix

## Louisiana Young Readers’ Choice Nominee 2017

**Grade 3-5**

Submitted by Kenna Salinas, Student,

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**Title:** *Shooting at the Stars: The Christmas Truce of 1914*

**Author and illustrator:** John Hendrix

**Publisher:** Abrams Books for Young Readers

**Pages:** 40

**SUMMARY**

*Shooting at the Stars* is a fictionalized retelling of an event that took place during World War I, a war that happened over a hundred years ago; though it has been known as the Great War, the conditions and the death toll prove that there was nothing great about it. *Shooting at the Stars* is written from the perspective of one British soldier on the front lines during the Christmas Truce of 1914 and takes the form of a letter home to his mother. He describes a miraculous Christmas Eve experience in which, despite fierce fighting from both sides and the barrier presented by language differences, soldiers from England, France, and Germany shared songs, faith, and yearning for Christmas. The soldiers, normally protected only by rows of trench lines and the area between them called the “No Man’s Land,” set the fighting aside for one day and joined together in celebration. As the end of day drew near, the soldiers returned to their trenches and were ordered to resume fighting once again, but it was clear that after the truce, they fired not at one another but safely over their enemies’ heads, at the stars.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

John Hendrix is an American author and illustrator born in St. Louis. He attended The University of Kansas where he studied graphic design and illustration and completed his degree in Rock Chalk and Visual Communication. He then moved to New York City where he attended The School of Visual Arts MFA “Illustrations as Visual Essay” program. While in New York City, he also taught at Parsons School of Design and worked at The New York Times as Assistant Art Director of the Op-Ed page. His books have received the numerous awards.

Biographical information taken from the author’s website at

<http://johnhendrix.com/portfolio/about/john/>

Accessed January 28, 2016.

**AWARDS**

2016 Volunteer State Book Award nominee

Society of Illustrators Original Art Show selection

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Author website <http://johnhendrix.com/portfolio/>

Author interview <http://www.passionately.kyleandclaire.com/4-John-Hendrix/>

**OTHER TITLES BY AUTHOR**

*A Boy Called Dickens (2012)*

*Nurse, Soldier, Spy: The Story of Sarah Edmonds, a Civil War Hero (2011)*

*John Brown: His Fight for Freedom (2009)*

*Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek (2008)*

# RELATED TITLES

*The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak

*Gingerbread for Liberty!: How a German Baker Helped with the American Revolution* by Mara

Rockliff, illustrated by Vincent X. Kirsch

*Truce: The Day the Soldiers Stopped Fighting* by Jim Murphy

*Christmas in the Trenches* by John McCutcheon

**CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

**Language Arts:**

* Research various sources then draft and write a letter or diary entry of the truce based on a character from one of the sources, using actual diaries or other letters as inspiration. The diary entry could relate to any events related to the truce. For examples see, page 51 of <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/media/sites/researchwebsites/martinlutherkingmlkpeacecommittee/documents/PeacePack%20for%20Print.pdf>, a resources pack from Newcastle University, or Task 4 of <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/The_Christmas_Truce_lesson_plan.pdf>, a lesson plan from the British Council.
* Write a letter to a loved one, as the British soldier does in *Shooting at the Stars*, telling about the experiences of your day. Students can practice sharing their letters through podcasts. Use the information from Smithsonian Education at <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/lesson_plans/podcast/index.html> and the steps from Reading Rockets at <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/creating-podcasts-your-students> to guide you.

**Social Studies:**

* Charlie’s descriptions are taken from letters and interviews with actual soldiers who were present on the day of the truce. Research periodicals, news, etc., and create a citations page, working in groups to report other events that occurred around the world on that day. Student teams can build a workspace using [wikispaces.com](http://wikispaces.com) to showcase their findings.
* *Shooting at the Stars* is an excellent read aloud to introduce a unit on World War I. Readers are taken to one moment in time during the war in which the harsh conditions are paired with goodwill. It could similarly be added to a list of supplementary readings, paired with the “Related Titles” listed above.

**Art:**

* As a class, create the trenches and the truce from the book using supplies such as clay, toothpicks, wire, and any other materials. Uses the images and interactive video at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/0/ww1/25626530> to guide you, and use the finished product to create a stop motion video or photo diary of the events in *Shooting at the Stars*.
* Using any choice of art supplies, draw your own images of what No Man’s Land might have looked like.

**Science:**

Discuss the concept of trajectory and how it relates to *Shooting at the Stars*. Why did the soldiers change the trajectory of their bullets by aiming high? Consider using the model in the following link from *Science in School* <http://www.scienceinschool.org/2010/issue17/projectiles> to help students visualize the concept.

**Vocabulary:**

Play BINGO to help students store words into long term memory. The teacher writes X amount of words, phrases, and/or expressions on the board. Each student chooses any 5 of the items from the board and writes them down. The teacher then selects one of the items at random (bits of paper from a hat, for example) and offers a brief definition or synonym of the item but does not say the word itself. If a student thinks they have the word the teacher described, they mark it. When a student marks all of their words, they shout BINGO! The first student to shout BINGO wins the round. Additional rounds can be played with different sets of words.

Alliance

Allies

Artillery

Biscuit

Bunker

Court-martial

Football

Fritz

Front line

Lieutenant

Loamy

Major

No Man’s Land

Pickelhaube

Treason

**Technology:**

* Use selected online databases (such as Explora Elementary at <http://lalibcon.state.lib.la.us/>) to research information about the Christmas Truce of 1914. Discuss selecting search terms and using the options available through advanced search functions.
* Using ZeeMaps, <https://www.zeemaps.com>, design a map that includes all the countries involved in World War I. Divide students into small groups, and ask each group to add entries with detailed descriptions to a different country. Share the final result with the class.
* Use the Interactive WWI Timeline, <https://theworldwar.org/explore/interactive-wwi-timeline>, to answer teacher generated questions. Ask students to make their own timelines of the events in *Shooting at the Stars*.

**Physical Education:**

Plan a soccer match to commemorate the Christmas Truce of 1914, as mentioned in parts 5 and 7 of this BBC webpage: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zxsfyrd>. Discuss how soccer has evolved over time and how American and European football differs.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. In the letter to his mother, Charlie says, “I so wish to make you proud and to serve my beloved England with honor…” Why might his mother be proud? How could he serve England with honor? Provide examples from the text as evidence of Charlie acting in ways that might make his mother proud or show him serving his country with honor.
2. Charlie describes the living conditions in the trenches, mentioning that the bunkers are the only place to eat and sleep. However, it is also miserable to be in the bunkers when it rains. What could the soldiers have done to improve the conditions?
3. Why was one of the first actions the soldiers chose to take during their temporary truce to bury the soldiers who had been killed at war?
4. Why was Major Walter Watts furious upon his discovery of the truce?
5. What was the significance in trading things such as food, buttons, belt buckles, and hats? Why did these items matter to the soldiers?
6. Charlie says, “Tomorrow, I suppose we will all fight for our countries.” What does it mean to fight for your country?
7. One of the German soldiers asks Charlie, “Why can’t we just go home — and have peace?” Why couldn’t/didn’t the soldiers just end the war right there and go home?
8. Use the Interactive WWI Timeline at <https://theworldwar.org/explore/interactive-wwi-timeline> to go to the date of the truce, December 25, 1914. The book shows the truce through the eyes of Charlie and a few other men who are involved, but what additional information can you take about the truce from this timeline that is not depicted in the book?

**RELATED WEB SITES**

**Football Remembers**

<https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/classroom-resources/football-remembers>

Downloadable activity plans for teachers and supplementary original documents.

**The World War I Document Archive**

<http://wwi.lib.byu.edu>

A History Channel recommended archive of primary documents from World War I assembled by volunteers of the World War I Military History List (WWI-L).

**The National WWI Museum and Memorial**

<https://theworldwar.org>

A site dedicated to information about the museum and WWI. Contains an online collection database allowing anyone to search digital records of the organization’s collection that began in 1920.