

## The Cat that was Shot for Treason



A British soldier 'shakes hands' with a kitten on a snowy bank, Neulette, 1917, Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection, Photographer, Lieutenant J.W. Brooke

A cat was shot for treason  
In World War One.  
It had acted as an intermediary  
Between Allied and Axis lines:  
English and German soldiers  
Could send messages  
To each other  
By tying scraps of paper  
To the cat's collar.  
The cat then ran across No Man's Land,  
From one trench to the other.

When the War Office found out,  
Allied superior officers  
Ordered that the cat, nicknamed Felix,  
Should be shot for its being a go-between,  
And thus enabling fraternization  
Between the warring troops  
On the Western Front.

For, after a Christmas truce  
When enmity miraculously faded

And one German dug-out sang 'Heilige Nacht'  
As its English opposite number joined in  
With 'Silent Night';  
And when deadly enemies  
Shyly scrambled out  
Into the open air  
Clutching presents  
Of rum and schnapps, and *lebkochen*  
And Huntley and Palmer's digestive biscuits;  
And when they swapped them with broad smiles,  
And when impromptu football matches  
Broke out up and down the battle lines...  
These popular displays of comradeship;  
These congenial armistices;  
These undeclared cease-fires  
Were outlawed by the government  
Who declared that all such happenings  
Were high treason,  
And subject to the same condign punishment  
As cowardice, namely the firing squad.

Felix the cat, however,  
(Called Nestor by the Germans)  
Was a law unto itself.  
It would wait patiently  
Whilst cheery little scrawls  
In English and in German  
Were being attached to its collar  
By trembling fingers, raw with cold:  
*"Hello Fritz." "Gutentag Tommy."*  
*"Fröhliche Weihnachten, Tommy."*  
*"Happy Christmas, Fritz."*

Back and forth the cat skipped across the snow,  
Across the hard, unforgiving soil  
Of No Man's Land; first appearing at Mons  
And later at Passchendaele.

Then Felix – just like the animals  
In the Middle Ages who, notoriously,  
Were tried for being suspected  
Of being in league with the devil –  
Was judged by the top military brass  
To constitute a threat  
Through its enabling treasonous acts,  
Through its being an accessory  
To the undermining of the serial hate-crime  
That was World War One;  
A war crime that left fifteen million dead  
Including a peace cat,

Who's barely ever mentioned  
But whose bloodstained paw-prints  
Are a lone, feline testament  
To war's absurdity.

*Heathcote Williams*