



**NOËL 14**  
ASSOCIATION

 **RÉGION**  
**Nord-Pas de Calais**

A MONUMENT TO REMIND US



In the course of writing the script for my film « Merry Christmas », I gained access to several eye-witness accounts of the fraternisations with the enemy that took place at Christmas in 1914, and came across the diary of Louis Barthas, a barrel-maker from the southwest of France. He and his fellow-soldiers fraternised with German soldiers in Neuville Saint Vaast, near Arras in the department of Pas de Calais. While his account is similar to others I had read, he ends his story with the following extraordinary passage:

*« Being in the same community of suffering brings our hearts closer together, makes our hatred melt away and creates sympathy across borders, even between foes. Anyone who says otherwise knows nothing of human psychology. French and German soldiers looked at each other and saw before them not enemies but human beings. They smiled at each other, chatted, shook hands, hugged each other, shared tobacco and wine. (...) Who knows, perhaps one day in this corner of Artois there will be a monument raised to commemorate this sense of compassion between men who hated war and had to kill each other against their will. »*

I was fascinated by Barthas' vision. For this reason, we created the "Association Noël '14" (Christmas 1914), in order to realise his dream and to raise a monument of these events on the very spot where they took place.

**Christian Carion**  
Vice-president  
Association Noël 14



Christian Carion is the director of the film « Merry Christmas », which tells the story of the fraternisation between Allied and German soldiers, that took place at Christmas in 1914.

Released in France in November 2005, the film reached an audience of more than two million people and went on to become a massive international success.

The film starred Diane Kruger, Guillaume Canet, Benno Fürmann, Dany Boon, Gary Lewis, Daniel Brühl, Bernard Lecoq and Lucas Belvaux.

- Official selection – Cannes Festival - 2005
- 6 nominations – Césars - 2006
- Nominated for best foreign film – BAFTA awards - 2006
- Nominated for best foreign film – Golden globes - 2006
- Nominated for best foreign film – Oscars - 2006

## THE INCREDIBLE CHRISTMAS OF 1914

The collective slaughter that the Great War became is well known, and yet out of the memories of this carnage, one magical moment emerges: the events of Christmas Eve, 1914.

At the end of August 1914, on orders from Field-Marshal Joffre, the French soldiers put their guns to one side and start to dig the trenches which will form a bulwark against the German advance – little knowing that they are building a Front which will run for 700 kilometres from Ostend to Basel. As a result, for the next four years, millions of men will take turns in the trenches, losing their lives, their limbs, or quite simply the recklessness and enthusiasm of youth.

When the poor soldiers, numbed by the fury of battle, find themselves still in these anonymous trenches in December 1914, they realise that they will not return home for Christmas, as expected.

Every unit and every nation involved resigns itself to organising a special Christmas “celebration” for the men, whom they sent to fight here and who will only return home in the Spring – or so they believe.

The best wines, champagnes, whiskeys and schnapps are transported to the French, British and German trenches. The humdrum canteen is transformed. Each soldier can enjoy a menu even more sumptuous than the one he shared with his family a year ago, which already seems like a lifetime away ...

In some areas, the bitter fighting continues despite the advent of Christmas: there is action in many areas of the Front and hundreds of soldiers die, even on Christmas Eve... but in many other places, the guns remain silent for a few days. In those places where there is coal, delicious feasts are prepared over braziers. Memories of the families they have left behind and of past Christmases bring tears to the eyes of the men, so far away from their parents, wives and children, so far away from home.

A wave of nostalgia and sadness creeps into the trenches and slips into their hearts.

In many parts of the Front, the soldiers spend the night together in this atmosphere of warmth and solidarity. In others, they choose to break with all the known laws of engagement.

In some spots, the Germans have placed illuminated Christmas trees on top of their trenches. A hundred metres away, the French and British stare in amazement at the glimmering lights.



Some of the German soldiers pluck up their courage and start to sing “Silent Night”. The song is immediately taken up across the French and British trenches, each group of soldiers singing in their own tongue. The singing is soon accompanied by the sound of the harmonica or the bagpipes. It is as though a bridge is being built across the wasteland that separates the lines.

Then some of the men lay down their arms, step out of their trenches, and dare to move forward across No Man’s Land, to meet face to face with their foes. The soldiers meet together in the middle of the mud and snow. They stretch out their hands to shake them, they offer each other cake and wine.

The sense of shared suffering and misery transcends the colours of their uniforms and brings them

For a few hours, a few days, sometimes longer, these men stop fighting. They gather together to have a drink, to share food and newspapers, to exchange their addresses so they can meet up again when war is over.

Though the military authorities were aware of what was going on, not surprisingly they disapproved and sure enough, the fighting soon started up again. But they could ever erase the memory of the Christmas trees, the songs, the laughter and the faces of those who were on the other side, so similar to their own.

At the time, every country dealt with the matter in a different way.

In Britain, the press wrote about it openly, some tabloid newspapers displayed the rare photos that were taken on the front page, and the letters pages were full of first-hand accounts of the event. But of course Britain was not fighting on its own soil or trying to recover land that had been annexed by Germany. Its goal was to thwart German expansion, preserve its colonial interests and prevent Germany from gaining access to its trade routes in the North sea. A little distraction for the soldiers on Christmas Eve was therefore tolerated.

For France on the other hand, this was a bitter pill to swallow. The whole country was up in arms against the Prussians, so to discover that French soldiers had been singing and eating with the Krauts was considered unacceptable. The truth was kept secret, for fear of creating a misunderstanding and having a demotivating impact on public opinion. The press, which was strictly censored, said nothing of the matter.

In Germany, a few articles appeared in the press, but in the back pages.

Of course many things have changed since then. Attitudes have evolved and no European country nowadays could be said to have a "mortal enemy" any more. In Britain the story of the events of Christmas 1914 is taught in schools and a record of it is on display at the Imperial War Museum in London.



*German and british officers, no man's land, christmas 1914.*

Nonetheless these incidents of fraternisation with the enemy remain largely unknown to the general public.

Don't these men, long-since departed, deserve to be remembered for this astonishing gesture of peace and fraternity in a time of war?

There will always be historians who will play down the importance of such moments, but even if there had been only two soldiers shaking hands in the mud of No Man's Land, it would have been remarkable. In fact, there were thousands of them!

So, the answer to the question is yes. These men deserve to be commemorated in the same way as those who fell at Verdun, Passendaele or le Chemin des Dames. Besides, it is what they themselves wanted, as Louis Barthas said in his diary (which was republished in the 80s with a foreword by President François Mitterrand):

"Who knows, perhaps one day, there will be a monument on these lands of Artois to commemorate what we did today... »

It is to the actions of this man, who wrote these astonishingly touching words 100 years ago, and to the memory of all those who laid aside their guns and walked across No Man's Land carrying lighted candles in their hands, that we owe a memorial...



*British soldiers carrying a christmas tree*

*French, german and british soldiers December 1914*



## ASSOCIATION NOËL 14

In 2005, we created the Association Noël 14, whose president is Bertrand Tavernier and vice-president Christian Carion. The purpose of the Association is the establishment of a memorial site.

Several well-known French personalities have joined the association to support the project : Simone Veil, Daniel Percheron, Martine Aubry, Jean-Paul Delevoye, Philippe Vasseur, Claude Michelet, Alain Terzian, Margaret Menegoz, Michel Ocelot, et al.

The Association was immediately supported in its efforts by the Nord-Pas de Calais region.

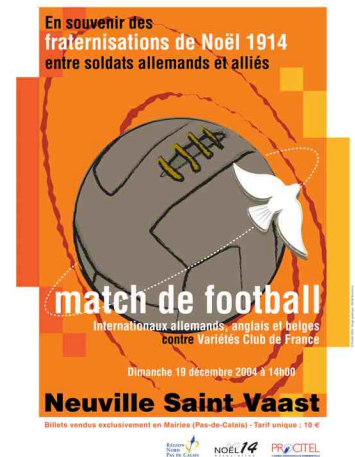
When « Merry Christmas » was released in cinemas, the Association co-organised a commemorative football game involving several international football stars.

This charity event raised the necessary funds to launch the project.

Many generous individuals have also responded to the fundraising appeals initiated by the Nord-Pas de Calais media on this occasion.

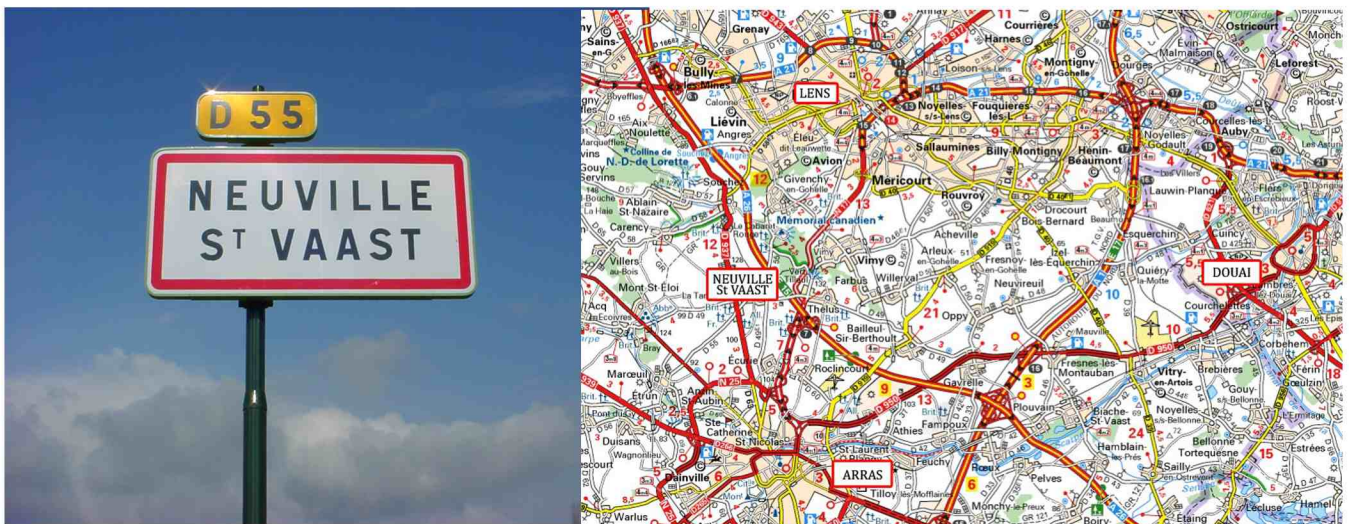
The Nord-Pas de Calais Region will act as project manager for the creation of the memorial. Mr. Yves Le Maner's team will be in charge of co-ordinating the project within the regional council.

There will be a competition to select the artist who will construct the monument.



## LOCATION

Instances of fraternisation with the enemy took place in many places along the front, from Belgium to the Swiss border. No one place could be considered historically or symbolically more significant than another. However, the city of Neuville Saint Vaast (Pas de Calais) stands out : this is where Louis Barthas shook hands with the Germans before returning in his trench, and where he had the idea for a memorial monument.



Neuville Saint Vaast is a town with 1500 inhabitants, located in the Pas de Calais department and the region of Nord-Pas de Calais, between Arras and Lens.

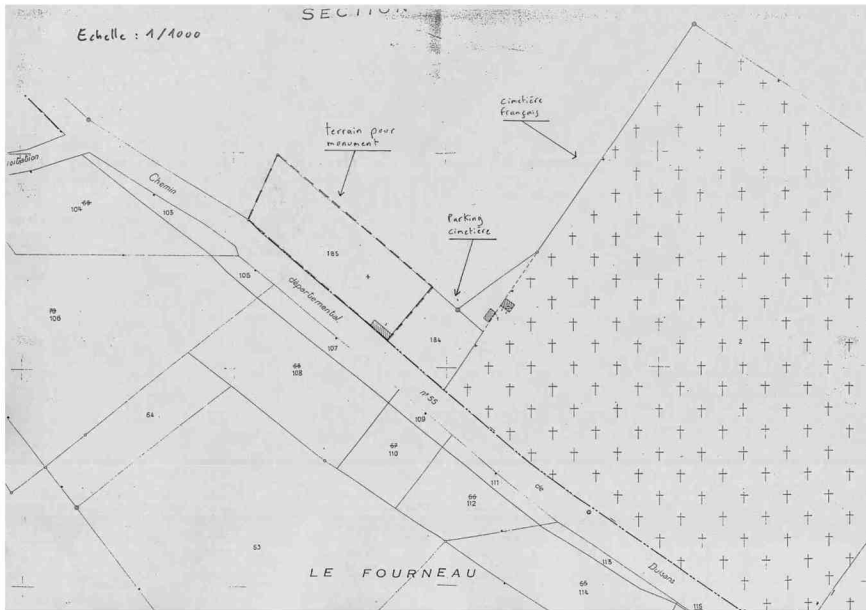
It therefore seems right to us to respect the memory of this man , who could be said to have been speaking on behalf of all his fellow soldiers.

The town of Neuville Saint Vaast, which suffered during both world wars, is already home to the famous war museum, the « Musée de la Targette », as well as three WW1 cemeteries : one French, one English and one German (the largest in France).

Furthermore, many major battles took place in this area, of which the memory is still very much alive today: Vimy, Notre Dame de Lorette, Souchez...

The first funds raised by the Association have been used to purchase a building plot of 1000m<sup>2</sup>, on which the commemorative stele will be erected.

The site is next to the French and British WW1 cemeteries, and there is a parking area for visitors close by.



The spot chosen, along with various views:

- general view of the site.
- the right-hand side of the plot, which includes an old building, which will be taken down.
- The parking lot adjoining the plot and the French WW1 cemetery.



## THE FUNDING AND FUTURE OF THE PROJECT

The project is financially supported by The Urban Community of Arras, with a call for donations from individuals via Ululen by Companies, by Fondations, and also by the Region Nord Pas de Calais, the Department Nord-Pas-de-Calais, by the city of Arras, by the Ministry of Defence and the CCIR du Nord.

Following the launch of a call for an artistic offer, the choose of the artist to design this place fell on Gérard Colin-Thiébaud.

The site development work will begin this summer and the Monument will be inaugurated in December.





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