

Christmas truce of 1914 was broken when German snipers killed two British soldiers

A previously untold account of Christmas Day casualties has now come to light in the Herts at War project, an exhibition to mark the 100th anniversary of the start of the war



Private Percy Huggins of 1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment, left, and his original grave in Le Touret, France Photo: HertsAtWar/BNPS

By Agency

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German snipers shot and killed two British soldiers while the famous Christmas Day truce of 1914 broke out around them, it can be revealed 100 years on.

The historic cease fire which saw men from both sides emerge from their trenches to exchange seasonal greetings and play games of football is one of the most enduring images of the First World War.

But while the remarkable gesture of goodwill spread to many parts along the Western Front, the friendly festivities stopped half-a-mile short of the Rue De Bois near the French village of Festubert.

There, the peace of Christmas morning was shattered by the piercing, solitary shot of a sniper's rifle fired from a German trench.

Private Percy Huggins, who was on sentry duty at a forward listening post just 20 yards from the enemy, was killed with a single bullet to the head.

News of the 23-year-old soldier's death enraged his comrades of D company Hertfordshire regiment, especially his platoon Sergeant Tom Gregory.

The experienced soldier demanded he take Pte Huggins' place so he could avenge his comrade's death. He immediately set about scanning the frost-covered ground before identifying the sniper, who he took out with a single shot.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of the deadly exchange. Sgt Gregory continued scouring the enemy lines and located a second sniper in his sights.

But the German marksman had already spotted him and in a split-second action, he shot and killed Sgt Gregory.

The two British men made up the 149 Commonwealth servicemen who lost their lives on December 25, 1914, although many of those died of previously-inflicted wounds.

And while the incredible stories of a truce and fraternisation filtered back to Britain in the days afterwards, the families of Pte Huggins and Sgt Gregory received the devastating news that they had been killed in action.

The previously untold account of the Christmas Day casualties has now come to light after the family of Pte Huggins offered up his letters home from the trenches to the Herts at War project, an exhibition to mark the 100th anniversary of the start of the war.

It prompted researcher Dan Hill to study military records and regimental diaries which revealed the full tragic tale, which started hours earlier with the British responding to the German overtures for a truce by shooting at their lanterns.

Mr Hill said: "There is no doubt that a truce of sorts took place in multiple points along the line of trenches forming in France and Belgium.

"These men did shake hands and exchange gifts and wished each other a Merry Christmas.

"Less than a mile to the north of the Rue De Bois, we know the men of the 1st North Staffordshire Regiment took part in a truce and one also seems to have taken place to the south as well.

"Many men used the pause in fighting as a time to collect and bury the dead that lay about in No Man's land.

"The truce probably bypassed the Hertfordshire Regiment because they were with the Guards Brigade who were incredibly professional and were highly unlikely to have fraternised.

"The story Percy and Tom's tragic demise on that day serves to highlight that December 25, 1914, was just another day on the Western Front for some.

"To think that Mrs Huggins, Mrs Gregory and the mother of one German soldier enjoyed their Christmas at home unaware at that time of what had befallen their sons."

At the age of 36, Sgt Gregory, from Watford, was a veteran of the Boer War and became a postman before he re-joined the army in 1914.

He was married to wife Jeanette and they had seven children; Charles, Evelyn, Bill, Doris, Herbert, Fred and Lille who was born on December 18, 1914, a week before his death.

Pte Huggins, from Ware, Hertfordshire, worked in his family's upholstery business before he joined the Hertfordshire Regiment, which was one of the first Territorial Army units to be called up to the regular army in the First World War.

In November 1914 the men joined up with the illustrious Guards Brigade and sailed to France and were soon in action at the first Battle of Ypres.

They then left frontline duties for a month's rest before returning to the trenches on the evening of Christmas Eve.

Soon afterwards Pte Huggins wrote his last, poignant letter home to his mother, Agnes, a widow bringing up seven children by herself back in England.

He thanked her for sending him a Christmas pudding which he explained he would have to eat cold but was still very much looking forward to it.

Clearly missing his family, he wrote: "I know you all must miss me and no doubt can to some extent realise what my feelings are for I cannot express them.

"I long for the day when this terrible conflict will be ended. You consider war a terrible thing but imagination cannot reach far enough for the horrors of warfare that can be seen on the battlefield are indescribable and I pray this may be the last war that will ever be."

He explained he was proud to serve his King and country, adding: "I can only hope by the grace of God to acquit myself honourably and be permitted to return to all the dear ones in safety.

"I have already asked, dear mum, that you will spend as happy a Xmas as possible and I will do the same."

Shortly before dawn on Christmas Day, Corporal Clifford Lane, of H Company Hertfordshire regiment, recalled how the Germans hoisted their lanterns above the trenches and called out to the British as a overture for a temporary truce.

The British responded by shooting at the lights, putting an end to any prospect of a Christmas Day ceasefire - one that could have spared the lives of Pte Huggins and Sgt Gregory.

Speaking in an interview in 1983, Cpl Lane that Mr Hill has now uncovered, he said: "There was a great deal of commotion going on in the German front line 150 yards away. After a few moments there were lighted objects raised above the German parapet, looking like Chinese lanterns to us.

"The Germans were shouting over to our trench. We were ordered to open rapid fire which we did.

"The Germans did not reply to our fire and carried on with their celebrations. They ignored us and were having a very fine time indeed and we continued in our wet trenches trying to make the most of it.

"They did make overtures but the Guards Brigade had the highest discipline in the army and you couldn't expect them to fraternise at all and that is why we were ordered to open fire.

"Apparently regular troops did respond to their overtures and engaged in this truce.

"I greatly regretted it afterwards because it would have been a good experience."

The regiment ate a Christmas breakfast of bread and jam, cheese and a piece of cold bacon. By the time the men tucked into their dinner of cold meats and Christmas pudding, Pte Huggins and Sgt Gregory were dead.

In his diaries called 'Twenty-two Months Under Fire' published in 1917, Brigadier General Henry Page-Croft, who was second in command of the Hertfordshire Regiment, wrote: "Early in the day I got news that a lad who lived in my native town in Hertfordshire had been killed by a bullet whilst on sentry in the sap (small listening post) and then it was that a sergeant in his company anxiously asked and received leave to go up and take his place.

"The sergeant, who was a good shot, avenged the boy by killing the German sniper; but shortly afterwards a bullet through the brain sent him to join his young comrade.

"After this we began to study the art of sniping and the tactics of the hunter were added to the science of shooting."

It is thought the families of both soldiers received news of their deaths sometime in early January.

The two men were buried side by side at Le Touret Military Cemetery in Bethune, France.

Sgt Gregory's granddaughter Audrey McLachlan, whose late mother was his eldest daughter Evelyn, said: "My mother once told me how my grandfather came home on leave in 1914 and he gave her a little girl's tea service.

"She was running inside with it all excited and she fell over and broke it.

"She said she never really got over that because that was the last time she saw her father."

Mrs McLachlan, 80, from Watford, Herts, added: "A relative researched the army records some years ago and we knew then that Percy Huggins and my grandfather were killed by two German snipers on Christmas morning.

"Percy must have been a close friend of my grandfather. In hindsight, it was a very brave but foolish thing for him to have done but at least he was killed quickly and cleanly and was saved the misery of the next three years in trenches.

"With this year being the 100th anniversary of the truce and the Sainsbury's Christmas advert being on, people naturally talk about this wonderful event but to me it will always be the day my grandfather was killed.

"It was a big theatre of war and the truce didn't happen in every single location."

About 20 years ago Mrs McLachlan took her late auntie Lille - Sgt Gregory's youngest child - to France to see his grave, a visit which triggered a remarkable coincidence.

She said: "Afterwards, we signed the visitor's book and the very next day a great-nephew of Percy Huggins visited his grave which of course is next to my grandfather's.

"He saw our names in the book and got in contact with us afterwards.

"My grandmother never really spoke about it afterwards, even at Christmas time. She has seven children and had to work all the hours god sent."