

# Remembrance Sunday: Amazing story of 'shot at dawn' soldier, the luckiest Tommy alive

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Published here for the first time, as Britain honours the millions who have sacrificed their lives in conflict, it belonged to infantryman Frank Handley Ridgwell and shows his sister Florence.

The hole in it was made by a German bullet which came within millimetres of piercing his chest right above his heart – one of three miraculous escapes that make Frank the war's luckiest Tommy.



Frank Ridgwell

His story will be told tonight in a Remembrance Day special edition of The Antiques Roadshow.

It will reveal how Private Ridgwell first dodged death in February 1916 when, at the age of 21, he was posted to a shellhole at Festubert in France to spy on the German trenches.

He had volunteered to do the double watch to help a sick pal, but Frank himself was suffering from trench fever, starved of sleep and dazed by shellfire.

A young officer accused him of sleeping on duty and arrested him. At a 10-minute field court martial he was sentenced to be executed by firing squad.

But after an agonising two-week delay – during which he was handed back his rifle and sent to the front line again – the death sentence was dropped.

Instead, he was told he would get five years penal servitude – jail and hard labour – once the war was over.

That would be cut by four months if he volunteered for “hazardous duties”.



He did. Which is how Frank, a grocer's assistant from Chelmsford in Essex, who had patriotically signed up for the Sportsman's Regiment a year earlier, ended up in the hell on Earth that was the Battle of the Somme.

In just five months, from July to November 1916, a million men died or were wounded there.

Frank's duties were leading ammunition parties and stretcher-bearers across the front and through No Man's Land, the most hazardous role in his unit, the 24th Regiment of Royal Fusiliers.

He proved himself a hero – and had his second brush with death when his brass belt buckle saved his life by stopping a piece of shrapnel that would have torn into his flesh and killed him.

In recognition of his valour, in November 1916 Frank's five-year penal servitude sentence was dropped. He was also awarded a Certificate of Honour and allowed a brief visit to his family in Essex in March 1918.

He rejoined his regiment days before a German attack during which he was hit by two enemy - bullets. Incredibly, the luck that saved him from the firing squad and shrapnel continued to hold.

One bullet, which hit him in the right breast pocket and would have killed him, was blocked by a cigarette case he was carrying.

The second, which hit him on the left pocket over his heart, was deflected by his Army paybook, which had the photo of his beloved sister tucked inside it.



The sepia photograph of sister Florence, known as Ciss, which was taken in 1914 when she was 26, was inside the book and was pierced by the bullet.

He had escaped certain death again – but on March 25 his unit was surrounded by enemy troops and he was captured. He was held at a prisoner of war camp in Charleroi, Belgium, escaping after seven months and living rough until the Armistice.

The First World War was over – but Frank’s troubles were not.

His nephew, the Rev Michael Austin, who researched his uncle’s story and showed the photo and other mementoes to the Antiques Roadshow team, said: “At risk of their lives, Uncle Frank had been helped by Belgian families after he escaped.

“But having reached the coast he was arrested by British military police on suspicion of being a deserter.

“The production of his paybook – with its picture of sister Ciss and his Certificate of Honour – again saved him.”

Mr Austin, 78, of Southwell, Nottinghamshire, who is a retired Canon of Southwell Cathedral, believes his uncle suffered a gross miscarriage of justice.

He said: “Frank was accused of sleeping on duty and sentenced to death but there is no compelling evidence that he was asleep. Frank was ill and dazed. I’m afraid that the word of a grocer’s assistant would not count for much against that of an officer in an army heavily divided on class lines.

“The effect of his sentence on his family can hardly be imagined. Even when exonerated and subsequently recommended for the Military Medal for heroism, the verdict meant that he never received anything above a Certificate of Honour.

“Even now, after those on whom the death sentence was carried out have received a government pardon, others like Frank never did. It is dreadfully unjust that their sentence was never withdrawn and their honour fully restored.” After the war, Frank met and married another grocer’s assistant, Gladys, with whom he had two daughters and opened his own shop in Plaistow, East London. He was a special constable during the Second World War and was on duty during the first two days and nights of the Blitz, which he spent recovering body parts.

He and Gladys retired to Romford where he died aged 85 in 1979. Gladys died a few months later.

Frank’s beloved sister Ciss, whose photograph he kept close to his heart throughout the Great War, never married but spent her life caring for members of her wider family until her death at 89.

The segment of tonight’s Antiques Roadshow revealing Frank’s amazing story was filmed at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire in front of the Shot At Dawn Memorial.

Its centrepiece is a statue of a young man blindfolded and strapped to a post, surrounded by 306 other posts, each with the name, age and regiment of a man who was executed.

Mr Austin added: “It disturbs me that the incidence of death sentencing in World War One increased before and during every major campaign.

“One reason this was done was to boost the resolve of the men who, like Uncle Frank, referred to themselves as the PBI – the poor bloody infantry.”

(Source: Mirror UK)