



**WEEKEND**  
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As we commemorate for the last time this century those who died in its wars, our link to those who experienced the most bloody of those conflicts is fast disappearing.

The memory of the battlefields of Flanders is now held by only a few hundred individuals. A year ago, 80 years after the armistice that ended the first world war, France bestowed the Legion d'Honneur on the surviving Allied soldiers who fought on its soil. It reckoned it would award no more than 1,500 medals around the world, and fewer than 600 in Britain.

One was presented in January to my grandfather's brother, Tom, just a few months before he died, aged 181. His eldest brother - my grandfather Jack, who was wounded in the Dardanelles campaign of 1915 - died four years ago at the age of 103. Their youngest brother, Jim, now 94, missed the first world war, but spent much of the second as a prison labourer in Japan.

They were not great actors in the wars they fought. But they were on stage throughout and by chance experienced some of the events that have defined the century. They also lived long enough to speak to me about them.

I wish I had talked to them more, or earlier, and worked harder to ask better questions. But I have them all on tape, to which I am listening and I write, speaking in a Derbyshire cadence that has all but disappeared and providing a personal connection to the foreign country that is the past.

From a historical perspective, the century now draws to a chronological close. It began with the outbreak of war in 1914 and ended when elated crowds began tearing down the Berlin wall, almost 80 years ago to this day.

The conflicts that drew a curtain on the 19th century and opened a door to the 20th left few men dead on its battlefields. The Oxford historian, Niall Ferguson, in his recent book, *The Pity of War*, describes the conflict as "nothing less than the greatest error of modern history".

His conclusion that the first world war was a tragedy that could have been avoided if Britain had chosen to stand aside is controversial. But there is widespread agreement about the ill it produced.

The Russian revolution of 1917, which shattered Russia from western civilisation for more than 70 years, was one direct consequence. The vindictive peace visited on Germany at Versailles fostered the rise of Adolf Hitler, which brought the second world war and the Holocaust - and that war's stepchildren: the nuclear bomb and the cold war.

All of us in the west have been fashioned by this, and many in the east, though we have all been influenced differently.

American GIs returned after 1945 to a thriving post-war economy and produced a "baby boom" generation that grew up accustomed to prosperity. Europe's immediate post-war experience, certainly Britain's, was of relative austerity.

And in Britain, at least, the illusion of victory in two world wars - nurtured largely by American finance and arms - delayed its coming to terms with the country's reduced circumstances.

But this was not the world into which my grandfather's generation was born. Britain raised the waves and its empire stretched around the world, but it offered little succour to most of its subjects at home or abroad.

When his father died, aged 30, of illness, my grandfather was 31. In those days there was welfare, the family was plucked from modest affluence into poverty almost overnight and three of the five children were farmed out to relatives.

As soon as he was 14, Jack began work in a coal mine. As a territorial (Britain's army reserve), he was called up when Britain declared



# Snapshot of war

There are few first world war veterans left to share their memories of that bloodiest of conflicts. But Stephen Fidler kept alive a link with the past by taping his grandfather and two great uncles as they recalled the wars that overturned their lives

war on Germany in August 1914, at the age of 18. He joined the Derbyshire Yeomanry, a cavalry regiment of territorialists, at the Esplanade Hotel in Buxton.

Seventeen-year-old Tom, meanwhile, went to nearby Chesterfield, where he enlisted as an infantryman with the Sherwood Foresters.

Their paths diverged. Tom spent the entire war in Europe, most of it on the Western Front as a messenger and a sniper. Tom had been at Ypres early in the war, and won the military medal for gallantry and devotion to duty for running messages to the front lines on the Western Front in 1918. He also spent time in Ireland; he remained last year about being in the grounds of Dublin Castle on Easter Monday 1916, among the British troops sent to quell the Easter Rising.

He went from Dublin back to the Western Front and into the Somme, the battle historian John Keegan describes as the greatest tragedy in British military history.

In this 20-month Allied offensive, 600,000 German soldiers were killed or wounded.

Allied losses were higher. British casualties alone numbered 418,664. The farthest line of advance for the Allies was seven miles. For Keegan, the Somme was a watershed, too, for British society: "The Somme marked the end of an age of vital optimism in British life that has never been recovered."

My grandfather, Jack, on the other hand, went to Egypt in 1915 and in August was shipped to the Dardanelles as part of the British second mounted division. He was to take part in a last-ditch attempt to rescue Winston Churchill's ill-fated campaign to secure the narrow straits leading from the Mediterranean to Russia's warm water ports in the Black Sea.

The campaign at Gallipoli saw troops from the old British dominions die in their thousands, leaving in Australia a sense of betrayal and marking the start of the separation of Australia's identity from that of the mother country.

But the British died, too. My grandfather landed in Suvla Bay just before daybreak in time to take part in what was, in terms of numbers, the greatest offensive of the campaign, on August 21 1915. The Derbyshire Yeomanry, miners and farmers in their first action, were ripped apart.

"The first time we went over the top, there were 300 of us, and there were only 30-some left to call the roll," he said.

"The Turks held their positions - military historians believe the campaign was effectively lost 11 days earlier - and the Allies began an

immobilising pull-out from the peninsula in December. Jack survived the offensive but was wounded the following month. He was lucky in two ways: he had been careless and he could still walk. Exhausted after a night moving sandbags on a famed local landmark known as Chocolate Hill, his detachment returned to sleep but were ordered straight back to start again.

Too tired to pick their way back to Chocolate Hill through trenches of fresh soldiers, they walked across open country in full view of Turkish artillery. A shell exploded nearby and he caught a shoulder full of shrapnel.

He recovered in Egypt, where he returned to the half of the regiment that had been left behind, and spent most of the rest of the war in another dispersing campaign, Salonica, now Thessaloniki in Greece. This was a largely static front opened in an unsuccessful Allied effort to help Serbia. By 1918 though, Jack was chasing through Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey after the retreating Germans.

"When we got the Germans on the run, we never laid down above four hours at a time," he said. Running far ahead of the supply lines, they lived for days off horse fodder. When told the Germans had finally surrendered, he replied: "God help the poor buggers if they're no better off than us."

If Jack's war was a succession of personal and strategic calamities, younger brother Jim's experience in the second was no better. Having spent three years in the Royal Artillery in 1918, he was in the army reserve in 1939. Three days after he was called up, he was in Brussels, manning anti-aircraft guns he had never seen before.

He was evacuated from Dunkirk in May 1940 after a sleepless retreat. In one 24-hour period, he set up gun positions eight times as German artillery forced them progressively back. The memories of this - the roads jammed with military vehicles and frightened civilians clutching a few belongings - came flooding back this year as he watched television news footage from Kosovo.

Back in England, he manned anti-aircraft guns in Southampton, London and Coventry during the blitz.

Tom ordered to Basra in Iraq, his detachment was diverted to Singapore after Pearl Harbor, to confront the Japanese. "We went to Singapore and most of our equipment went to Basra," he said.

He was shipped on to Sumatra, where retreating from the Japanese advance he splashed guns for the second time in the war. Having evacuated to Batavia (now Jakarta) in Java, they marched inland to find the Japanese behind and in front of them. Although they were now officially infantry, they had not been issued with any weapons. "We had nothing to march about with, not even a revolver."

For the rest of the war, his family had no idea whether he was alive or dead.

Taken prisoner in Bandung, he was moved to a prisoner-of-war camp in Batavia.

twisted girders. "Closer to the city, no buildings were standing. It was terrible. We went left but there was nothing but rows and rows of machines... You could smell death in Nagasaki."

When Jim arrived in Southampton on the liner *Le de France* in December 1945, "it was a miserable day and a hard, playing miserable tunes," he weighed less than 100lb. But he appears to bear little resentment towards the Japanese people. "Many of them were based about as badly as us," he said.

None of the brothers appears to have worried much about death. "You didn't think about things like that. You used to live from day to day," said Jim. Tom, who told me he "never got a scratch, and I went through the thickest" of the war or never afraid, in the war or

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After eight months, he was moved to Japan. He worked for eight months in an undersea coal mine in Onmitsu, in the southern Japanese region of Kyushu. He lived off rice and occasional rations of raw fish that he remembers rotted of ammonia.

For the rest of the war, he worked at the Imperial steel-works in nearby Yawata, a married man of 34, was a less than the target of the first US superfortress bombers in June 1944.

Fortunately perhaps for Jim, although his aircraft set out on the mission, only one bomb fell anywhere near his intended target.

One day, the Japanese simply stopped marching the prisoners to the steelworks. American supplies came soon afterwards, dropped from the sky in barrels. He was taken home through Nagasaki, where a few weeks before, the US had dropped the second atomic bomb.

As he approached the city, scorched trees gave way to misshapen buildings of the war lives. Page X

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Composite of article written by Stephen Fidler in FT Magazine  
 It documents the experiences of his grandfather, Jack Fidler and his two great-uncles, Tom and Jim Fidler during the First and Second World Wars

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