

## THE DYING COMRADE

Private Percy Buck

**MAIN PICTURE:** This view of the battlefield at Passchendaele, albeit taken later in the year on 14 November 1917, illustrates the conditions faced by the attackers on 31 July 1917. The men seen here holding the line in a landscape of mud and water-filled shell holes are from the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company, part of the Canadian 4th Division.

(HMP)

**P**ERCY BUCK was born in 1891 into a fairly typical late Victorian family in the Northamptonshire town of Peterborough. Ten years or so later the family moved to Hitchin in Hertfordshire. There Percy married, as well as joined the local Territorial Army unit, the Hertfordshire Regiment, where he proved to be an excellent shot. With his new wife he moved to St Albans where on 15 August 1914 – just eleven days after Britain had declared war on Germany – their son Cyril was born.

With a new born child, Percy did not rush to volunteer to serve abroad. Instead he remained with his Territorial unit, using his skills with the rifle to help train recruits in the 2nd and 3rd battalions of the Hertfordshire Regiment in preparation for joining the unit's

fighting arm – the 1st Battalion, known affectionately as the "Herts Guards".

By 1916, the devastating losses incurred on the Western Front during 1914 and 1915, as well as an increasing demand for manpower, meant that even Percy could no longer stay at home. Consequently, on 10 January 1916 he duly presented himself at St Albans where he enlisted for overseas service. It was as Private 267098 P. Buck, 15 Platoon, No.4 Company, 1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment, that he finally stepped ashore at Boulogne on 25 November 1916.

### UP TO THE FRONT

It was not until 7 December 1916 that Percy was sent to join the battalion at Ypres. Five days later the men moved by train to the 'Hill Top Section' of the 'Canal

Bank' in the Ypres Salient to relieve the 1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment in the trenches. The Cambs were one of the four battalions which, together with the Herts, formed the 118th Brigade of the 39th Division; the other two being the 6th Cheshires and the 4/5th Black Watch.

The battalion was involved in relatively small-scale actions until July 1917 when the build up began to the great offensive in the Ypres Salient, the Third Battle of Ypres – today known simply as "Passchendaele".

The 39th Division was taken out of the line in July 1917 and moved to a specially prepared training facility away from the front for practice in going "over the top". Replicas of the trench system that the Herts would target at the end of the month had been constructed and



Percy and his colleagues spent weeks making mock attacks and identifying areas that they would have to avoid or eliminate at the earliest opportunity.

### THE BIG PUSH

Despite all the thorough preparation that the Herts Regiment made, there was one factor which unfortunately they could not control; the weather. The last week of July 1917 saw some of the heaviest rain the area had ever experienced, turning the already shell-cratered landscape into a morass of mud that made the ground virtually impassable. Trenches were filled with water and tales of soldiers drowning in waterlogged shell-holes spread throughout the area. Moving up >>

**LEFT:** A portrait of Percy Buck. When war was declared in August 1914 Percy had been married less than a year and was working in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, as a Composer in the printing trade. His only son Cyril was born less than a fortnight later. (ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF HERTS AT WAR" UNLESS STATED OTHERWISE)



# The Dying Comrade

**Private Percy Buck** was killed at the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. Months after he had been listed as missing in action, his family received a photograph of Percy accompanied by a letter from a soldier who had found the photograph in the hands of "a dying comrade". That soldier was, writes **Dan Hill**, a German corporal.



## "OVER THE TOP AT PASSCHENDAELE

PHILIP GIBBS was one of just five official war correspondents, and he witnesses the start of the Third Battle of Ypres.

"The order came to advance," he later wrote. "There was no dramatic leap out of the trenches. The sandbags on the parapet were so slimy with rain and rotten with age that they fell apart when you tried to grip them. You had to crawl out through a slough of mud. Some of the older men, less athletic than the others, had to be heaved out bodily.

"From then on, the whole thing became a drawn-out nightmare. There were no tree stumps or ruined buildings ahead to help you keep direction. The shelling had destroyed everything. As far as you could see, it was like an ocean of thick brown porridge. The wire entanglements had sunk into the mud, and frequently, when you went in up to the knees, your legs would come out with strands of barbed wire clinging to them, and your hands torn and bleeding through the struggle to drag them off ...

"All this area had been desperately fought over in the earlier battles of Ypres. Many of the dead had been buried where they fell and the shells were unearthing and tossing up the decayed bodies. You would see them flying through the air and disintegrating."



**ABOVE RIGHT:** Men of the Hertfordshire Regiment pictured before the First World War. Percy Buck can be seen on the far right.

**BELOW:** The area of the 1st Herts' attack on 31 July 1917. This is the view looking from the Steenbeek River towards the 'Green line'. The windmill in the distance was just behind the German trenches that morning and was known as the "Totemuhle" or "Death Mill". Used as an observation post by the German troops, the windmill is also notable for the fact that Erich Maria Remarque, author of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, served nearby.

supplies for the "big push" was severely hampered by the weather and men left in the trenches were soaked through and desperately tired even before the advance had begun.

However, the training for the offensive continued, with breaks, right up until 30 July 1917, when the 1st Battalion moved into its assembly positions around 'X' lines on the 'Hill Top' sector. No.4 Company's specific role was to form the left hand flank of the Herts' attack and to maintain the advance and the link with the neighbouring unit, the 4/5th Black Watch.

In broad terms, the attack of Tuesday, 31 July 1917, which formed the start of the first phase of the Third Battle of Ypres, was a large scale assault against the German-held Pilkem Ridge. The ridge dominated the surrounding area and, in German hands, restricted further Allied offensive moves. Its capture would pave the way for the British troops to mount more attacks upon the main German line, *Flanders I*, further back.

The attack itself was planned to take a series of 'objective lines', points plotted on a map designated the blue, black and green lines. The final objective of

that day, the green line, included the section of trench line that the Herts were to attack. Located to the north of Ypres, just outside the small village of St Julien (today called Sint Juliaan), the system itself formed part of the German third line trench system known as the "Langemarck Line". It was known to be heavily defended by artillery and machine-guns and protected by thousands of yards of barbed wire.

The plan for the attack at St Julien (which was the final objective of the day) was that the 118th Brigade, including the Herts, would form the divisional reserve until the men reached the River Steenbeek. At this point they would transfer to the attack role, becoming the leading unit of the advance for the final objective. Under this plan, the Herts would cross the small Steenbeek River and advance across some 600 yards of open ground to the enemy trench line where they would storm the objective and "dig-in" using the newly-captured position as the basis for their own defence line. The Herts would be supported by two tanks and a large scale artillery bombardment designed to soften up the enemy positions as they

approached.

There was a fourth objective, the Red Line, but any moves towards that point were to be made by fresh troops, to take advantage of any German disorganization caused by the first series of attacks.

### OVER THE TOP

By all accounts the attack on 31 July started well, with the 116th and 117th Brigades achieving their objectives without too much opposition. The preliminary bombardment of the enemy's first and second line trenches had been successful and those German who were encountered had put up little resistance. Although the going had been tough due to the muddy and waterlogged ground, the 39th Division reached the Steenbeek with comparatively few casualties.

The attack of that morning had started at 03.50 hours, with the Herts arriving at the Steenbeek sometime after 07.00 hours. Soon the weather began to play its part as it had started to rain heavily.

It was now the turn of the Herts Regiment and Private Percy Buck to lead the advance. It was not known at the



**FAR LEFT:** Percy Buck pictured in standing in the centre at the back behind his wife, young son, and mother.

**LEFT:** One of Percy Buck's last letters home. Posted on 21 July 1917, this one was sent to his sister. On this date, the 1st Herts' War Diary notes that the battalion "did splendid training for offensive action".

**LEFT:** Peaceful today, it was in this nondescript field that such carnage was wrought on 31 July 1917. It is also the area in which Private Percy Buck was mortally wounded. Taken looking from the German line back towards the British line of attack, the meadow in the foreground is where the 1st Herts' Nos.2 and 4 companies took their highest casualties.

**BELOW LEFT:** A map showing the area of the Herts' attack near St Julien on the morning of 31 July 1917. The letter 'A' indicates the course of the Steenbeek River, whilst 'B' is the so-called Green Line, the defences of which formed part of the German third line trench system known as the "Langemarck Line, which was the Herts' objective that day. The village St Julien can be seen on the boundary between the 1st Herts and the 6th Cheshires.

time, but events were already turning against them. The Germans had actually been well aware of the impending attack and so had virtually abandoned their first and second trench lines in favour of the heavily defended third, the Green Line, which was out of range of most of the supporting British artillery.

Disastrously, as the Herts waited for the artillery to move within range and bombard their objective – the Green Line – it was realised that the ground was too waterlogged and churned up by shellfire for the guns to move. Consequently, the Green Line was left almost completely intact, with relatively fresh enemy troops and machine-guns waiting for the coming advance.

### THE GREEN LINE

At 10.00 hours the order for the Herts Regiment to advance was given. As it and the rest of the brigade crossed the Steenbeek it suffered its first two casualties – the two tanks which were designated to take out enemy strongpoints and provide support for the advance. One was immediately stuck trying to cross the Steenbeek which had



swollen due to the heavy rains; the other made it some fifty yards before it fell into a large shell hole where it became bogged down and had to be abandoned.

As intended, Private Percy Buck and the soldiers of No.4 Company were initially on the left flank of the attack, following behind No.2 Company as it advanced toward the enemy line. About 10.50 hours the battalion moved forward in four lines behind the 116th and 117th Brigades east of the Steenbeek. Until this point the casualties had been slight, though this was about to change.

About halfway to the objective some of No.3 Company came upon a German strong point which they gallantly charged, capturing or killing most of those manning the position and sending the remainder back as prisoners. Unfortunately, this was as good as things would get for the Hertfordshire Regiment.

Shortly after capturing a German advanced trench, a hail of machine-gun and artillery fire was opened up on the Herts. They pushed on, taking increasingly severe casualties until they reached the area directly in front of the enemy trench system. By this time, about 10.50 hours, the last officer (of twenty that started that morning) became a casualty, leaving the Regimental Sergeant-Major (who was wounded) in command of the battalion.

### IMPENETRABLE BARBED WIRE

Particularly vicious fire was directed on the Herts from several machine-gun emplacements on the left flank of the attack from the strongpoints at Masion d'Hibou and Triangle Farm. These took a heavy toll on Nos.2 and 4 companies, which by then had, because of the casualties, amalgamated to form a single, smaller composite company.

Within 100 or so yards of the enemy trench, still losing men all the while, the Herts encountered an impenetrable



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**RIGHT:** A knocked out British tank half submerged in mud and water near St Julien, 12 October 1917. It is not known if this is one of the two tanks that had been tasked to support the men of the 1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment on 31 July. (IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM; Q6327)

barrier – barbed wire. A contemporary account of the time states: “The whole Battalion was left in the open with uncut wire in front of them. The few men who got through were killed. The rest just ‘took it.’”

Whilst the survivors sought shelter where they could, it was soon noticed by the German defenders that the Herts were in bad shape. A counter-attack was soon launched against the battalion's left flank, and in particular the remnants of Nos.2 and 4 companies.

It is known that Private Percy Buck was with these men, and had reached as far as the Springfield Farm pillbox



where the two companies were sheltering. As pressure mounted on the Herts, they were eventually forced to conduct a fighting withdrawal back toward the Steenbeek, leaving dead, wounded and separated men behind.

#### HEAVY CASUALTIES

The 1st Herts War Diary describes the final phase of the attack with characteristic understatement: “On reaching the enemy wire this was found to be practically undamaged (except in one place) & very thick. 2/ Lieut Marchington & a handful of men of No.3 Coy got through the only gap and got into the enemy trench & killed a lot of Germans. The remainder of the Bn, being unable to get through the wire and suffering severe casualties from enfilade MG fire & the Germans making a strong counter attack from our left flank about this time, had to fall back having suffered exceptionally heavy casualties. The remnants of the battalion subsequently dug themselves in in line with the 1st Cambs Regt. on the west side of the STEENBEEK.”

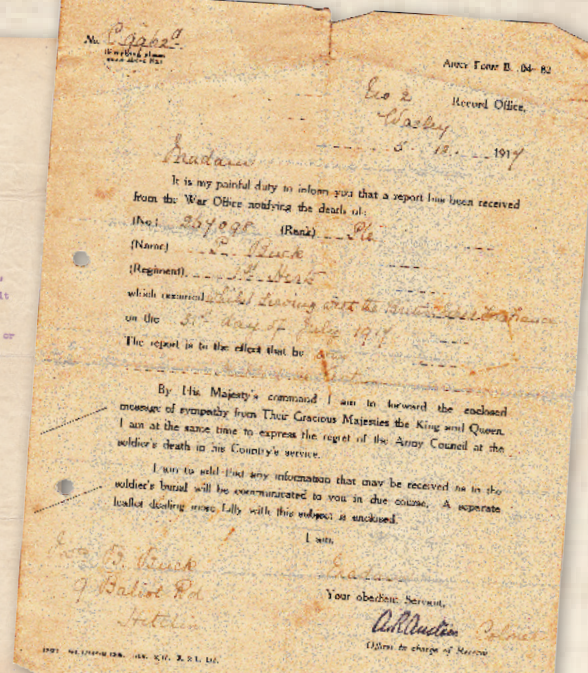
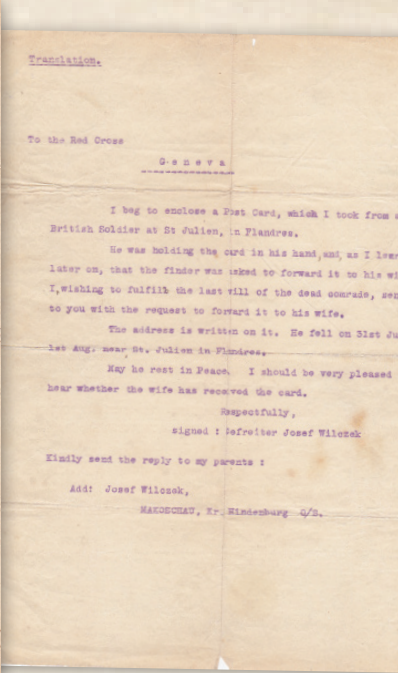
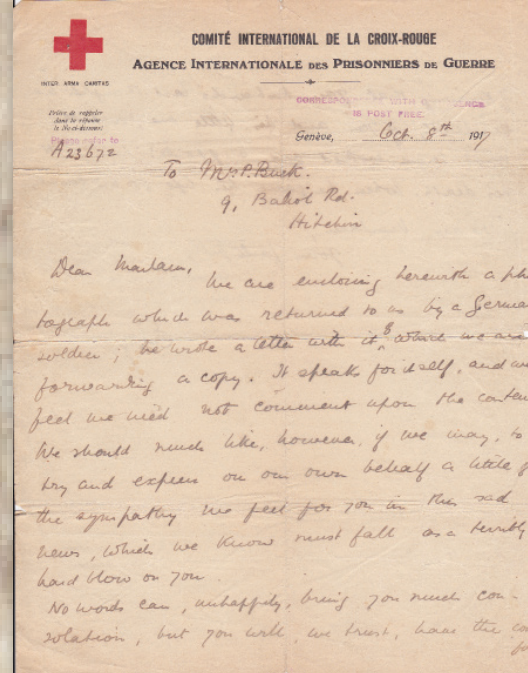
Around 12.30 hours the remnants of the Hertfordshire Regiment made it back across the Steenbeek, harassed

all the time. They crossed back to the point where they had started from some two hours earlier. Of the 620 officers and men who started the attack, not a single officer and only 130 Other Ranks returned. Private Percy Buck was not among them.

For the Hertfordshire Regiment the devastation of the day's attack was summed up succinctly by a conversation on the evening of 31 July between Quartermaster Sergeant Gordon Fisher of the 1st Herts, who had just arrived in St Julien with rations for 620 men, and the Brigadier-General commanding 118th Brigade: “I said to the general ‘excuse me Sir, I can't seem to find the Hertfordshire Regiment’. He looked at me for a while and then said ‘I'm sorry Quarters, there is no Hertfordshire Regiment.’”

#### MISSING IN ACTION

Once the dust had settled, the survivors of the Hertfordshire Regiment were slowly reinforced and re-equipped. They spent the next few months in the line, again suffering very heavy casualties in September 1917 during the latter stages of Passchendaele.



Throughout the first two weeks of August, news of the attack at St Julien slowly filtered home through personal letters, wounded soldiers returning to the UK and newspaper articles. Telegrams informing families of the fate of their loved ones also began to arrive.

One of the many anxious relatives to receive a dreaded letter was Mrs Bertha Buck who was staying at that time with her husband's parents at 9 Baliol Road, Hitchin. Percy's service record indicates that, aged just 26, he was officially reported Missing in Action on 10 August 1917. The likely reason for this delay in informing Percy's family is that the days after the attack saw stragglers and wounded men make it back from No Man's Land, usually during the night.

There was also still a chance that Percy had been captured and that he was safely out of the war in a German prisoner of war camp. Over the following months Percy's wife and family may well have endured a dreadful period of uncertainty and anxiety – no doubt hoping that news would come that he was in the hands of the enemy. That he was, somehow, still alive.

The wait for news finally ended when an unexpected letter, dated 8 October 1917, arrived from the British Section at the International Red Cross in Geneva, Switzerland.

#### A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Inside the letter from the Red Cross were a typed translation of document from a German soldier and, most incredible of all, a photograph of Percy.

“Dear Madam,” began the letter from the Red Cross. “We are enclosing herewith a photograph which was returned to us by a German soldier; he wrote a letter with it of which we are forwarding a copy. It speaks for itself,

and we feel we tried [to] not comment upon the contents. We should much like, however, if we may, to try and express on our own behalf a little of the sympathy we feel for you in this sad news, which we know must fall as a terribly hard blow on you.

“No words can, unhappily, bring you much consolation, but you will, we trust, have the comfort of knowing that your



husband's last thoughts were evidently of you and his little one, and this must have soothed and supported him in his death, when he gave his life for his country.”

The second piece of paper in the communication from the Red Cross was the typed translation of the German soldier's letter. Josef Wilczek, a Gefreiter (the equivalent to a corporal in the British Army), had posted his letter to the Red Cross from Makoschau in eastern Germany (now Poland).

It is believed that Wilczek served in Infantry Regiment 23.

“I beg to enclose a Post Card, which I took from a British Soldier in Flandres,” Wilczek wrote. “He was holding the card in his hand, and, as I learnt later on, that the finder was asked to forward it to his wife. I wishing to fulfil the last will of the dead comrade, send it to you with the request to forward it to his wife. The address is written on it. He fell on 31st July or 1st Aug. near St. Julien in Flandres.

“May he rest in peace. I should be very pleased to hear whether the wife has received the card.”

#### AN EYEWITNESS

Despite the seemingly conclusive evidence provided by Wilczek, Bertha apparently persisted in her quest for information on her husband's fate, almost certainly assisted by his parents, John and Elizabeth. Aside from the detail provided by Josef Wilczek, hard facts relating to Percy continued to be scant. Then, on 5 December 1917, official notification was received from the authorities that he had been listed as killed in action on 31 July that year.

How the news affected Bertha, John and Elizabeth, is not recorded, but it would appear that they remained determined to find out more. On 11 March 1918, John received a reply from the Rev. Alfred Edgar Popham, MC & Bar, CF, of the Army Chaplains' Department, who had been the 1st Herts' Padre at the beginning of Third Ypres.

“I left the Hertfordshire Regt. shortly after July 31st,” began Popham. “Then all we knew about your son was that he was missing. I do not remember seeing him on the day of the battle.

“He was a great friend of mine ... I can remember him so well; he was in 15 Platoon. Time after time he would be

**TOP LEFT:** The covering letter from the British Section of the International Red Cross at Geneva.

**TOP MIDDLE:** The translation of Gefreiter Josef Wilczek's letter.

**TOP RIGHT:** The official notification that Private Percy Buck was no longer “missing” but “killed in action”. The British suffered shockingly high casualties as they battled first to take and then hold their initial objectives at the start of Third Ypres. The first phase of the operation lasted until 15 August 1917, and had been undertaken in conditions of almost continual rain – it was one of the wettest summers on record. More than 30,000 men had become casualties and little had been gained.

**ABOVE LEFT:** A portrait of Percy Buck as a Corporal prior to volunteering for overseas service.

**BELOW:** The Passchendaele offensive continues. Soldiers run for cover as a shell explodes in the area known as Glencourse Wood on 20 September 1917, the day that the Battle of Menin Road Ridge was launched. As part of this the 1st Australian Division attacked, taking Glencourse Wood with little difficulty. An indication of the stagnation of the fighting on the Western Front can be gained from the fact that Glencourse Wood was where the First Battle of Ypres had ended on 11 November 1914. (NATIONAL MEDIA MUSEUM)





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Private Percy Buck

HERTS AT WAR

“HERTS AT WAR” is a community led project to commemorate the diverse experiences of Hertfordshire during the First World War. The project aims to uncover the untold stories of the county’s men and women, both at the fighting front and on the Home Front.

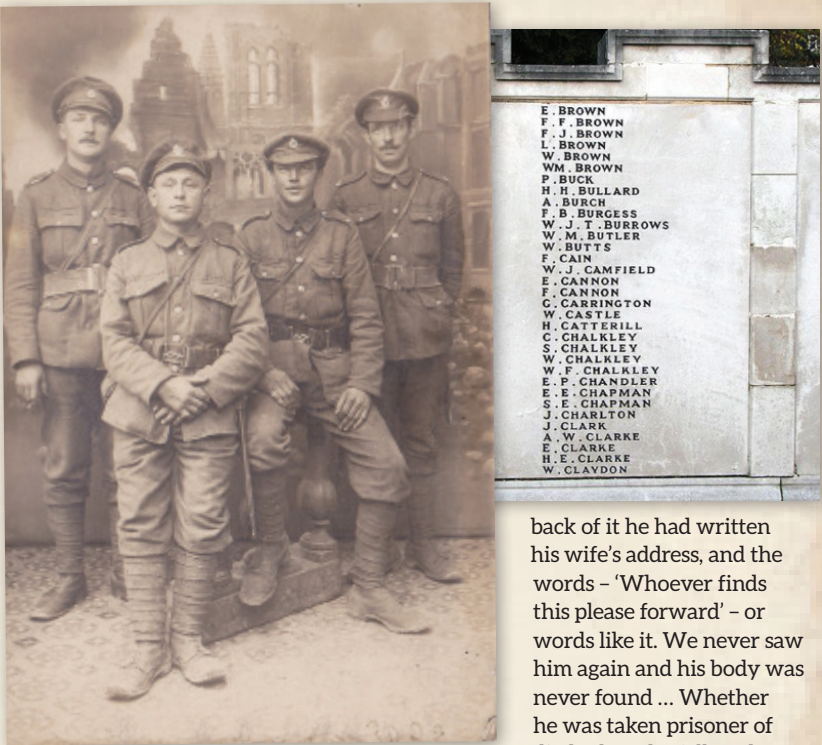
It was through this organisation’s work that the moving story of Private Percy Buck came to light. Ninety-six years after he was killed in action, the project was contacted by Percy’s granddaughter, Christina Reynolds, who reported that she had found some old papers in her late father’s belongings that might prove of interest.

For more information on Herts at War, its aims, regular updates or how you can help, please visit: [www.hertsatwar.co.uk](http://www.hertsatwar.co.uk)

**RIGHT:** The postcard that was returned to Percy Buck’s by Gefreiter Josef Wilczek. Percy himself is standing on the far left.

**TOP RIGHT:** As well as being remembered on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, Percy Buck is also commemorated on the war memorial in Hitchin town centre, Hertfordshire – a memorial that can be seen in the grounds of the church in which he was married in 1912.

**BELOW:** Stretcher bearers struggle through the mud at Passchendaele. Lloyd George wrote of the battle that it was, “one of the greatest disasters of the war ... No soldier of any intelligence now defends this senseless campaign”. (HMP)



back of it he had written his wife’s address, and the words – ‘Whoever finds this please forward’ – or words like it. We never saw him again and his body was never found ... Whether he was taken prisoner or died where he fell, and a

German found the photograph, we never heard. Our belief was that he was too badly wounded to live.”

**TWO CASUALTIES**  
Private Percy Buck’s body was never recovered from the battlefield of St Julien, or, if it was, it remained unidentified. Consequently his name is one of the 54,406 commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial.

As for Gefreiter Josef Wilczek, despite his act of kindness and humility, it would appear that he too did not survive the war. Surviving German records suggest that he was killed in action on 31 October 1918, barely two weeks before the Armistice that ended the fighting was agreed. 📍

- NOTES**
1. Richard van Emden, *The Quick and the Dead* (Bloomsbury, London, 2011) p.169.

