

# The Mail

ON SUNDAY

**The Queen's uncle and the bravest last stand:  
Choking on gas, blown up, riddled with bullets...  
heroics of the Queen Mum's brother revealed 100  
years after his death**

By [IAN LLOYD](#)



Heroic: Fergus Bowes-Lyon, son of the 14th Earl of Strathmore, elder brother to the Queen Mother and the uncle Queen Elizabeth II never met, died 100 years ago today. The Prince of Wales stood in solemn silence yesterday as he took part in a centenary memorial service in Dundee to honour the British troops who lost their lives at the ill-fated Battle of Loos. And among the 20,000 soldiers who died during the largest First World War battle on the Western Front, there was one brave soldier in particular whose heroic sacrifice the Royal Family will never forget.

Fergus Bowes-Lyon, son of the 14th Earl of Strathmore, elder brother to the Queen Mother and the uncle Queen Elizabeth II never met, died 100 years ago today after leading his men into the face of the enemy. Yet for the best part of a century the Royals have not known his

final resting place, or the full details of how he led an assault on the most heavily defended part of the German lines, had a leg blown off and was repeatedly hit by machine-gun bullets, before dying an hour later as his sergeant tried desperately to keep him alive until medical assistance arrived.

Such was the chaos and carnage of the battle that the precise details of the death of the Queen Mother's beloved brother 'Fergie' have remained a mystery – until now. But after years of trawling his family's archives and discovering long-lost letters, the true heroism of the Queen's uncle has been unearthed by Fergus's grandson James Joicey-Cecil.

It is an astonishing story that, without his search, would have been lost to history. The Battle of Loos, which Winston Churchill later called a tale of 'sublime heroism utterly wasted', was the first in which Lord Kitchener's New Army of patriotic volunteers – rapidly trained and sent to France after answering the call of his famous recruitment poster – were pitched against the well-defended Germans. After a four-day artillery barrage that proved to be largely ineffective because of a shortage of big guns and ammunition, a British force of 75,000 men, including about 30,000 Scottish troops, marched across open fields in full view of enemy guns.

The result was slaughter on an unprecedented scale, not helped by the fact that the Army deployed poison gas for the first time, some of which blew back towards the troops and settled in the trenches and craters that provided their only cover.

More than 8,000 British soldiers were killed on the first day of the battle alone, with the brunt borne by the Scottish regiments. The 8th Battalion, Black Watch, in which 26-year-old Fergus served as a captain, lost 511 men; the 9th Battalion lost 680.

Of the 20,598 names on the war memorial on the Loos battlefield, which commemorates soldiers with no known grave, a third are Scots.



Before the storm: The Bowes-Lyon family in 1910. Lady Elizabeth, second from right, front row, was spoiled by brother Fergus, far left

Though most towns and villages in Scotland suffered losses, Dundee – which lies just ten miles south of the Glamis Castle, home to the Bowes-Lyon family – was particularly badly affected. It was said at the time that there was barely a home in the city that did not lose a father, husband, son or brother.

Now an investigation has pieced together Fergus's final hours and, crucially, discovered his last resting place. Mr Joicey-Cecil, 59, Prince Charles's second cousin, has, with Charles's help, revealed an incredible story that will resonate with many families who lost a loved one at war.

It begins with an eager call to arms and letters home, an appeal for local women to knit 100 pairs of socks for his men, and ends with an all too brief assault on the most heavily defended German position – the Hohenzollern Redoubt – and Fergus's death, at just 26, in his sergeant's arms.

Fergus was the fourth of five older brothers of Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon. When she was in her mid-90s she recalled: 'It was so nice being brought up by elder brothers. They kept a good eye, you know. I was the youngest, apart from one brother, and so we were cherished and also disciplined, which is a very good thing.

'We all liked each other tremendously... you feel very safe in a big family. It was a great thing to be loved.'

Elizabeth wasn't just loved, she was spoiled and teased by her older siblings, who would end their letters 'Give my love to Buffy' – a nickname she was given because she pronounced her own name as 'Elizabuff'.

Fergus once wrote to her from India describing his ideal shopping list from the local shop at Glamis. It contained salmon, pigeon, lamb, and fruit, with the comment that it would make him 'probably very, very sick.'

Fergus was educated at Ludgrove prep school in Berkshire and Eton, the same schools that Elizabeth's great-grandsons, Princes William and Harry, would attend 90 years later. The summer months were spent at Glamis Castle. Here, Fergus enjoyed the acres of countryside on the estate. His sister Rose would later recall: 'He would suddenly stop and point and say, "Look!" And you would look and see nothing. Then he would put down his hand and bring up a rabbit in his palm. It was like magic.'

After school he joined the Army, but said he expected to one day end up making a modest income from dairy farming. In the meantime, he was due to start a career in London. 'I am looking forward to City life with horror... Ugh!' he wrote to his mother.



Over the top: Tommies in gas masks attack from a trench. The battle of Loos, where Fergus was killed, saw the first British use of poison gas.

In the end he would experience neither. War was declared on August 4, 1914 – Elizabeth's 14th birthday – the start of what she called 'those awful four years'.

Fergus and his adult brothers immediately enlisted, three of them in the Black Watch and the younger brother, Michael, in the Royal Scots.

Like many other soldiers, two of the brothers hastily brought forward their weddings. Fergus married Christian Dawson-Damer, daughter of the Earl of Portarlington, on September 17, 1914, apologising to his mother for the 'fearful bother' the rush had created. His brother Jock married 12 days later. Elizabeth was a bridesmaid at both ceremonies.

After training at Aldershot, during which he asked his mother if the local women at Glamis could knit more than 100 pairs of green/khaki half-hose for his men, Fergus and the 8th Battalion headed for France in the spring of 1915. He returned on leave in late August to meet, for the only time, his daughter Rosemary – James Voicey-Cecil's mother – who was born on July 18, 1915.

After five days with his family, Fergus headed back to France in time for the final preparations for the offensive. During the preceding months in France, Fergus had seen at first hand the Germans strengthening their positions. He noticed the enemy trenches were 'quite impregnable – rows and rows of them... & all lined with concrete and with murderous machine guns', he wrote. Constant heavy rain worsened the situation. On September 25, General Douglas Haig, Commander of the British Expeditionary Force, proclaimed that 'the greatest battle in the world's history begins today'.

*On the morning of September 27, Fergus was instructed to take 100 men to bolster the attack on Hohenzollern Redoubt, a heavily fortified section of high ground with an excellent view of the entire battleground. But at about 10.30am a bomb landed near him, blowing off his right leg*

Privately he had deep concerns about the plan of attack.

The British troops, using their poisonous gas, were initially successful but a lack of reinforcements hampered progress and the German machine-gun retaliation was swift and brutal, inflicting appalling losses.

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Back at Glamis, 15-year-old Elizabeth had each day been meeting the postman to intercept any of the black-edged telegrams that meant only one thing. Her aim was to protect her mother, who had lost a daughter, Violet Hyacinth, to diphtheria in 1893, as well as a son Alec, from a brain tumour in 1911 caused, it was assumed, by a blow to the head from a cricket ball while at Eton.

Two of Fergus's brothers had already been wounded while serving with the Black Watch. The telegram finally arrived at Glamis four days after Fergus was killed. Lieutenant Gilroy of the 8th Battalion wrote to the Strathmores telling them their son's death was instantaneous and that he wouldn't have suffered.

However, several weeks later Fergus's soldier servant, Lance Corporal Andrew Ross, came to break the news that the death, in fact, had not been as quick as the family had hoped, and that Fergus had lingered for an hour or so until 11.30am.

Deep in mourning for the rest of the war, the family hoped they could one day find Fergus's final resting place. Elizabeth's brother-in-law Sidney Elphinstone received a letter from a friend written nine days before the Armistice of November 11, 1918, mentioning that he had seen Fergus's grave in an area known as the Quarry.

Lady Strathmore planned to go to France in search of it as soon as the war was over, but her plans were dashed. By 1920, the grave had disappeared in the quagmire of shell-holes and trenches, and ten years later Fergus's name was one of 20,000 carved on to the Loos Memorial for those killed in the conflict who had no known grave.

James Voicey-Cecil takes up the story: 'In September 2011, a military historian, Christopher Bailey, wrote to the Prince of Wales to tell him he had spoken to a local man called Jean-Luc Gloriant who lived overlooking the site of the Hohenzollern Redoubt and felt sure he knew where Fergus was buried.'



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Hope: Prince Charles, pictured at the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, forwarded a letter from a military historian to the Strathmore family that outlined the possibility Fergus's grave had been found. Queen Elizabeth II is pictured (right) at the beginning of this month Prince Charles – Fergus's great-nephew – forwarded the letter to the Strathmore family. James added: 'The following month, my wife Jane and I met Jean-Luc Gloriant at his home near Vermelles.

'It was a bright, crisp October day and he took us on a tour of the battlefield. After he showed us some of his extensive research, we left by his rear garden gate, alongside which the Saltire permanently flies.

'He counted some paces across the frozen ploughed field. Suddenly he stopped, pointed to the ground and said, "Here exactly is where your grandfather fell: Little Willie Trench."

'We then went to the Quarry cemetery at Vermelles where Fergus had been buried and he showed us the grave of the Unknown Officer, which he strongly believed was my grandfather. 'There were several strands of evidence including the facts that no other officer was buried in the Quarry and no member of the Black Watch either. Of the other officers killed, some were buried elsewhere in marked graves and the bodies of the rest were never found.'

James added: 'It was later agreed that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission should erect a special memorial close to the grave of the Unknown Officer at the Quarry cemetery. In 2012, a headstone was erected there with Fergus Bowes-Lyon's name on it and all the usual markings, bearing the words "buried near this spot".'

Fergus might have been wryly amused that the sister he teased mercilessly would marry into the Royal Family.

She married Albert, Duke of York, second son of King George V, at Westminster Abbey in April 1923, four and a half years after the Great War ended. Elizabeth was supposed to stop her carriage during the return journey from the Abbey and place her bridal bouquet on the steps of the Cenotaph, the national monument to the war dead.

Instead, she spontaneously left her flowers on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier inside the Abbey. Her biographer Dorothy Laird wrote: 'Perhaps she was thinking of her brother Fergus, who had died at Loos.'

Indeed, Fergus was never far from her thoughts. In July 1937 and by then Queen Elizabeth, she met a railway worker called Peter Douglas at Stranraer who had been standing beside her brother when the bomb exploded. She immediately asked him if Fergus had met his death from a bullet or a bomb.

He replied that there was a heavy barrage at the time and that he couldn't be sure. Three years later she had another poignant reminder. By now she was Colonel in Chief of the Black Watch Regiment and was at the regimental depot at Perth when she spotted her nephew, John Elphinstone.

'It gave me such a shock to see John in his Black Watch uniform,' she wrote to her mother-in-law, Queen Mary. 'He suddenly looked exactly like my brother Fergus who was killed at Loos, and in the same regiment.'

'It was uncanny in a way and desperately sad to feel that all the ghastly waste was starting again.'