**The man who didn't shoot Hitler**

**THEIR eyes met across the battlefield in what would turn out to be the final weeks of the First World War. The wounded German corporal was trying to escape but realized he was in the rifle sight of a British soldier.**

By [Jane Warren](http://www.express.co.uk/search/Jane+Warren?s=Jane+Warren&b=1)

At that moment on September 28, 1918, the Tommy lowered his weapon indicating that he would not kill an already injured and retreating enemy. The German nodded his thanks and then disappeared.  
  
It was an act of humanity that was typical of Private Henry Tandey, the Victoria Cross winner who emerged from the terrible conflict as the most decorated surviving British soldier.  
  
But as he stood in the bombed wreckage of his home in Coventry 22 years later, after the city was laid waste by a Luftwaffe raid, Tandey regretted the compassion he had shown. For, as he had discovered only a few years previously, the adversary whose life he had spared that fateful day was Adolf Hitler.  
  
How had Tandey learned the astonishing news that he was the “man who didn’t shoot Hitler”? In 1938 with Britain seeking to appease the now Fu?hrer as he plotted continental domination British prime minister Neville Chamberlain had fl own to Munich on what was to be a futile diplomatic mission.  
  
While at Hitler’s hilltop retreat in Bavaria Chamberlain was intrigued by a painting. Strangely, given its setting, it depicted a British soldier from the Green Howards regiment in the First World War carrying a wounded comrade.  
  
Asked by Chamberlain about its significance Hitler said: “That man came so near to killing me that I thought I should never see Germany again. Providence saved me from such devilishly accurate fire as those boys were aiming at us.”  
  
Hitler asked Chamberlain to convey his best wishes and thanks to Tandey when he returned to England and the prime minister did so, calling the war hero with the news he can scarcely have wanted to hear.  
  
How the world might have looked if Hitler had not survived is one of the great “what ifs” of history.  
  
It was also a stigma that Tandey (who as well as the Victoria Cross received the Distinguished Conduct Medal, the Military Medal, five mentions in dispatches and three wound stripes) lived with until his death in 1977 aged 86.  
  
After that Coventry raid in 1940, when as an air raid warden Tandey spent 10 hours rescuing occupants from blazing houses and which cost an estimated 560 lives, Tandey said of the incident with Hitler: “I didn’t like to shoot at a wounded man but if only I’d known who he would turn out to be… I’d give 10 years now to have five minutes of clairvoyance then.”  
  
So how did Tandey and Hitler come to find themselves on the same battlefield and why was Hitler so convinced of the identity of the man who had spared him?

He stood in the wreckage of his home as Coventry had been laid waste

The events of that day in September 1918 took place near the village of Marcoing in northern France. Tandey’s platoon was halted by gunfire so he crawled forward to locate the gun post and led comrades to destroy it.  
  
Behind the German lines nearby was the 16th Bavarian infantry regiment whose number included the 29-year-old Hitler. During the fighting that day he was wounded and it was shortly afterwards that he and Tandey saw one another.  
  
The story is still doubted by some but in 1997 Major Roger Chapman of the Green Howards said: “We have no doubts he did meet Hitler and allowed him to live.”  
  
Historian David Johnson, who has written Tandey’s biography, says the German leader did not forget the incident after he came to power with his Nazi Party.  
  
“Hitler is reported to have tasked his staff with searching through British Army records in order to identify the British soldier who spared his life although just how likely it is that the Germans would have had access to such records is not explained,” says Johnson.  
  
Hitler was also made aware of the painting hanging in the officers’ mess of the Green Howards Regiment.  
  
A member of his staff named Dr Schwend, who had served as a medical officer at the First Battle of Ypres in 1914, had kept in touch with a British Lieutenant Colonel Earle whom he had treated.  
  
In December 1936 Earle sent Schwend a reproduction of the painting. A year later Schwend wrote to the Green Howards requesting a larger reproduction for Hitler.  
  
Sixty years later the Green Howards Museum’s staff found a letter from Hitler’s adjutant Captain Fritz Weidemann thanking them for the painting and in which he wrote: “The Fu?hrer… was obviously moved when I showed him the picture.” According to the story Hitler identified Tandey from the painting – even though his depiction in the painting looks nothing like him.  
  
Another version of the story claims that Hitler had identified Tandey from newspaper photographs printed around the time that he received the Victoria Cross but David Johnson finds that similarly unlikely.

“These photographs would have been grainy so it stretches credibility that Hitler should have identified him from those,” he says.  
  
While Tandey seemed to accept the story of his act of compassion he was never totally convinced of its absolute truth. “Nevertheless the possibility that he might have spared Hitler’s life at times left him feeling some sense of responsibility,” says Johnson.  
  
He also points out that Tandey had tried to volunteer for army service in the Second World War but was prevented from doing so by his age (he was by then 49) and the injuries he had received in the 1914-18 conflict.  
  
That was why he became an air raid warden instead. “He still saw himself as a soldier and wanted to do his bit,” says Johnson. “And maybe he also felt that if he had spared Hitler’s life he had a responsibility to try to put things right.”  
  
Tandey’s biographer believes that the most plausible explanation is that the Victoria Cross winner’s involvement in Hitler’s past was cooked up by the Fu?hrer as a piece of wartime propaganda. “Britain’s most decorated private soldier sparing the life of Adolf Hitler makes a great story,” he adds.  
  
“How much better would it have sounded if it was embellished by the claim that the man concerned was the most decorated private soldier to survive the First World War rather than an anonymous Tommy?” he suggests.  
  
“The truth may never be known but for Henry Tandey to be known more for his alleged compassion towards Hitler than for his bravery seems to do him a disservice.”