

# Meet the women war detectives tracking down unknown soldiers

Many families are still searching for relatives lost in the wars – but help is at hand. *Joe Shute* reports

**A**llam today, Edward and Sydney Graham will stand in the shadow of Mount Etna and lay a wreath on the grave of the father they never met – and who never knew they existed. The twins were born on July 22, 1943. Edward arrived 15 minutes earlier than Sydney and was named after Edward Graham, who was then fighting for the Royal Irish Fusiliers in Sicily.

But before news of their birth could reach him, Fusilier Graham was killed in a hail of bullets, near

the town of Randazzo, on Aug 13, 1943. The 31-year-old's body was never identified and was buried in an unmarked grave. His wife Eveline, who he had married in January 1941 after meeting at a dance in County Down, was told only that her husband was missing presumed dead. She died in 1983, aged 76, never knowing her husband's final resting place.

A decade ago, Edward, now 74, living in Northumberland and married with three children, launched a renewed attempt to find his father. "We were told very little when we were younger," he says. After poring over old war diaries and books, Edward

zeroed in on the grave of an unknown soldier in Catania War Cemetery, Sicily. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission put him in touch with a little known branch of the Ministry of Defence, nicknamed the "war detectives".

Based at the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre in Gloucester, the war detectives are a team of seven women, set up 12 years ago to trace the bodies of the First and Second World Wars' unknown fallen, whose numbers stretch to some

half a million lost souls. In October 2015, Edward's research landed on the desk of Nicola Nash. The 35-year-old works on around 40 rededications of



Reuniting: Nicola Nash, who has helped to trace the grave of Fusilier Graham, left

previously unidentified headstones every year, not to mention the remains of fallen servicemen, which are still discovered everywhere from northern Europe to Burma. Occasionally, close relatives are still alive – although the number is dwindling.

Last year, she helped identify 23-year-old Frederick Edwin Woolven, part of a Lancaster Bomber crew shot down near Berlin in 1944. His widow was in a nursing home when Nash invited her to the rededication of his grave, in April 2016. "She passed away on the day of the service," Nash says. "The family believe that finally finding his headstone gave her peace."

The Queen's uncle spent close to a century unaccounted for. Captain Fergus Bowes-Lyon was killed in the Battle of Loos in 1915 and only discovered in a mass grave in 2011 with the help of his grandson James

Joicey-Cecil. Nash admits that each case leaves a profound impression. After painstaking work, she pinpointed Edward Graham as one of 12 Royal Irish Fusiliers who could have been laid to rest in Catania and, by plotting their final days using regimental war diaries, established it could only be him buried near Randazzo, as Edward had suspected. "Knowing he is in Catania with his comrades is a comforting thought," says Edward.

At the rededication service, a new headstone bearing Fusilier Graham's name will replace that of the unknown soldier. Nash will be there, alongside the twins.

"You feel like you become part of families," she says. "I always feel I have to be strong for them, but when I get back to my room afterwards I always have a cry."