London’s untold First World War stories uncovered

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One in three soldiers serving under British command in France came from India although their significant contribution to the war effort is largely unknown by today’s ethnic minority Londoners.

The project Trench Brothers will help young people from London’s Asian community learn that the 1914-18 conflict was far from being a ‘white man’s war’ and involved large numbers of troops from India and other parts of the then British Empire.

Hackney-based HMDT Music has received a grant of almost £70,000 to work with 50 London schools to uncover the untold stories of soldiers from India and the West Indies who served in France in the First World War. These included some whose heroism earned them medals including the Victoria Cross and the Distinguished Flying Cross and many more who, although non-combatants, were employed digging miles of trenches and moving vital supplies.

HMDT will work with the National Army Museum, Chelsea, The Imperial War Museum, and National Archives to research into these troops’ life-stories. As well as work with primary schools that includes writing letters home from soldiers, setting them to music and bringing them to life through puppetry, the project will also contribute recorded information for use in the audio guides to cemeteries provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Tertia Sefton-Green, Executive Director of HMDT Music, said: “We are delighted to receive this grant to explore the stories of so many soldiers whose contributions are unrecognised and bring them to life for young Londoners through a range of exciting activities.”

Another project has discovered that German immigrants living in East London when the war broke out were rounded up and interned on what is now the London Olympic site.

Stratford Little Germany 1914 is researching the story of the German immigrants who were living and working in Stratford and West Ham. The area had the largest German community in London. Tensions rose following the sinking of the British ocean liner Lusitania by a German U-boat in 1915 and mobs began smashing the windows of German-owned shops. It was after these disturbances that an internment camp was set up in a disused factory on the site where the Olympics was located in 2012.

The project is being run by Redbridge-based Eastside Community Heritage with the aid of a £9,900 grant. Descendants of the German residents will be interviewed by volunteers and local archives scoured for documents and photographs from the period. The hidden history uncovered will be used to create a local exhibition and workshops for schools in the area.

Judith Garfield, Executive Director of Eastside Community Heritage, said: “Understanding the importance of the First World War in the British psyche, is more than looking at old poems and photographs. The First World War teaches us how communities can so easily be divided and separated. Our Stratford Little Germany 1914 project is a reminder that the implications of war reach far beyond the battlefields, and seep into the remotest corners and neighbourhoods of

England."

Sue Bowers Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: "The First World War changed the face of modern history touching the lives of everyone in this country and beyond. HLF has committed to funding a variety of projects, from organisations large and small, that will create a deeper understanding of the heritage of the conflict. Some of these will capture the memories of individual soldiers, regiments or families, some will restore local war memorials, whilst others like Trench Brothers and Stratford Little Germany will shed new light on other aspects of the war not only on the continent but on the Home Front.

"We have already supported over £28m of projects from across the United Kingdom and will continue to support as many applications as we can afford that want to commemorate the centenary."

Notes to editors

Through its First World War: then and now programme, HLF is making at least £1million available per year for six years until 2019. It will provide grants between £3,000 and £10,000 enabling communities and groups right across the UK to explore, conserve and share their First World War heritage and deepen their understanding of the impact of the conflict.

To find out how to apply for funding visit www.hlf.org.uk/thenandnow.

If a group needs a grant of more than £10,000 for a First World War project, it can apply to HLF through its open programmes. www.hlf.org.uk/firstworldwar.

Further information

Heritage Lottery Fund Vicky Wilford, 020 7591 6046 / 07973 401 937, email: vickyw@hlf.org.uk or Phil Cooper, 07889 949 173, email: phillipc@hlf.org.uk.

Trench Brothers
Tertia Sefton-Green, Executive Director, HMDT Music, on: 020 8882 8825.

Stratford Little Germany 1914
Judith Garfield: Executive Director, Eastside Community Heritage on: 020 8553 3116.

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