

Major Richard
Raymond Willis
VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



THE SCENE AT 'W BEACH', LIKELY AFTER THE JANUARY 1916 EVACUATION. NOTE THE WRECKED CRAFT, DESTROYED JETTIES AND ABANDONED TRACTION ENGINE. THE SITE WAS RENAMED 'LANCASHIRE LANDING' THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

“Crack! ...the signal for the massacre had been given; rapid fire, machine guns and deadly sniping opened from the cliffs above”

Major Richard Willis was recipient of one of the famous “Six Before Breakfast” VCs awarded for acts of incredible bravery during the Gallipoli landings. Willis, then a captain, and his comrades from the 1st Battalion, the Lancashire Fusiliers, displayed sustained courage under the most terrifying enemy fire on April 25, 1915, as they approached a small cove that had been designated ‘W Beach’.

As they reached the beach, the strength of the fire only intensified, and the site was eventually renamed ‘Lancashire Landing’ in honour of the regiment. In my view, this dawn landing on just 350 yards of well-defended beach remains one of the most courageous actions ever performed by the British Armed Forces.

Born in Woking, Surrey, on October 13, 1876, Richard Raymond Willis was the son of merchant Richard Willis and his wife Marion (née Godfrey). Richard Jnr was educated at Totnes Grammar School, Devon, and Harrow School, Middlesex, before attending Royal Military College Sandhurst. On February 20, 1897, he was gazetted to the Lancashire Fusiliers as a second lieutenant. Shortly after, Willis joined the 2nd Battalion in Quetta, India, although he had to return home to recover from enteric fever. In January 1898, he travelled with his battalion to Egypt and joined Kitchener’s Army for the reconquest of the Sudan. Willis was promoted to lieutenant in 1898 and to captain two years later.

In 1900, he was transferred to the 1st Battalion and from July 1900 until 1915 he commanded ‘C’ Company in Crete, Malta,

Gibraltar and India. Willis was a talented sportsman, representing the battalion at polo and hockey as well as being a champion shot with a revolver, a gifted linguist and a musician.

He married Maude Temple, the daughter of another officer, in Marylebone, central London, on July 10, 1907, and the couple had a daughter and two sons.

Breaching the impregnable

With the eruption of war in August 1914, the 1st Battalion arrived back in Britain on Christmas Day. On March 28, 1915, it arrived in Alexandria to prepare for their part in the Gallipoli campaign. On April 25, while two companies from the 2nd Battalion landed at ‘X Beach’ (north of Cape Tekke), four companies of the 1st Battalion were ordered to land at ‘W Beach’. This was a small, sandy cove between Cape Helles and Tekke Burnu, and was so well defended that the Turks may well have regarded it as impregnable.

Captain Willis, who led his beloved ‘C’ Company, was one of several survivors to provide a vivid description of the events of that day: “Not a sign of life was to be seen on the Peninsula in front of us. It might have been a deserted land we were nearing in our little boats. Then crack! ...the signal for the massacre had been given; rapid fire, machine guns and deadly sniping opened from the cliffs above.

“The timing of the ambush was perfect; we were completely exposed and helpless in our slow-moving boats, just target practise for the concealed Turks, and within a few minutes only half of the 30 men in my boat were left alive. We were

now 100 yards from the shore, and I gave the order ‘overboard’. We scrambled out into some 4ft of water and some of the boats with their cargo of dead and wounded floated away on the currents – still under fire from the snipers. With this unpromising start the advance began. Many were hit in the sea, and no response was possible, for the enemy was in trenches well above our heads.

“We toiled through the water towards the sandy beach, but here another trap was awaiting us, for the Turks had cunningly concealed a trip wire just below the surface of the water and on the beach itself were a number of land mines, and a deep belt of rusty wire extended across the landing place. Machine guns – hidden in caves at the end of the amphitheatre of cliffs – enfiladed this.

“Our wretched men were ordered to wait for the wire-cutters to cut a pathway through. They were shot in helpless batches while they waited and could not even use their rifles since the sand and the sea had clogged their action. One Turkish sniper in particular took a heavy toll at very close range until I forced open the bolt of a rifle with the heel of my boot and closed his career with the first shot, but the heap of empty cartridges round him testified to the damage he had done. Safety lay in movement, and isolated parties scrambled through the wire to cover. Among them was Sergeant Richards with a leg horribly twisted, but he managed somehow to get through.”

Captain Harold Clayton, who survived the landings but was killed two months later, also described desperate scenes:

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“There was tremendously strong barbed wire where my boat was landed. Men were being hit in the boats as they splashed ashore. I got up to my waist in water, tripped over a rock and went under, got up and made for the shore and lay down by the barbed wire. There was a man there before me shouting for wire-cutters. I got mine out but could not make the slightest impression. The front of the wire was by now a thick mass of men, the majority of whom never moved again.

“The noise was ghastly and the sights horrible.”

Selected by comrades

The Lancashire Fusiliers began the day with 27 officers and 1,002 men, 24 hours later a headcount revealed just 16 officers and 304 men. The *London Gazette* of August 24, 1915, reported that the Fusiliers “were met by a very deadly fire from hidden machine guns which caused a great

number of casualties. The survivors, however, rushed up to and cut the wire entanglements, notwithstanding the terrific fire from the enemy, and after overcoming supreme difficulties, the cliffs were gained and the position maintained. Among the very gallant officers and men engaged in this most hazardous undertaking, Capt Willis, Sgt [Alfred] Richards and Pte [William] Keneally have been selected by their comrades as having performed the most signal acts of bravery.”

In a second, similar citation – delayed until March 15, 1917 because of discussions over how many VCs should be awarded for the single action – three more men were awarded the VC for bravery at ‘W Beach’, again

after being selected by their comrades. These were Captain Cuthbert Bromley, Sergeant Frank Stubbs and Corporal John Grimshaw. Willis, Richards, Keneally, Bromley, Stubbs and Grimshaw soon became known as the ‘Six Before Breakfast’ VCs.

However, Willis had been involved in heavy fighting in between the initial landings and the announcement of his VC on August 24 – twice in the fortnight following April 25 he escaped uninjured while men just feet away were killed. He took part in an action on April 28 when he led an attack by a small force in the First Battle of Krithia, but he and his men had to withdraw. On May 2, he was back in action on ‘W Beach’ in a major attempt by the Turks to retake the position.

In a day of terrifying fighting at the Third Battle of Krithia, during which the 1st Battalion suffered more than 500 casualties, Willis was shot beneath his heart



MEN OF THE LANCASHIRE FUSILIERS LEAVING THE SS NILE ON A CRAFT BOUND FOR CAPE HELLES AFTER THE INITIAL LANDINGS ON GALLIPOLI OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



THE CAPTAIN WILLIS MEDAL COLLECTION COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

On June 4, after a brief spell of sick leave, he commanded 'D' Company in an attack that was intended to break through the lines in front of Krithia. In a day of terrifying fighting at the Third Battle of Krithia, during which the 1st Battalion suffered more than 500 casualties, Willis was shot beneath his heart. He was evacuated to Egypt and, later, to Britain.

Willis was promoted to major in September 1915 and he received his VC from George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on December 21, 1915. After his recovery, Willis was posted to the Western Front back with the 2nd Battalion. He served on the Somme and in the Ypres Salient, and in August 1916 he was made an acting lieutenant-colonel.

He was appointed commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in January 1917 and also commanded the 8th West Ridings and 6th York and Lancasters in later operations.

Medals reunited

In March 1917, he reverted to the rank of major and in April 1918 he was present during the German breakthrough on the Lys, when he was praised for his work in marshalling his men.

At the end of the war, he returned to the Lancashire Fusiliers and was appointed as second-in-command of the regiment's 2nd Battalion. Having commanded a unit in India for a short time, Willis retired

on November 26, 1920, after more than 23 years of military service. He became a teacher in 1923 and for the next six years worked for the RAF Education Branch and, later, in private schools.

His two sons pursued army careers (one was awarded the Military Cross) and they both eventually moved to Africa. After the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939, Willis volunteered to work as a training officer and served at Aldershot, Hampshire. He was injured during the London Blitz and needed hospital treatment. Once recovered, he resumed his teaching career. In 1958 Willis moved into the Lilian Faithfull Home in Cheltenham, where he lived with his wife. He died at the home on February 9, 1966, aged 89.

I purchased Willis' medal group privately in 2010; it was the third of the 'Six Before Breakfast' VCs to enter my collection, for I had bought Corporal John Grimshaw's medal group privately in 1999 and Sergeant Alfred Richards' medal group at a Spink auction in 2005. I feel hugely privileged to be the custodian of half of these famous six VCs.

In 2014, ahead of the centenary of the Gallipoli landings, I was approached by the Fusilier Museum in Bury, Lancashire, to see if I would be willing to loan my medal groups to mark the centenary. The Fusilier Museum, which was in possession of the VCs belonging to Sergeant Frank Stubbs and Private William Keneally, hoped to unite all six

VCs the following year. I readily agreed, and the Fusilier Museum undertook some good old-fashioned detective work to locate the sixth and final VC – that belonging to Major Cuthbert Bromley, who was wounded in the landing. It meant that the six awards could be united for the first time in 100 years. ●

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Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II*, was first published

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