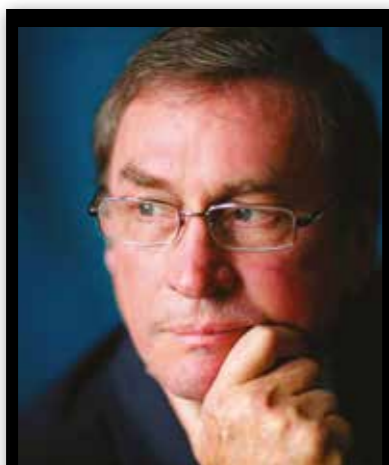




# Brigadier General Charles FitzClarence VC

**BELOW:** A contemporary artist's depiction of British defenders at the Siege of Mafeking. It was during this 217-day-long Boer campaign that Captain Charles FitzClarence undertook the actions for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross.



Lord Ashcroft's  
"Hero of the Month"

**C**HARLES FITZCLARENCE was a brilliant soldier and leader of men who distinguished himself during two major conflicts: the Second Boer War of 1899-1902 and the First World War. By the outbreak of the latter, he was approaching 50 years old and still known affectionately by his comrades as the "Demon of Mafeking" as a result of his remarkable courage in 1899 during the siege of the South African town.

FitzClarence had an interesting and unusual family history. Born on 8 May 1865, in Bishopscourt, Co. Kildare, his paternal grandfather, George, 1st Earl of Munster, was the eldest of five illegitimate sons born to the Duke of Clarence (later King William IV) by his mistress, "Mrs Jordan". His father and most of his uncles served in the Army or Royal Navy. FitzClarence was educated at Eton and Wellington colleges before becoming a lieutenant in the Royal

Fusiliers on 10 November 1886. Later he was "grievously disappointed" to miss active service in Egypt, while his twin brother, Edward, yet another soldier from the FitzClarence family, made the trip. Tragically, his brother was killed at Abu Hamed in 1897.

The following year FitzClarence, who was widely known simply as "Fitz", was promoted to captain and was sent on "special duty" to South Africa. After the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899, he quickly distinguished himself on the battlefield and was awarded the Victoria Cross for three separate acts of bravery during the Siege of Mafeking, which lasted from October 1899 to May 1900.

On 14 October 1899, FitzClarence was in command of a squadron from the Protectorate Regiment, consisting of only partially trained men who had never seen action, when it was sent to the assistance of an armoured train that had left Mafeking. The squadron



During the Siege of Mafeking in the Second Boer War, Captain (later Brigadier General) Charles FitzClarence showed outstanding bravery on at least three occasions. In the latest article in his "Hero of the Month" series, Lord Ashcroft tells the story of a remarkable military career.

he was warned that he must have an ambulance ready for the wounded. There was hand-to-hand fighting in the enemy trench and FitzClarence, the first man into it, killed four men with his sword, beheading one with a clean blow. The British force was also firing on the enemy from the rear. The Boers suffered a heavy defeat, while FitzClarence's squadron had six men killed and nine wounded. FitzClarence was twice wounded but was saved from serious injury by his compass case.

Major Robert Baden-Powell, later the founder of the Scout Movement, said of the two incidents in October that had it not been for FitzClarence's "extraordinary spirit and fearlessness, the attacks would have been failures, and we should have suffered heavy loss both in men and prestige".

**LEFT:** A portrait of Captain Charles FitzClarence, The Royal Fusiliers.



was surrounded by a far larger force of enemy soldiers and it looked as if they would be massacred. FitzClarence, however, showing coolness and courage, inspired his men so they not only relieved the train but inflicted a heavy defeat on the Boers, who lost fifty men and had many others wounded. *The London Gazette*, which announced the award of FitzClarence's VC on 6 July

1900, stated: "The moral effect of this blow had a very important bearing on subsequent encounters with the Boers."

Thirteen days later, FitzClarence was leading his men into action again. This time his squadron traversed the open space from Mafeking to make a night-time attack on the enemy's trenches. The sortie was so secret that not even the army doctor was told, although



On Boxing Day 1899, FitzClarence distinguished himself yet again during the action at Game Tree, near Mafeking, despite being seriously injured by a bullet that passed through both his legs. The Siege of Mafeking was the most famous British action of the war: it lasted 217 days and, when the siege was lifted on 17 May 1900, it resulted in a crushing defeat for the Boers.

FitzClarence had got married on 20 April 1898, to Violet Spencer-Churchill, the daughter of Lord [Alfred] Spencer-Churchill. She was the granddaughter of John, the sixth Duke of Marlborough, and she was a cousin of Winston Churchill. The wedding took place in the Citadel Church in the Egyptian

**ABOVE & LEFT:** A pair of drawings showing the armoured train that Captain Charles FitzClarence, and his men of the Protectorate Regiment, went to the assistance of on 14 October 1899, this being the first of the actions for which he was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross. >>





# LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH"

Brigadier General Charles FitzClarence VC



**ABOVE:** A trench map showing the area where Brigadier-General Charles FitzClarence VC was killed in November 1914. Note the location marked "FitzClarence Farm" in the centre. In his Despatch of 20 November 1914, Sir John French wrote: "Another officer whose name was particularly mentioned to me was Brigadier-General Fitzclarence, VC, commanding the 1st Guards' Brigade. He was unfortunately killed in the night attack of the 11th November. His loss will be severely felt."

**RIGHT:** Entitled "FitzClarence's Bayonet Charge", this drawing illustrates the events of 27 October 1899, when Fitzclarence led his squadron across open ground, and made a night attack with the bayonet on one of the enemy's trenches.

capital of Cairo but during the siege she had remained with her husband. Their son was born in Mafeking, being named Edward in honour of FitzClarence's dead twin brother. The couple later had a daughter too.

By the end of the siege, FitzClarence was considered so brave and dashing that he had been nicknamed the "Demon of Mafeking" or simply the "Demon", a sobriquet which stuck until his death. His investiture took place in Pretoria, Transvaal, where he received his VC from Lord Roberts VC.

FitzClarence served as a brigade major in South Africa from August 1900 to February 1901 and was Mentioned in Despatches, receiving the Queen's Medal with three clasps and becoming a brevet major on 29 November 1900. The Second Boer War claimed 75,000 lives, including those of 22,000 British soldiers, and led to the award of seventy-eight VCs.

He was transferred to the Irish Guards on its formation, and from 1903 to 1905

was brigade major to the 5th Brigade at Aldershot. In 1909, he succeeded to the command of the 1st Battalion Irish Guards, and four years later was given the command of the regiment and regimental district, positions he held until the outbreak of the Great War.

In September 1914, FitzClarence was handed the command of the 1st (Guards) Brigade, 1st Division, in France, with the rank of brigadier-general. The following month, the Germans launched a fierce attack on the British Expeditionary Force at Pilckem, north of Ypres. Despite the fact that the Scots Guards lost ten officers and had a further 370 men killed or wounded, the line was held until the end of the month. The Germans also suffered heavy losses.

Eventually, though, the Welsh Guards and the Queen's were shelled out of their trenches before the Battle of Gheluvelt. Their positions were lost at 11.45 hours on 31 October 1914, yet, at noon, FitzClarence decided that the last

## THREE VICTORIA CROSSES

FOR THEIR actions during the Siege of Mafeking, three men were awarded the Victoria Cross. As well as FitzClarence, the other two were Sergeant Horace Martineau and Trooper Horace Ramsden, both of which were the result of the attack on the Boer Game Tree Fort.

The announcement of Trooper Ramsden's VC (it is his portrait seen here) stated: "On the 26th December, 1899, during the fight at Game Tree, near Mafeking, after the order to retire was given, Trooper H.E. Ramsden picked up his brother, Trooper A.E. Ramsden, who had been shot through both legs and was lying about 10 yards from the Boer trenches, and carried him about 600 or 800 yards under a heavy fire (putting him down from time to time for a rest) till they met some men who helped to carry him to a place of safety."

Ramsden's and Martineau's VCs are, like FitzClarence's, held in the Lord Ashcroft Collection.



of his reserves - the surviving half of the 2nd Battalion the Worcestershire Regiment - must be thrown in to prevent an overwhelming defeat. He personally rode over to the Worcesters and ordered Major E.B. Hankey to advance and retake Gheluvelt. The Worcesters were fearless and determined, and eventually drove the Germans from the village. Hankey later said: "I feel perfectly certain that by shoving us in at the time and place he did, the General saved the day."

FitzClarence's courage had been noted by many of his senior comrades. Captain Valentine Williams MC wrote the following account which was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (originally founded in 1817 as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*): "The Coldstream and Scots Guards' battalions of FitzClarence's brigade, in trenches north of Gheluvelt, suffered terribly in



a German attack, delivered in a dense mist on the morning of the 27th along the Menin road. The odds against the British were crushing, for on that day some 24,000 Germans were arrayed against about 5,000 exhausted British troops. In two days the Scots Guards lost 10 officers and 370 men killed and wounded. But the result of the day's fighting was that the British line stood firm and unbroken, while the Germans had sustained enormous losses."

Sir John French, in his despatch published on 30 November 1914, described the fighting at this time as: "Perhaps the most important and decisive attack (except that of the Prussian Guard on the 10th November) made against the 1st Corps during the whole of its arduous experiences in the neighbourhood of Ypres."

However, by 8 November 1914, the Germans were attacking again. Two days later, the Prussian Guard, the pride of the Kaiser's army and thirteen

battalions strong, advanced, their officers with drawn swords. There were huge casualties on both sides as the 1st (Guards) Brigade was forced out of its trenches. At 15.00 hours on 12 November 1914, FitzClarence began the operation to try to retake these trenches. He ordered the Guards to move up in cold rain and thick mud and with little idea of where the enemy was positioned. It was a dangerous mission and one officer said: "We're going in nine wickets down with a sprung bat."

FitzClarence, though a brigadier general, was, typically, at the head of his men as they advanced steadily until a man at the rear of the Guards fired his rifle into the air, thereby betraying their position and causing the enemy to open fire. FitzClarence halted his men and advanced alone. The column then heard more firing and tentatively advanced again. A little later, they found FitzClarence lying on the ground, having been shot by a burst of machine-

gun fire. Three men carried his body back to safety, but the "Demon", aged forty-nine, had enjoyed his final brush with the enemy.

It is perhaps surprising that FitzClarence was not awarded another gallantry award, this time posthumously, for his courage in Belgium through the final months of 1914. However, to this day, FitzClarence remains the highest-ranking officer on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres, which commemorates those with no known grave. There are at least three other memorials which commemorate FitzClarence's life: in St Peter's Church, Eaton Square, London, which was severely damaged by a fire in the 1980s; St George's Memorial, Ypres; and in the Staff College in Camberley, Surrey.

I purchased the gallantry and service medals of this truly inspirational soldier at an auction held by Sotheby's in London in 1990, just four years after I had bought my first VC at a similar event.

**ABOVE:** Brigadier-General Charles FitzClarence VC's medals. (COURTESY OF THE LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)

**BELOW LEFT:** Brigadier-General Charles FitzClarence VC is one of eight VC holders commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial. As the most senior officer named on the memorial, FitzClarence became known to some veterans as "GOC [General Officer Commanding] Menin Gate". (SHUTTERSTOCK)



## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story of Charles FitzClarence's courage appears in his book *Victoria Cross Heroes*. For more information please visit: [www.victoriacrossheroes.com](http://www.victoriacrossheroes.com)



Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum. For more information visit: [www.iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes). For details about his VC collection, visit: [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com). Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

MICHAEL ASHCROFT