

Lieutenant Colonel Richard West VC, DSO & BAR, MC

Richard West's bravery was matched only by his leadership skills: both qualities resulted in him being awarded four gallantry awards during the final year of the First World War. As **Lord Ashcroft** recounts in the latest of his "Hero of the Month" series, West was at his most inspirational when the odds were against him and his men.

BELOW: At the time of the actions for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross, Lieutenant Colonel Richard West was attached to the 6th Battalion Tank Corps. As a "Light" battalion, the 6th was equipped with the Medium Mark A Whippet, an example of which (from the 6th Battalion) is pictured here on the battlefield in the summer of 1918. (COURTESY OF THE TANK MUSEUM)

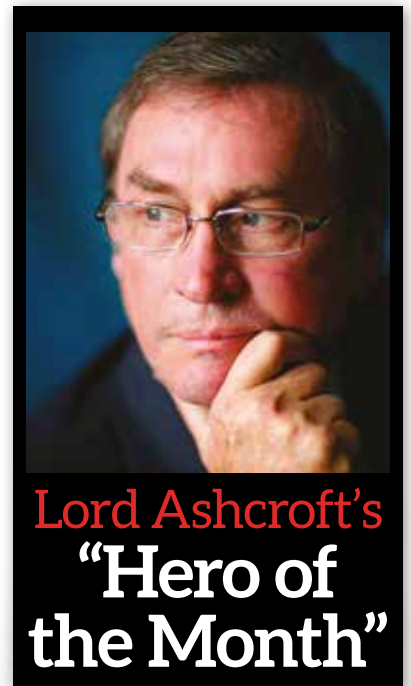
AS THE First World War neared its close in the summer of 1918, there was no doubt that Acting Lieutenant Colonel Richard West had more than done his bit for the British war effort. By then, he was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Order and in August 1918 he twice displayed such bravery that he was later rewarded with two further gallantry medals. On top of these formidable achievements, West had been Mentioned in Despatches no less than three times.

So, on the first day of September 1918, as he approached his fortieth birthday and with the end of the war in sight, West could have been forgiven for displaying a streak of self-preservation and allowing himself to "coast" the final weeks and months of the conflict. However, coasting was simply not part

of West's make-up: he was one of those people who always rose to a challenge even if it meant his life was being risked yet again.

Richard Annesley West was born in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, on 26 September 1878, but his roots were most certainly Irish. His father was Lieutenant Augustus West, from Whitepark, Co. Fermanagh and who had served with the 76th Hindustan Regiment. The Regiment got its name from distinguishing itself in Hindustan and was often known affectionately as the "Seven and Sixpennies" from its number.

The youthful Richard West was educated in Britain: first at Channel View School, Clevedon, then Somerset, and, later, at nearby Monkton Combe School.



After finishing his schooling, West attended Uckfield Agricultural College in Sussex. However, if he had intentions of pursuing a career as a landowner and farmer, they did not last long, for soon he followed his father into the Army.

West served during the Second Boer War of 1899-1902, ending up as a lieutenant in Kitchener's Fighting Scouts. He continued his military career in South Africa long after the war was over and it was while serving in the country that he is believed to have met his wife, Maude Cushing. The couple were married in Pretoria, Transvaal, on 16 July 1909, and they went on to have a daughter.

Immediately after the outbreak of the First World War, West served with the North Irish Horse (Cavalry Special Reserve). He was promoted to lieutenant



ABOVE: The medals and decorations of Lieutenant Colonel Richard West VC, DSO & Bar, MC. (COURTESY OF THE LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)



LEFT: A portrait of Richard Annesley West photographed in uniform.

FAR LEFT: Richard West embarked for France on 21 August 1914, as a Lieutenant in 'C' Squadron North Irish Horse. Here, in an image taken from Richard Doherty's *The North Irish Horse: A Hundred Years of Service*, Lieutenant (later Lieutenant Colonel) Richard West (mounted) is pictured riding alongside Captain Holt Waring. Like West, Waring did not survive the war, dying of wounds in April 1918. (COURTESY OF NORTH IRISH HORSE ARCHIVE)

on 11 August 1914 and left for France that month. The North Irish Horse arrived in France on 20 August and were soon involved in the thick of the action. They quickly pushed forward and reached the French and Belgian frontier in time to relieve the pressure on the retreating forces. They were involved in fierce fighting at Compiègne on 1 September, and fought again a few days later at Le Cateau.

During the Battles of the Marne and the Aisne, both the North and the South Irish Horse were employed in the woods rounding up parties of Uhlans, light cavalry armed with lances, sabres and pistols. If accounts from the front-line were to be believed, the British had the better of these exchanges. Captain

Stewart Richardson, of the North Irish Horse, wrote to a friend living in Belfast: "They run like scalded cats when they see you and are always in close formation as if afraid to separate. I had a grand hunt after twenty (there were five of us), and we got four dead, picking up two more afterwards. We came on them round the corner of a street, and they went like hunted deer."

West, who had embarked for France on 21 August 1914 as a Lieutenant in 'C' Squadron, served with distinction during the early months of the war. He survived the retreat from Mons and was Mentioned in Despatches in Sir John French's very first despatch of the war. West's leadership qualities were rewarded when he was promoted to

captain on 18 November 1915. Shortly before this promotion, he had been briefly attached to the North Somerset Yeomanry with the temporary rank of major.

Despite serving throughout the war and seeing a great deal of action, it was not until the final year of the conflict that he received the first of his four gallantry medals. On New Year's Day 1918, *The London Gazette* announced that he had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order. His citation read: "On 11 April, 1917, at Monchy-le-Preux, his squadron was sent forward to reinforce the right flank of the Brigade under very heavy shell and machine-gun fire. By his excellent example, rapid grasp of the situation >>>



LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH"

Lieutenant Colonel Richard West VC, DSO & BAR, MC

A VICTORIA CROSS WHIPPET



ON DISPLAY at The Tank Museum in Bovington, Dorset, this Medium Mark A Whippet, A259 Caesar II, was the very tank in which Lieutenant Cecil Sewell went into action on 29 August 1918 – the day on which he undertook the actions for which he would be awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

An extract from *The London Gazette*, of 30 October 1918, the same edition that carried the announcement of Lieutenant Colonel West's VC, records the following: "When in command of a section of Whippet Light Tanks in action this officer displayed most conspicuous bravery and initiative in getting out of his own Tank and crossing open ground under heavy shell and machine-gun fire to rescue the crew of another Whippet of his section which had side slipped into a large shell-hole, overturned and taken fire.

"The door of the Tank having become jammed against the side of the shell-hole, Lt. Sewell, by his own unaided efforts, dug away the entrance to the door and released the crew. In so doing he undoubtedly saved the lives of the officer and men inside the Tank as they could not have got out without his assistance. After having extricated the crew, seeing one of his own crew lying wounded behind his Tank, he again dashed across the open ground to his assistance. He was hit in doing so, but succeeded in reaching the Tank when a few minutes later he was again hit, fatally, in the act of dressing his wounded driver.

"During the whole of this period he was within full view and short range of the enemy machine guns and rifle-pits, and throughout, by his prompt and heroic action, showed an utter disregard for his own personal safety." (HMP)

RIGHT:
A Medium Mark A Whippet of the 6th Battalion Tank Corps. (COURTESY OF THE TANK MUSEUM)

BELOW RIGHT:
On the same day that he was killed in action, 2 September 1918, Lieutenant Colonel Richard West was buried at Mory-Abbey Military Cemetery. The cemetery contains 619 Commonwealth burials of the First World War, along with 230 German burials. West's grave can be found at plot III.G.4. (COURTESY OF THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION)

and skilful disposition of his squadron he did much to avert an impending German counter-attack. He had shown great ability in command of a squadron since July, 1915."

West became an acting major in the Tank Corps on 18 January 1918, and an acting lieutenant colonel on 22 August of the same year, in command of the



6th Light Tank Battalion. While with the Tank Corps, he showed bravery for which he was later rewarded with his second decoration, the Military Cross. This was announced in *The London Gazette* on 7 November 1918, when his citation stated: "During the advance on 8 Aug., at Guillencourt, in command of a company of Light Tanks, he displayed magnificent leadership and personal bravery. He was able to point out many targets to his Tanks that they would not otherwise have seen. During the day he had two horses shot under him, while he and his orderly between them killed five of the enemy and took seven prisoners. On the 10th he rendered great services to the Cavalry by personally reconnoitring the ground in front of Le Quesnoy, and later in the day, under very heavy machine-gun fire, rallied and organised the crew of Tanks that had been ditched, withdrawing them after dark."

Less than two weeks after the action at Guillencourt, West earned a Bar for his DSO by displaying further courage. This decoration was announced in *The London Gazette* on 7 November 1918, when his citation read: "For conspicuous gallantry near Courcelles on 21 Aug. 1918. In consequence of this action being fought in a thick mist, this officer decided to accompany the attack to assist in maintaining



direction and cohesion. This he did mounted, until his horse was shot under him, then on foot until the final objective was reached. During the advance, in addition to directing his Tanks, he rallied and led forward small bodies of Infantry lost in the mist, showing throughout a fine example of leadership and a total disregard of personal safety, and materially contributed to the success of the operations. Major West was in command of the battalion most of the time, his Commanding Officer having been killed early in the action. The consistent gallantry displayed by this officer throughout the operations since 8 Aug. has been remarkable.”

However, by the time that both the Bar to his DSO and his MC has been announced, West had received a posthumous Victoria Cross as a result of outstanding gallantry, on 21 August and, again, on 2 September, when he died on the battlefield. His VC was announced in *The London Gazette* on 3 October 1918, only a month and a day after West had been killed. The second part of his citation, relating to the action in which he died, read: “On a subsequent occasion, it was intended that a battalion of Light Tanks, under the command of this officer, should exploit the initial Infantry and Heavy Tank attack. He therefore went forward in order to keep in touch with the progress

of the battle, and arrived at the front line when the enemy were in process of delivering a local counter-attack. The Infantry Battalion had suffered heavy officer casualties, and its flanks were exposed.

“Realising that there was a danger of this battalion giving way, he at once rode out in front of them under extremely heavy machine-gun and rifle fire and rallied the men. In spite of the fact that the enemy were close upon him, he took charge of the situation and detailed non-commissioned officers to replace officer casualties. He then rode up and down in front of them in face of certain death, encouraging the men and calling to them: ‘Stick it, men; show them fight, and for God’s sake put up a good fight.’ He fell riddled by machine-gun bullets. The magnificent bravery of this very gallant officer at the critical moment inspired the infantry to redoubled efforts, and the hostile attack was defeated.”

The *Daily Mirror* welcomed the news of West’s VC with the headline “Splendidly won V.C.,” which was above two photographs, one of West and the other of his widow. West’s widow received his posthumous VC from King George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 15 February 1919. Today West’s standard Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone is inscribed with

Another Whippet pictured on the Western Front. The 6th Battalion formed part of the 3rd Tank Brigade alongside the 3rd Battalion, both of which were intended to be equipped with forty-eight Whippets each. (HMP)



ABOVE: Lieutenant Colonel Richard West VC, DSO & Bar, MC is commemorated on the war memorial in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, as well as in the town’s St Ronan’s Church. When news of the award of his posthumous VC was made public, many in the press referred to its as the “The ‘Stick It’ VC”. (COURTESY OF KEVIN THOMAS)

words from the Book of John: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

I purchased West’s medal group privately in 2002, some sixteen years after I first started to build my medal collection. Such was the quality of his medal group, in general, and West’s VC, in particular, that I paid significantly higher than the “record” auction price at that time. Today West’s medals are on show at the Imperial War Museum in London, as part of the largest display of VCs in the world. 🕒

ABOVE LEFT: A portrait of Lieutenant Colonel Richard West VC, DSO & Bar, MC. (COURTESY OF THE TANK MUSEUM)

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story of West’s life appears in his book *Victoria Cross Heroes*. For more information please visit: www.victoriacrossheroes.com

Lord Ashcroft’s VC and GC collection is on public display at the IWM, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes.

For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com
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