

# BRIGADIER GEORGE ROUPELL, VC, CB

As part of a quite astonishing military career that spanned both World Wars, George Roupell was awarded the VC for his actions at Hill 60 while still a young lieutenant.



▲ Lieutenant George Rowland Patrick Roupell. (© IWM; Q70012)

**G**EORGE ROWLAND Patrick Roupell was born in Tipperary, Ireland, on 7 April 1892.

He was the son of Colonel Francis Roupell, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment. Roupell was educated at Rossall School, Lancashire, and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst.

On 2 March 1912, Roupell was commissioned into his father's regiment as a second lieutenant and he was promoted to lieutenant on 29 April 1914. After the outbreak of the First World War, he was deployed to France on 16 August 1914 as part of the British Expeditionary Force.

Roupell was present at Mons, Le Cateau, the Marne, the Aisne and the first Battle of Ypres, but it was for gallantry at Hill 60, near Ypres, Belgium, that he was awarded the Victoria Cross. Hill 60 was an elevated position held by the Germans but it needed to be captured by the British if they were to advance in the area. On 17 April 1915, the British succeeded in capturing the position but the enemy was equally determined to recapture the observation platform within days.

The Germans started making a concerted effort to seize back the hill on the evening of 19 April. Earlier that day, Roupell, commanding 'A' Company, and his men positioned in one of the most advanced trenches,



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"HERO OF THE MONTH"

close to the German line.

After a period of fighting from 17.00 hours on 19 April, Roupell and half of 'A' Company were tasked, at 22.00 hours, with relieving two 'C' Company platoons that had originally held the old German support trenches on the forward slope of the hill. On 20 April, there was a heavy bombardment by the enemy from 11.00 hours; from 16.00 hours the Germans launched a sustained attack to recapture the hill.

Enemy troops were soon swarming over the area, inflicting casualties and Roupell's half of 'A' Company came under a particularly heavy attack. His men suffered heavy losses from grenade and rifle attacks yet, in some cases, his



men had picked up the grenades and thrown them back at the enemy before they exploded. Despite their heavy losses, Roupell and his men held out against the repeated attacks.

During the bombardment that preceded the final German attack, Roupell had been wounded no fewer than eight times, yet still he and his men held their position. After nightfall, Roupell made his way back to HQ to explain the hopelessness of their position and to request urgent reinforcements. After having his wounds dressed, he returned to his men even though the surgeon urged him to report to a casualty clearing station.

By the time he returned, at about 20.00 hours, 'A' Company's position was looking increasingly precarious. Some Germans had managed to crawl along one of its trenches and a firefight ensued. At 23.00 hours, Roupell again went back, under fire, to seek desperately needed reinforcements and he returned with a party of men from the 1st Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment. They managed to hold the position until finally being relieved by the Devonshire Regiment at 02.00 hours on 21 April, having been involved in ferocious fighting for some 33 hours.

Roupell eventually recovered from his serious injuries. His award of the VC was announced on 23 June 1915 when his citation concluded:

'This young officer was one of the few survivors of his company, and showed a magnificent example of courage, devotion and tenacity, which undoubtedly inspired his men to hold out til the end.'

He received his VC from King George V at Buckingham Palace on the day that his VC was 'gazetted'. Roupell was also awarded the Russian Order of St George 4th Class for his VC action. In September 1916, he was promoted to captain.

Roupell served with distinction throughout the war, being wounded twice more, being Mentioned in Despatches three times and receiving the French *Croix de Guerre*.

At the end of the war, Roupell served as an acting lieutenant-colonel in north Russia against the Bolsheviks and in 1919 he was captured, mistreated and eventually released. He married in 1921 and the couple went on to have two daughters.

Between 1935 and 1939, Roupell commanded the 1st Battalion East Surrey Regiment in the rank of lieutenant colonel. After the outbreak of war, he again saw action when, as a brigadier, he served with the British Expeditionary Force in France, commanding the 36th Brigade.

On 19/20 May 1940, his brigade came under a sustained German attack and, by the early hours of the next day,

## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

► Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *Victoria Cross Heroes* is largely based on his VC collection. For more information, please visit: [www.victoriacrossheroes.com](http://www.victoriacrossheroes.com) Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at Imperial War Museums, London. 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



◀ Lieutenant George Roupell's wounds are hurriedly treated during the fighting at Hill 60. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

► Company Sergeant Major Reid was stationed on the right flank of Lt. Roupell's company during the fighting on Hill 60. When the defence became critical, Reid 'went out of his trench across the open and brought up ammunition and reinforcements on three occasions. The ground traversed by CSM Reid was constantly swept by very severe machine gun and shell fire.' For his actions, Reid was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, one of the 960 gazetted in June 1915. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

the situation was so desperate that Roupell ordered his men to split into small parties to try to escape. Three senior officers were captured; Roupell was hidden on a farm, at great risk to the courageous French farmer, for an astonishing two years. Eventually, with the help of the Resistance, he escaped through Spain and returned to the UK. Roupell commanded Chatham Garrison from 1943 to 1945.

Roupell retired with the honorary rank of brigadier in February 1946 but commanded the Surrey Home Guard from 1952-6, and was appointed



Deputy Lieutenant of Surrey in 1953. In 1956, he was appointed a Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB). His first wife, Doris, died in 1958 and he later remarried.

Roupell became president of the Old Contemptibles Association in 1973 but died the following year at his home in Shalford, Surrey, a month short of his 82nd birthday. His VC is not part of my medal collection. ☺

## ENDURANCE

AGGRESSION • BOLDNESS • INITIATIVE  
LEADERSHIP • SACRIFICE • SKILL

THE MANY Victoria Crosses and George Crosses in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London are displayed under one of seven different qualities of bravery. Whilst Brigadier George Roupell's award is not part of the collection, Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of endurance:

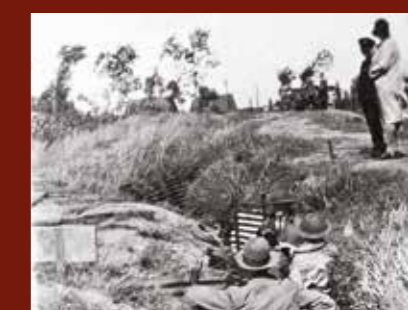
'Endurance is the opposite of Aggression. It is all about 'cold courage', about knowing the cost and being prepared to pay it. It involves mental and physical resilience, not giving in and rising above the pain. It is almost infinite.'



◀ After the war Hill 60 was left as it was, a memorial to all those soldiers whose bodies were never recovered from the battlefield. Although softened by the hand of nature and passage of time, many of the shell-holes, craters and trenches can still be discerned.



◀ Another member of the 1st Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions in the same fighting at Hill 60 was Private Edward Dwyer (see last month's issue). When Dwyer's trench was heavily attacked by the enemy, he climbed on to the parapet, and, although subjected to a hail of bombs at close quarters, succeeded in dispersing the enemy by the effective use of his own hand grenades. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)



◀ Trenches at Hill 60 being inspected by early battlefield visitors after the First World War. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)