



LORD ASHCROFT'S
"HERO OF
THE MONTH"

Second Lieutenant SIDNEY CLAYTON WOODROFFE VC

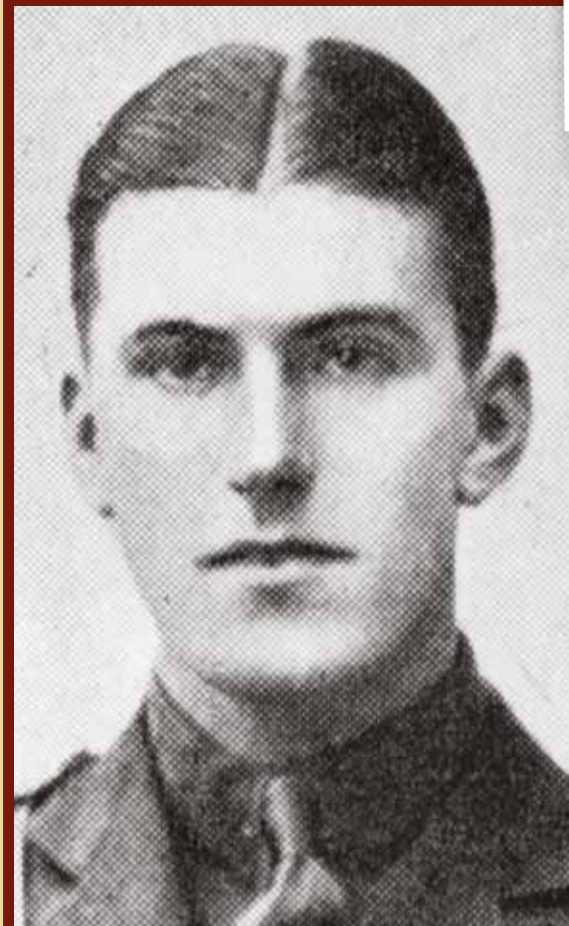
'Simply one of the bravest of the brave.'

LEADERSHIP

AGGRESSION • BOLDNESS
INITIATIVE • SACRIFICE
SKILL • ENDURANCE

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. Second Lieutenant Woodroffe's award is part of the collection and Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of leadership:

"Charismatic, strong, inspirational, the natural leader not only takes command, but also infuses all those around them with confidence and hope. They exude calm and resolve. They are a tower of strength."



▲ A portrait of Second Lieutenant Sidney Woodroffe.
(THE LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)



▲ Second Lieutenant Sidney Woodroffe and his men defending their position at Hooge on the morning of 30 July 1915, the day a new and terrible weapon was unleashed upon the unsuspecting British troops in the Ypres Salient - the flamethrower. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

SIDNEY CLAYTON Woodroffe was born in Lewes, Sussex, on 17 December 1895, and was the youngest of four sons of Henry Woodroffe and his wife, Clara. Woodroffe was educated at Marlborough College in Wiltshire, where he was a senior prefect and represented the school at rugby, cricket and hockey. He attended Pembroke College, Cambridge, after gaining a classical scholarship. However, his studies were interrupted by the start of the First World War.

On 23 December 1914, just six days after his nineteenth birthday, Woodroffe was gazetted as a second lieutenant in the 8th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade. On 25 May of the following year, he and his battalion were deployed to France, before later moving on to Belgium.

At midnight on 30 July 1915, the 8th Battalion started taking over a section of trenches at Hooge, east of Ypres, Belgium. By 02.00 hours, the relief of its sister battalion, the 7th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, was completed. However, a small group from the

7th Battalion was instructed to remain in the line on the orders of the General Officer Commanding (GOC), possibly because the 8th Battalion was so inexperienced. Woodroffe's men from 'A' Company were separated from the rest of the line by a large bomb crater measuring some 90 feet across and 40 feet deep. At 03.15 hours, the Germans mounted an attack from their position close to the British line, which initially took the form of a heavy bombardment lasting two or three minutes. Casualties in the tightly-packed British trenches were high but worse was to come: a "liquid fire" was sprayed from hoses in the German line causing serious burns to those men that were hit by it.

In fact, this was the first use of flame-throwers by the Germans during the Great War and one eyewitness described how "the Boches loosened their liquid fire on us with a vengeance... We were choked by the smoke and half scorched by the heat".



The flame-throwers' fire had been concentrated on the line either side of the large crater and then, under the cover of the thick smoke and flames, German soldiers surged forward through the crater before fanning out to the left and right behind the British line. Confusion reigned and four British machine-guns were soon out of action. At just before 03.30 hours, Woodroffe and his men came under a sustained attack from enemy soldiers who were advancing down the British trench leading off from the crater, while other Germans were approaching from behind the original line.

A British counter-attack aimed at relieving the endangered position failed. However, Woodroffe and his men fought on courageously until almost all their bombs ran out and they were virtually surrounded by the advancing enemy. At that point, Woodroffe skilfully withdrew his men, first along the Menin Road and then using a culvert to return to the main British line.

By around 09.00 hours British reinforcements had finally arrived on the scene and at 12 noon orders arrived from the GOC to launch a counter-attack at 02.45 hours. This was to be led - following a 45-minute artillery bombardment - by the 8th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, even though many of its men had been killed or wounded in the earlier fighting.

The artillery bombardment had, however, achieved very little and so, as the counter-attack got under way, a fierce enemy machine-gun and rifle fire greeted the advancing British soldiers. Woodroffe was shot dead near "Old Bond Street" trench, Zouave Wood, as he attempted to cut the barbed wire so that the counter-attack could proceed: he died in No Man's Land aged just nineteen years and seven months.

Woodroffe's father received a letter from Lieutenant Colonel

R.C. Maclachlan that detailed precisely how courageous his son had been: "Your younger boy was simply one of the bravest of the brave, and the work he did that day will stand out as a record hard to beat... When the line was attacked and broken on his right he still held his trench, and only when the Germans were discovered to be in the rear of him did he leave it. He then withdrew his remaining men very skilfully right away to a flank, and worked his way alone back to me to report. He finally brought his command back, and then took part in the counter-attack.

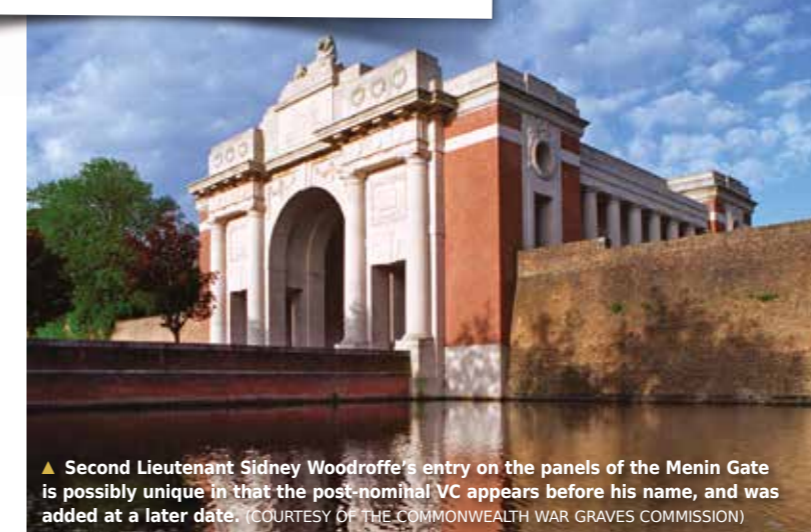
"He was killed out in front, in the open, cutting the wire to enable the attack to be continued. This is the bald statement of his part of that day's action. He risked his life for others right through the day and finally gave it for the sake of his men. He was a splendid type of young officer, always bold as a lion, confident and sure of himself too. The loss he is to me personally is very great, as I have learnt to appreciate what a sterling fine lad he was. His men would have followed him anywhere."

Sidney Woodroffe's posthumous VC was announced on 6 September 1915 when his citation praised the actions of "this very gallant Officer". His parents were presented with his award from King George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 29 November 1916. Sadly, Mr and Mrs Woodroffe lost three of their four sons to the war.

Sidney Woodroffe's body was never recovered and his name is listed on the Menin Gate at Ypres, as well as on the Rifle Brigade Memorial in Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire. I purchased his medal group privately in 2001 and I feel hugely privileged to have the VC of this courageous young officer as part of my collection. ☺

▲ Second Lieutenant Sidney Woodroffe's medals, which are part of the Lord Ashcroft Collection.

▲ A picture of Hooge Crater Cemetery in the aftermath of the Armistice. It was on the site of this cemetery that Second Lieutenant Sidney Woodroffe of the 8th Rifle Brigade held the German advance after the attack that morning. Later that day he led the remnants of the 8th Rifle Brigade in a counter-attack, ascending the slope from Sanctuary Wood. A communication trench that played a vital part in the fighting and referred to by the name Old Bond Street Trench is described as having passed through the site of the cemetery or immediately beside its eastern boundary on its way to Zouave Wood. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)



▲ Second Lieutenant Sidney Woodroffe's entry on the panels of the Menin Gate is possibly unique in that the post-nominal VC appears before his name, and was added at a later date. (COURTESY OF THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION)

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

► Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. A write-up on Sidney Woodroffe 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 Imperial War Museums, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

