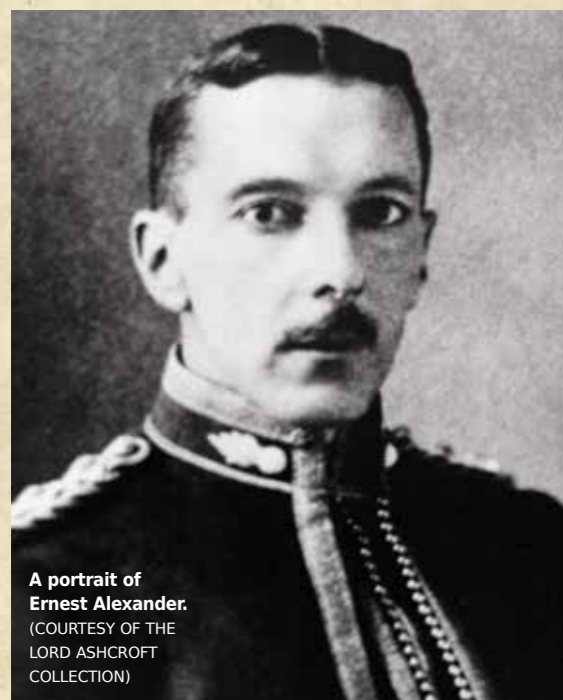


LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH" LIEUTENANT COLONEL ERNEST WRIGHT ALEXANDER VC

Serving in the Royal Field Artillery, Major (later Major General) Ernest Alexander was 43 years old when he became involved in the bitter fighting at Élouges during the retreat from Mons. For his actions he was later awarded the Victoria Cross.

LT COL ERNEST WRIGHT ALEXANDER VC



A portrait of Ernest Alexander. (COURTESY OF THE LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)

ERNEST WRIGHT Alexander was born in Everton, Liverpool, on 2 October 1870. He was the son of Robert Alexander, a wealthy ship owner originally from Belfast, who was both a director of the Suez Canal and a merchant with Sun Shipping Co. Ernest was educated at Cherbourg House in Malvern, at Harrow School and the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. He received his first commission as a second lieutenant in the Royal Artillery (RA) in July 1889 and twice served long stints in India: from 1892 to 1900, and from 1903 to 1906, when he was promoted to major. He married in 1903 and he and his wife, Rose, went on to have two sons and two daughters (although one son died in infancy).

After Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, it took some time to make vital military preparations, so the first contact British troops had with their German opponents was not until the 22nd of that month.

Alexander, who at the time was a major, was awarded his Victoria Cross for courage just two days later – which made it the joint sixth award action of the war, five having been won the previous day.

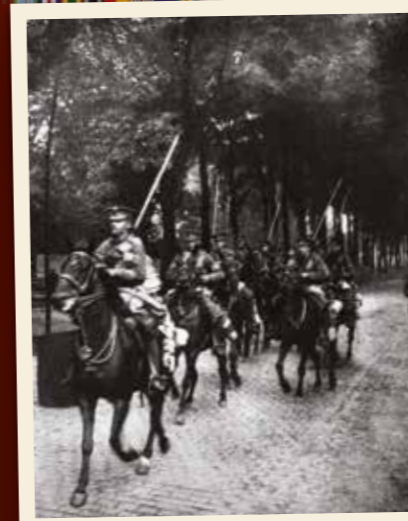
His acts of bravery and great skill took place during the retreat from Mons, at Élouges, Belgium. As substantial enemy forces advanced, Alexander kept his guns firing until the last moment. At one point, it looked as though the Germans would overrun the area and seize four guns from 119th Battery, Royal Field Artillery. Under a heavy fire, Alexander gave the order for the guns to be moved back by hand to the shelter of an embankment. However, the rain-soaked ground was so heavy that only one gun could be manoeuvred at a time and, short of men, this proved a dangerous and difficult task. Eventually, they were aided by the arrival of reinforcements: Captain Francis Grenfell and the remnants of the 9th Lancers and 4th Dragoon Guards arrived on horseback to assist.



According to his citation in *The London Gazette*, which was published on 18 February 1915, Alexander showed gallantry on at least two occasions during fierce fighting while commanding the 119th Battery: "For conspicuous bravery and great ability at Elouges on 24th August, 1914, when the flank guard was attacked by a German corps in handling his battery against overwhelming odds with such conspicuous success that all his guns were saved, notwithstanding that they had to be withdrawn by hand by himself and three other men. This enabled the retirement of the 5th Division to be carried out without serious loss. Subsequently Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander (then Major) rescued a wounded man under a heavy fire with the greatest gallantry and devotion to duty."

Captain Grenfell, of the 9th Lancers and who was seriously wounded in battle, also received the VC for his part in rescuing the guns, while two sergeants were awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM).

The courage of the British forces on that day (24 August 1914) had come at a heavy price. The 119th Battery lost 42 men and 43 horses, although this paled alongside the much heavier losses of the Cheshire and Norfolk Regiments, which between them had some 800 casualties (dead,



wounded or missing).

Alexander received his VC from King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 12 July 1915. His courage and leadership resulted in a series of rapid promotions, culminating in command of the Royal Artillery of XI Corps from May 1917 until April 1918, and subsequent appointment as major general of the RA at the headquarters of the First Army. Later, he commanded the RA, Southern Area, Aldershot Command. During the course of the war, he was Mentioned in Despatches a remarkable nine times, and was created a Companion of St Michael and St George in June 1915. Furthermore, he received the Military Order of Savoy (Cavalier) in September 1918, became a Companion of the Bath in January 1919, received the *Croix de Guerre* from Belgium in August 1919, and was created Grand Officer of the Portuguese Military Order of Avis on 21 August 1919.

Alexander retired in the rank of major general on 1 October 1920, the day before his 50th birthday. He moved to South Milton, near Kingsbridge, Devon, where he played an active role in the local community. He employed three servicemen who had fought with him at Élouges in 1914 on his country estate.



While living in Devon, Alexander became a Justice of the Peace, a member of Kingsbridge Guardians Committee, a member of his Rural District Council and president of his local branch of the Royal British Legion.

Alexander died at South Milton on 25 August 1934, aged 63. He was cremated at Putney Vale Cemetery in south-west London, where his ashes were interred in a family grave. Memorials to him include the naming of "Alexander Way" at Putney Vale Crematorium, his portrait at South Milton Parish Hall and recognition on a Royal Artillery memorial at Woolwich.

I have always hugely admired the courage, skill and leadership that Alexander displayed so early in the Great War and so I was delighted when I was able to purchase his medal group at a Dix Noonan Webb auction in London in 1999. His medals are now on public display in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at Imperial War Museums, London. ☺

BOTTOM MIDDLE: Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Wright Alexander VC, CB, CMG's medal group. (LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)

TOP RIGHT: An artist's depiction of one of the 119th Battery's guns being hauled to safety during the fighting at Élouges. (HMP)

TOP MIDDLE: Captain Francis Grenfell's unit arrive at Mons on 21 August 1914, three days before they went into action at Élouges. (HMP)

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. The story of Ernest Alexander'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 Imperial War Museums, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

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