



LORD ASHCROFT'S
"HERO OF
THE MONTH"

Acting Captain George Henry Tatham Paton

VC, MC

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. Whilst Acting Captain George Henry Tatham Paton VC, MC's award is not part of the collection, 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."



appointed as acting captain, in charge of 4 Company.

For his bravery on the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres in Belgium during August 1917, Paton was awarded the Military Cross for leading his men during an advance through a fearsome artillery barrage.

However, it was for his sustained courage during the Battle of Cambrai in northern France that he was awarded Britain and the Commonwealth's most

prestigious gallantry medal: the Victoria Cross. The Battle of Cambrai had begun on 20 November 1917, and involved a substantial British attack followed, in turn, by the biggest German counter-attack on the British Expeditionary Force since the Great War had started more than three years earlier.

Indeed, during this battle there was a constant toing and froing as both sides tried to assert their authority on the enemy. On 27 November, the 2nd Grenadier Guards had taken part in an ill-conceived offensive in an attempt to capture Bourlon Ridge, west of Cambrai. On 30 November, the Germans had advanced and on 1 December the British launched their own counter-attack in which the 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards attempted to capture the village of Gonnelleu, just south of the Péronne-Cambrai road: this had fallen to the Germans the previous day.

Acting Captain Paton commanded the support company during this action and, although the attack failed, it prevented the Germans from advancing out of Gonnelleu. It was during this fierce fighting that Paton once again displayed outstanding bravery. The citation for his VC takes up the story: "When a unit on his left was driven



back, thus leaving his flank in the air and his company practically surrounded, he fearlessly exposed himself to re-adjust the line, walking up and down within fifty yards of the enemy under a withering fire. He personally removed several wounded men, and was the last to leave the village. Later, he again re-adjusted the line, exposing himself regardless of all danger the whole time, and when the enemy four times counter-attacked he sprang each time upon the parapet, deliberately risking his life, and being eventually mortally wounded, in order to stimulate his command.

"After the enemy had broken through on his left, he again mounted the parapet, and with a few men – who were inspired by his great example – forced them once more to withdraw, thereby undoubtedly saving the left flank."

Paton had been killed aged just 22. His fellow officers and his men were deeply distressed at the loss of such a courageous man and a wonderful leader. Sir Henry Streatfield, the Commanding Officer of the Grenadier Guards, wrote to Paton's parents expressing his deepest sympathy at their loss:

"Amongst all who have lain down their lives upon the field of Honour, there is no one that I regret the loss of more than your son. He was a born soldier and leader of men, beloved by his brother officers and esteemed and respected by his men, and his loss to the regiment is a great one. We, his old comrades, will long remember him with affection."

Viscount Gort was another senior figure to write to Paton's parents: "His loss was a great personal grief to me, as he was extremely popular with everybody, both officers and men; always cheerful in difficulties, and above all, an officer who had a wonderful aptitude for soldiering which I am confident would have carried him a long way had he been spared to develop it."



Paton's VC was announced in *The London Gazette* on 13 February 1918: he thereby became the first Grenadier Guards officer to receive the award since the Crimean War. Paton's parents received their son's posthumous VC from King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 2 March 1918.

Paton was buried at the British extension to Metz-en-Couture Cemetery in northern France, where his headstone bears this inscription: "Bright is their glory now boundless their joy above."

There are also several memorials that bear his name, including the War Memorial on the promenade at Dunoon, Argyllshire, close to his birthplace, and the War Memorial in the Territorial Army Centre in Mile End Road, Tower Hamlets, east London. At Putney Vale Cemetery in south-west London, his name is on a family headstone.

I do not own Paton's medal group amongst my 200-plus collection of VCs and instead its home is in the Guards Museum, Wellington Barracks, central London. However, I am full of admiration for the gallantry of a wonderful soldier thoroughly deserving to be described as one of "the bravest of the brave". ☺

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES II

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II* was published in hardback in 2016 and in paperback on 9 November. For more information, please visit: www.victoriacrossheroes2.com Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at Imperial War Museum, 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



ABOVE
A tank of 'G' Battalion, Tank Corps, part of the 40th Division, passing a captured German field gun at Graincourt, on its way to take part in the attack on Bourlon Wood, 23 November 1917.

LEFT
Men of the 47th Divisional Artillery water their horses near Flesquières, close to where Paton and the 2nd Grenadier Guards fought three days later, on 24 November 1917.

Note: Unusually, it has not proved possible to locate any photographic images of George Paton VC, MC, but only a drawn portrait. Nevertheless, his story is more than worthy of the telling.



ABOVE British troops, possibly from a Trench Mortar Battery (hence the 'TMB' on the sign), with a donkey and cart which they found in the newly captured village of Ribecourt, 29 November 1917. Note the souvenir Pickelhaube on the donkey's head. (NARA)

TOP RIGHT
A Mark IV tank, named Hyacinth, pictured having ditched in a German trench while supporting British troops near Ribecourt during the opening day of the Battle of Cambrai, 20 November 1917.

RIGHT
Acting Captain George Henry Tatham Paton, VC, MC.