



LORD ASHCROFT'S  
"HERO OF  
THE MONTH"

# Captain William Boynton Butler

VC

## SACRIFICE

AGGRESSION • BOLDNESS  
INITIATIVE • LEADERSHIP  
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. Captain William Butler's award is part of the collection and Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of sacrifice:

"In what is apparently the simplest quality of bravery, Sacrifice epitomises selfless responsibility. Noble, strong, dependable, life is offered up to protect, save or comfort others. It is not always lost, but it is always freely given."



ABOVE A group of Victoria Cross winners photographed on 5 December 1917. They are, from left to right: Private Michael James O'Rourke of the 7<sup>th</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> British Columbia) Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force; Sergeant James Ockendon of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal Dublin Fusiliers, awarded the Victoria Cross in Belgium on 4 October 1917; Private William Boynton Butler of the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment; and Corporal Ernest Alfred Egerton of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Sherwood Foresters, awarded the Victoria Cross in Belgium on 20 September 1917. (LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)

William Boynton Butler was born in Armley, Leeds, Yorkshire, on 20 November 1894. He was the illegitimate son of William Boynton, a colliery worker, and his partner Caroline Butler, a wool weaver. In fact, his parents married shortly after his birth in December that year, by which point he had already been given his mother's surname as his own surname and his father's surname as his second Christian name.

William Butler's childhood was spent at his family's modest home in Hunslet, Carr, Leeds, where he lived with his parents and his brother and three sisters. He was educated locally at St Oswald's school in Hunslet, which he left around 1907.

BELOW  
Captain William  
Boynton Butler  
VC's medal group.  
(LORD ASHCROFT  
COLLECTION)



Butler, who was quiet and unassuming, spent some seven years working down the pit as a pony driver, in the same coal mine as his father, before enlisting. He eventually joined one of the newly-created "Bantam Battalions" (for men of less than 5 foot 3 inches in height), the 17<sup>th</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup> Leeds Pals), West Yorkshire Regiment, in Leeds on 9 January 1915. He had previously been turned down for the military on the grounds that he was too short at 5 feet 2½ inches tall. Once in the Army, however, Butler was attached to a Trench Mortar Battery and was trained at Ilkley, Yorkshire.

By June 1916, he was serving on the Western Front attached to the 106<sup>th</sup> Trench Mortar Battery (also known as a Stokes Mortar battery after the name of the weapon's inventor). On 6 August 1917, Butler was in charge of a mortar on the British line east of L'Empire, France. His precise position was between Cambrai and St Quentin, some sixty miles to the south of the

Third Battle of Ypres, which had commenced in Flanders on 31 July – exactly a week earlier.

In fact, on 5 August the 17<sup>th</sup> West Yorkshires had been relieved from their front line position by the 19<sup>th</sup> Durham Light Infantry, returning to billets at L'Empire. However, the next day was misty and the enemy, apparently taking advantage of the favourable weather conditions, successfully raided Guillemont Farm at around 03.30 hours with a force of some 150 troops. Within forty-five minutes, the West Yorkshires had 'stood to' and during the night and the following day they supplied working parties.

It was during heavy fighting on 6 August that Butler showed such quick thinking and bravery that he was later awarded the VC. His citation, published on 17 October 1917, takes up the story:

"For most conspicuous bravery when in charge of a Stokes gun in trenches which were being heavily >>



**ABOVE** Men of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry fuse Stokes trench mortar shells near Wieltjie, 1 October 1917. (NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND)

shelled. Suddenly one of the fly-off levers of a Stokes shell came off and fired the shell in the emplacement. Private Butler picked up the shell and jumped to the entrance of the emplacement, which at that moment a party of infantry were passing. He shouted to them to hurry past as the shell was going off, and turning round, placed himself between the party of men and the live shell and so held it till they were out of danger.

"He then threw the shell on to the parados [a protective, elevated area of earth and sandbags at the rear-most side of a trench], and took cover in the bottom of the trench. The shell exploded almost on leaving his hand, greatly damaging the trench. By extreme good luck Private Butler was slightly injured [severely bruised] only. Undoubtedly his great presence of mind and disregard of his own life saved the lives of the officer and men in the emplacement and the party which was passing at the time.

By 22.30 hours the following day, the 17<sup>th</sup> West Yorkshires were relieved once again, this time by the 18<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry. Weeks later, Butler described to the press how the shell had been fired into the emplacement.

"I picked it up and showed it to my mate. 'It's going off,' I said. 'I know it is,' he replied, and stopped still and never shifted. I hardly knew what I did, but I jumped to the entrance of the emplacement with the shell, which was an eleven-pounder, and there I saw a party of infantry passing.

"I shouted to them to get out of the way, and they did so quickly. Those

on the right rushed away, and a man turned about a dozen men back with him. I then threw the shell on to the parados. Not being too far over, it fell back to the bottom of the trench and burst. It damaged the trench, but didn't injure any of the men.

It appears Butler was more seriously wounded at some point after his VC action, but, following medical treatment, he was back with his battalion on 18 November 1917.

Butler received his VC from George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 5 December 1917, when his parents were present. The next day he was the guest of honour at a civic reception in Leeds.

On the same day, he visited his old school, St Oswald's, where he was presented with a china clock from the citizens of Leeds. He also received a gold medal from a Leeds man and £300 from other well-wishers. After the war, he was also awarded the French *Croix de Guerre*.

On 7 February 1920, Butler married Clara Johnson at Hunslet Registry Office and the couple went on to have a daughter. It is understood that Butler was given a medical discharge from the Army in 1921. After that, he worked for the North East Gas Board.

For the rest of his life, Butler was an enthusiastic supporter of his regimental association and also the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association. In 1940, after the outbreak of the Second World War, he served in the Home Guard.

After the war, Butler attended the Victory Parade of June 1946. During

## 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 November. For more information, please visit: [www.victoriacrossheroes2.com](http://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](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



the final years of his life, he suffered from poor health and he died in his home in Leeds on 25 March 1972, aged 77.

Butler was given a full military funeral four days later and was buried in Hunslet Cemetery, Leeds, originally in an unmarked grave – but this was rectified in 1994. I feel privileged to be the custodian of his medal group having purchased it privately in 2011. ☉

**ABOVE**  
 A Stokes Mortar crew in action at the front. The men are from the New Zealand Rifle Brigade and are near Le Quesnoy. (NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NEW ZEALAND)



**ABOVE** The memorial to the Leeds VC holders that can be seen in The Headrow, a street in the city centre. Butler is commemorated in the left-hand column. (STEVE TERRINGTON/SHUTTERSTOCK)