

Brevet Major
John Knox VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

The medal group awarded to Brevet Major John Knox is quite exceptional because when it was offered for sale, it was accompanied by the cannonball that shattered his arm during his VC action. As a medal collector of more than three decades standing, I am used to gallantry decorations being accompanied by interesting and unusual memorabilia but this surely has to be a unique keepsake.

John Simpson Knox was born in Calton, Glasgow, on September 30, 1828. He was the son of John Knox, of Inverkeithing, and his wife Rebekah (née Living). John Knox Senior served with both the 90th Regiment and the 28th Regiment Militia, before working as a grocer and labourer. Little is known of John Knox Junior's early life, including his education. However, he enlisted into the Scots Fusilier Guards in Glasgow on May 15, 1843, aged 14, having run away from home. It appears that Knox, who was unusually tall for his years, may have bought himself out of the army but then re-enlisted a short time later (although it is also possible his real age was discovered by the authorities and he had to leave the service for a short time).

In July 1845, Knox was promoted to acting corporal, although he was still only 16. Over the next nine years, he received

a series of promotions so that four days after arriving in the Crimea, on September 18, 1854, he was elevated to the rank of colour sergeant.

During the next 24 months or so, he played a prominent role in the Crimea, during a two-year conflict between Imperial Russia, on the one side, and the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France and Sardinia, on the other side. The majority of the fighting took place on the Crimean Peninsula in the Black Sea and it was this war, because of its hardships and sacrifices, that eventually led to the creation of the VC.

“This involved using fixed bayonets to disperse Russian troops who had earlier fired on a village”

On September 19, 1854 the very day after Knox's promotion to colour sergeant, he fought in the Scots Fusilier Guards' first action of the war en route to Sebastopol: this involved using fixed bayonets to disperse Russian troops who had earlier fired on a village.

BELOW: THE BATTLE OF THE ALMA, SEPTEMBER 20, 1854, BY EDMUND WALKER. (NAM/MARY EVANS)

Calm Inside the Storm

On September 20, 1854, during the Battle of the Alma, Knox fought courageously, playing a key role at a time of great chaos and misunderstanding during the fighting. The Scots Fusilier Guards were part of the 1st Division that was at the extreme left of the allied line and furthest inland. It was initially in reserve to the Light Division as the two divisions halted a short distance before the Alma River.

At this point, the Russians had taken up defensive positions on the other side of the waterway. This meant that, in order to attack, British troops faced fording the river itself and then climbing the bank on its far side – all this before they confronted a Russian earthworks bristling with guns. The British force was ordered forward at 2.45pm, the French having managed to cross further down river. The Light Division traversed first, but came under fire from the Russian artillery and began to withdraw.

The Guards' Brigade was ordered forward and crossed the watercourse, with the battalions beginning to re-establish their ranks on the other side, having scrambled up the far banks. ▶





As the confusion mounted, the brigadier ordered them forward without delay, and the Scots, in the middle of the Guards' line, obeyed. However, as they started their advance, the retreating troops of the Light Division broke their line, and some of the Scots Guards joined the retreat.

Further chaos followed an attempt by the Russians to seize the regiment's colours. It was left to the officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), notably Knox, to regain control of the situation, which they were eventually able to do.

In a letter home, Knox described the horrors of battle: "The scene that met my gaze was the most awful description: it made me shudder. The bodies of our opponents were so thick on the ground that for some distance I had to go on tiptoe to pass without touching ... the enemy endeavoured to drive us back; however, we stuck to them until we were masters."

Further Combat

Knox also took part in major battles at Balaklava, Inkerman and Sebastopol, where he was Mentioned in Despatches. His talents as a fine soldier and a leader of men were further rewarded by his appointment to ensign in the 2nd Battalion, the Rifle Brigade, in March 1855. This had come about because the performance of the Scots Fusilier Guards

ABOVE: THE GRAPESHOT OR CANNONBALL THAT SHATTERED KNOX'S ARM SO BADLY THAT IT SUBSEQUENTLY HAD TO BE AMPUTATED. (SPINK)

RIGHT: BREVET MAJOR JOHN KNOX'S MEDAL GROUP (LORD ASHCROFT)

OPPOSITE: BRITISH FLAGS FLY OVER THE REDAN AFTER THE BATTLE. (MARY EVANS)

"It was left to the officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), notably Knox, to regain control of the situation"

at Inkerman had so impressed the Prince Consort that he offered several of them commissions in his own regiment. The men were individually selected by General Lord Rokeby.

On June 18, 1855, during an action at the Redan fort, Sebastopol, Knox, who was by

then a lieutenant and aged 26, once again excelled himself in battle. He volunteered for the ladder party (men carrying ladders with which to scale the enemy barricades) in the attack, knowing the dangers that he would face at the forefront of the fighting.

He fought valiantly, even though he was wounded twice. In fact, as already stated, his worst injury was his left arm being shattered by a cannonball (purists would describe it as 'grapeshot'). Towards the end of the day's fighting, he collapsed from the loss of so much blood. After declining brandy, he was stretched to the medical tent and his badly damaged arm was subsequently amputated.

It was for his bravery at the Alma and the Redan that he was awarded the VC soon after it was instituted by Queen Victoria. His action at the Alma was the earliest for which VCs were awarded to members of the British Army – personnel from the Royal Navy had earned the decoration in previous combats. His award was announced on February 24, 1857, when his citation read: "When serving as a sergeant in the Scots Fusilier Guards, Lieutenant Knox was conspicuous for his exertions in reforming the ranks of the Guards at the Battle of the Alma. Subsequently, when in the Rifle Brigade, he volunteered for the ladder-party in the attack on the Redan, on the 18th of June, and (in the words of Captain [Edward] Blackett, under whose command he was) behaved admirably, remaining on the field until twice wounded."

Knox, in fact, had the unique distinction of earning his Victoria Cross for one action while serving as a sergeant in





the Scots Fusilier Guards and for another action while serving as a lieutenant in the Rifle Brigade.

Royal Occasion

He was among the recipients at the first presentation of the VC by Queen Victoria in Hyde Park. This was quite an occasion because the monarch had made it clear that she wished to bestow as many awards as possible herself. So on June 26, 1857, the Queen invested 62 of the 111 earliest VC recipients in front of 4,000 troops and 12,000 spectators.

Dressed in a scarlet jacket, black skirt and plumed hat, Her Majesty remained on horseback throughout the ceremony. On one occasion, leaning forward from the saddle like a Cossack with a lance, she accidentally stabbed one VC recipient in the chest with an investiture pin, leaving him in great pain. One by one, however, she pinned a cross to each man's jacket, saluting each recipient. The ceremony and the new award were greeted with great enthusiasm by the public.

Despite the loss of his arm, Knox continued to serve and in January 1856, before his decoration was announced, he was appointed as acting paymaster at the Regimental Depot, Winchester, Hampshire. In April of the same year, he was assigned the role of adjutant of the Rifle Brigade at Aldershot, Hampshire.

Knox was made up to Instructor of Musketry in January 1858 and was promoted to captain in April of that year. Other positions followed and he briefly

returned to regimental duties in January 1872. On his retirement from the army in June 1872, he was given the honorary rank of brevet major.

Knox left the service to take up the position of governor of Cardiff Prison. In September 1886, he was given the same role at Kirkdale Prison, Liverpool. In October 1891, he was appointed governor of Hull Prison, but poor health prevented him from taking up this role. In fact, he retired from the penal service in January 1892, aged 63.

He had married Harriet Gale in Winchester, Hampshire, in July 1862, and the couple went on to have a son and six daughters. In his retirement, Knox lived in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. He died at his home in the spa town on January 8, 1897, aged 68, and was buried four days later at Cheltenham Cemetery. His name is on the Rifle Brigade Memorial at Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire.

Medals

The sale of Knox's medal group at a Spink auction in April 2010 created a great deal of media interest because it was one of the first VCs to a serving soldier and because, as stated, the sale included the Russian cannonball that had shattered his arm.

Oliver Pepys, then of Spink auctioneers, said at the time: "Major Knox showed incredible bravery, losing his arm to cannon fire in the process. The medal is being sold with a Russian cannonball, the very one that smashed into Knox's arm. In all my years of working with rare medals

and war artefacts, I have never seen a more unusual keepsake."

However, I did not purchase the medal group at the 2010 auction. Instead, I bought it privately four years after the sale and I feel privileged to be the custodian of this brave soldier's gallantry and service medals – and, of course, to possess the cannonball that shattered his arm more than 160 years ago. ●

Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes II*, was first published in 2016 and is available in hardback and

paperback. For more information, visit:

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Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC

collection is on public

display at the Imperial War

Museum London. For more

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Details of his VC collection

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