

Captain James
Edgar Leach VC



HERO
of the
MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Captain James Leach was awarded the Victoria Cross (VC) for an act of outstanding bravery during the early months of the Great War, when he led his men by example. I feel privileged to be the custodian of his medal group having purchased it privately in 2008.

James Edgar Leach was born at Bowerham Barracks in Lancaster, Lancashire, on July 27, 1894. He was the son of Colour-Sergeant James Leach, who served in the King's Own (Royal Lancaster) Regiment, and his wife Amelia (née Summerfield), a bookbinder.

James Leach Jnr, who had four brothers and a sister, was educated at Bowerham Council School in Lancaster and Moston Lane Municipal School, Manchester. His family had moved to Blackley, Manchester, in 1901 before relocating again, this time to Leicester, in 1907. Leach Jnr worked as an apprentice chemist before enlisting into the 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion, the Northamptonshire Regiment, in August 1910.

At the time he joined up, Leach stated that he was a fishmonger, added two years to his actual age and said his parents were dead (he gave no next of kin). In January 1911, he joined the 2nd Battalion, the Northamptonshire Regiment, and on March 11 of that year, he transferred to 1st Battalion.

Off to War

In November 1911, he was promoted to lance corporal and, in June 1914, he was made up to corporal. At the outbreak of war in August 1914, Leach and his battalion were based at Aldershot, Hampshire. On August 13, his unit was part of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Division that landed in Le Havre, France. The following month his battalion took part in the fighting at the First Battle of the Aisne and, soon afterwards, Leach was promoted to sergeant and Mentioned in Despatches.

On October 1, as a result of his sterling work on the battlefield and his leadership skills, he was commissioned in the field and transferred to the 2nd Battalion, the Manchester Regiment. On October 23, he joined the unit on the Western Front and, because it was short of officers, he was given command of 'A' Company.

“Although the Kaiser’s men succeeded in pushing the line back, they failed in their ultimate aim of smashing through the Allied positions”

BELOW: THE CANAL BRIDGE IN THE DESTROYED VILLAGE OF LA BASSÉE, CIRCA OCTOBER 1914.
(MARY EVANS/SUEDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG)

By late October 1914, the Allies in northern France and British II Corps had crossed the Béthune-La Bassée Canal and were fighting their way northwards. The corps' aim was to reach the Lille-La Bassée road supported by the French Tenth Army. However, the Germans had ambitions of their own and to the south of Armentières they intended to break through the Allied line in what turned out to be the Battle of La Bassée. Although the Kaiser's men succeeded in pushing the line back, they failed in their ultimate aim of smashing through the Allied positions.

After two days of heavy fighting from October 27, in which the Germans captured and then lost the village of Neuve Chapelle, there was further intense combat on October 29. That morning the Germans shelled the Manchesters near Festubert, west of La Bassée and, during one prolonged assault, under the cover of a smokescreen, the enemy managed to enter the British trenches. This was despite a heroic defence from the Manchesters, who lost two officers in the fighting. Two attempts were made to recapture the lost trench, but both failed. ▶



OPPOSITE: CAPTAIN JAMES LEACH'S MEDAL GROUP.
(LORD ASHCROFT)

BELOW: AERIAL VIEW OF LA BASSÉE CANAL, SHOWING THE
SCARS OF MANY MONTHS OF FIGHTING. (TOPFOTO)

VC Action

At 2pm, 20-year-old Leach and Sergeant John Hogan (aged 30) and their men mounted a third attempt to retake the position. Initially, they surprised the enemy and then they worked up the trench, skilfully going from one side to the other with fixed bayonets, until it was back in Allied hands. During close-quarter fighting, the 12 men killed eight of the enemy, wounded two and captured 16, according to their later citation.

Word soon spread of their bravery and VCs were announced for both Leach and Hogan on December 22, 1914, a surprise Christmas 'gift' as both had simply expected to be Mentioned in Despatches.

Leach later explained in more detail to an eager press what had happened

on October 29. That morning, he had been in an advanced trench capable of holding some 35 men. It was about 150 yards (135m) ahead of the main trench and as close as 120 yards to the enemy. Leach estimated that his position had been attacked by some 250 Germans who made a "wailing" noise as they advanced. Although he thought the Manchesters had shot down about 150 of their foes, the remaining 100 enemy soldiers seized the advanced trench, killing a dozen British troops in the process. Afterwards, the enemy made their way down the

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communication trench and eventually took over the main trench, too.

Leach explained that, on learning that the 2nd Manchesters' position was to be taken over the next day by the Gurkhas, he felt he should try to recapture the lost territory. The aim, as he and Logan advanced (initially supported by some volunteers), had been to try to push the enemy back and shoot them as they retreated. This worked and meant that they were also able to free some of the British POWs who had been taken the previous day. Leach estimated that the tiny raiding party had captured 14 enemy soldiers, along with 20 wounded and a German officer.

Poor Health

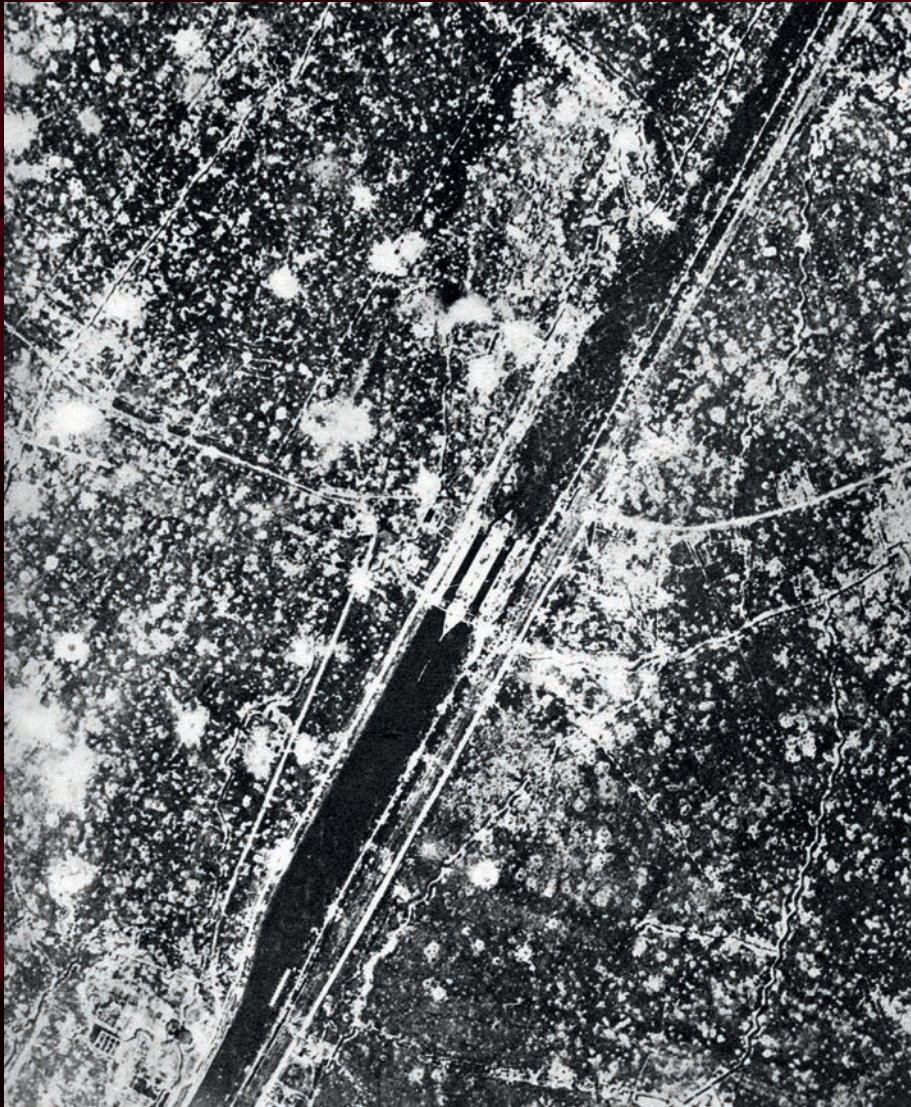
However, during his VC action Leach had become badly concussed and, on November 25, he was evacuated to Britain for treatment at Lady Evelyn Mason's Hospital for Officers in central London. He was promoted to lieutenant on December 11, less than two weeks before his VC was announced and he was presented with his award by King George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on February 13, 1915. Hogan, his comrade, received his decoration from the King a week later. After being declared fit for general service on March 1, Leach also took part in the training of troops at Cleethorpes, Lincolnshire. On April 15, he returned to his battalion in France, only to be concussed again days later and evacuated to Britain a second time.

After being treated at Taplow Priory in Buckinghamshire, Leach was again found unfit for any service and was stood down until June 20. Shortly after his return, a medical board found him fit for light duties and he was posted to 15th Royal Fusiliers, 7th Reserve Brigade, at Purfleet, in Essex.

On August 20, he was assigned to No.1 Army School of Signalling, HQ First Army Central Force, Caius College, Cambridge. Here, he is thought to have met Gladys Digby: the couple married in Cambridge two days before Christmas 1915. Sadly, the union was short-lived because his bride died just months later. However, on March 3, 1917, Leach wed a second time, on this occasion to Josephine Butt, the daughter of a Grimsby trawler owner, at Old Clee Parish Church, Cleethorpes. The couple went on to have two sons and a daughter.

Back to France

On New Year's Day 1917, Leach was promoted to temporary captain and on March 24 he returned to France to resume his active service. The next day





he went to 30th Infantry Base Depot and on April 17 re-joined the 2nd Manchesters. After completing a two-week Lewis gun course ending on July 2, he was medically examined and was again found unfit for active service. Three medical boards in Britain on September 13, October 16 and November 20 also found him unfit and he was in hospital for much of this time, including a spell at Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, a military institution that specialised in treating nervous illness.

On January 2, 1918, a medical board decided he was permanently unfit for active service and he was placed on half pay from February 9. The next month he took up the position of Adjutant, South-West London Cadet Battalion. Finally, after more than three years of poor health, and having apparently suffered from some kind of mental breakdown, a medical board on July 24 found him unfit for any further general service and he was discharged from the army, after eight years' service, on August 7, 1918. Because he had lied about his age from the start of his military career, Leach was still only 24 years old.

Post-war

After the war, Leach did a large number of wide-ranging jobs. Among them, on January 6, 1921 – and at a time of great tensions in Ireland – he joined the Royal Irish Constabulary, Auxiliary Division (the so-called 'black and tans'), where he was stationed at Glengarriff, in County Cork. The following year he returned to England and was employed by his father-in-law as a clerk, performing general duties, at Grimsby fish docks.

At the same time, he studied to become a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries (FICS). From 1927, he worked at the Bank of England in Central London, only to lose his job because of redundancies during the Great Depression of 1930-1931 bit hard. He was employed for some three years as a chartered secretary with an exporting business during which time he frequently worked in the South Pacific while his family remained at home back in Britain.

From 1934, Leach worked with Foster and Braithwaite, the stockbrokers, in the City of London. However, after the death of his wealthy father-in-law, Walter Butt, in 1936, he was able to give up work and study for the Bar.

In 1937, Leach's 20-year marriage to Josephine ended and he was divorced the following year at a time when such an event was rare and caused considerable embarrassment to the family. After the break-up, Leach worked as a chartered secretary and served as a councillor in Hammersmith, then Middlesex.

War Work and Home Guard Service

After the outbreak of war in 1939, Leach worked for the Ministry of Aircraft Production before switching in 1943 to a job at the Osram lighting factory in Hammersmith. From early December 1941 – then aged 47 – he joined the 27th City of London (Roehampton) Battalion of the Home Guard, serving as a lieutenant, role he performed for 15 months.

Leach married for a third time in 1944, this time to Mabel Folland. After the war,

he worked for the Danish Bacon Company and was a Hammersmith councillor from 1949-55.

Captain James Leach died at his home in Shepherd's Bush, west London, on August 15, 1958, aged 64, leaving a widow and, apparently, a total of six children from his second and third marriages. He was cremated at Mortlake Crematorium, East Sheen, west London, and his ashes were scattered at the venue's Garden of Remembrance. ●

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:

www.victoriacrossheroes2.com

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum London.

For more information, visit:

www.iwm.org.uk/heroes

Details of his VC collection

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