

Sergeant Thomas
Steele VC



HERO
of the
MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Just as they have in more recent times, gallantry awards for service in Iraq were hard earned during the Great War. Yet, throughout the four years of fighting in Mesopotamia, few soldiers displayed greater courage than Sergeant Thomas Steele, awarded the prestigious Victoria Cross for a day of relentless bravery in the most difficult of circumstances early in 1917.

I purchased the Steele medal group privately in 2009 and because of the incredible circumstances in which he earned the honour, I feel privileged to be custodian of this wonderful soldier's gallantry and service medals. They are on public display at the gallery bearing my name at the Imperial War Museum in London.

Thomas Steele was born in Claytons, Saddleworth, Lancashire, on February 6, 1891. Of Scottish descent, he was one of four children and the eldest of three sons born to Harry Steele, a cotton worker, and his wife Elizabeth (née Mitchell). All three brothers served during World War One.

The young Thomas Steele was educated at Austerlands Day School, Saddleworth, now part of Greater Manchester, and also attended Shelderslow Sunday School. After leaving school, Steele worked as

a bobbin carrier at Rome Mill, also in Saddleworth, a lowly-paid job that involved carrying spools of thread to looms for use by weavers. However, on August 22, 1911 Steele enlisted into the 1st Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, aged 20. Serving as a private, he was embarked for India where he was stationed from December 1912.

At the outbreak of the war, Steele, by then a lance corporal, was still in India and based with his battalion at Agra. On September 20, 1914, he left with the 7th (Meerut) Division as part of the Indian Expeditionary Force. Steele and his comrades arrived at Marseilles, southern France, on October 12, ready for service on the Western Front. While various British and Indian regiments and battalions rotated in and out of the division, the 1st Battalion Seaforths remained with the 7th for the duration of the conflict and later formed part of the component 19th Brigade together with two Punjabi regiments and the 125th Napier's Rifles.

In the thick of the fighting

Over the next few months, Steele was in the thick of it, seeing action in the retreat from Mons and at Ypres, La Bassée and

Neuve Chapelle. On June 1, 1915, he was promoted to corporal and in September took part in the Battle of Loos. In October 1915, he was promoted again to lance-sergeant and the next month, after 24 hours leave, left France with the 7th (Meerut) Division for Mesopotamia.

Then, as now, the area was rich in oil reserves and a principal aim of Britain's campaign there was to protect the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's installations at Mohammerah and Abadan Island, some 40 miles from the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab waterway on the Persian side of the border.

Britain had declared war on Turkey on November 5, 1914 and the first British troops landed in Mesopotamia the very next day. Basra, on the west bank of the Shatt al-Arab, was occupied on November 23 and was the base for the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force during the war.

During 1915 and 1916, there was heavy fighting with mixed fortunes.

The low point was, without doubt, the surrender by General Charles Townshend and his 13,000-strong garrison at Kut el-Amara on April 29, 1916 after a five-month siege. This was the largest surrender of British



A SECTION OF SEAFORTH HIGHLANDERS SNATCHING A MOMENT'S RESPITE IN THE TRENCHES HERITAGE IMAGES/TOFPOTO



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forces between Yorktown in 1781 and Singapore in 1942.

Steele fought during this period and, in January 1917, was promoted to sergeant. During his time in Mesopotamia, he suffered bouts of ill health, notably malaria, but this did not prevent him from taking part in the thick of the fighting.

Renewed offensive

The month before his promotion the new commander-in-chief, Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude, had begun a second advance up the Tigris, one of the two great rivers (the other being the Euphrates) that passed through Mesopotamia

By mid-February 1917, the south bank of the Tigris had been largely cleared but the Turks remained well entrenched along the northern bank, from Sanna-i-Yat, east of Kut el-Amara, to the Shumran peninsula to its west.

Maude devised a plan to attack the Turks on both fronts, but the initial attack on Sanna-i-Yat on February 17 failed to achieve any breakthrough. On February 22, he launched another attack on the same area, with the intention of drawing enemy soldiers away from Shumran so that British troops could cross the river from the south bank.

The 1st Seaforths stood to at 5.30am that day and at 6.30am British artillery began to bombard the Ottoman camp behind their trench line and heavy fighting ensued. During an intensive assault, the first two lines of Turkish trenches were seized and although the

enemy counter-attacked and temporarily regained some ground, they were eventually driven out. It was during this fighting Steele showed such exceptional bravery that he was, in the words of his letter home to his parents, “recommended for something”.

Rushing forward

That ‘something’ was none other than Britain and the Commonwealth’s most prestigious award for bravery in the presence of the enemy. In fact, Steele’s VC was announced in the *London Gazette* on June 8, 1917. His citation stated: “For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty. At a critical moment when a strong enemy counter-attack had temporarily regained some of the captured trenches, Sgt Steele rushed forward and assisted a comrade to carry a machine gun into

position. He kept the gun in action till relieved, being mainly instrumental in keeping the remainder of the line intact.

“Some hours later another strong attack enabled the enemy to reoccupy a portion of the captured trenches. Again, Sgt Steele showed the greatest bravery, and by personal valour and example was able to rally troops who were wavering. He encouraged them to remain in their trenches and led a number of them forward, thus greatly helping to re-establish our line. On this occasion he was severely wounded – these acts of valour were performed under heavy artillery and rifle fire.”

Steele, by then aged 26, received no less than 12 separate wounds during his VC action and was treated for his severe injuries in Malpa hospital, India.

However, his bravery and that of his comrades was richly rewarded. On February 24, 1917, two days after Steele’s VC action, Maude and his forces re-captured Kut el-Amara and on March 11 Baghdad fell to the British.

The *Oldham Chronicle* quickly picked up on its local hero, publishing an article in which they described Steele as “a gallant sergeant... of a most retiring disposition”. The newspaper reported: “This sergeant received a telegram from the sergeant’s battalion headquarters last evening telling them of the award and asking him to send at once a photograph of Thomas who by the way had been offered a commission.”

During the action, Steele had been greatly helped to encourage the Indian troops by Private Joseph Winder, who was himself awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the French Médaille Militaire. The citation for Winder’s DCM stated: “For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He went forward under very heavy fire and assisted in establishing



BRITISH AND INDIAN TROOPS REST IN KUT AL-AMARA FOLLOWING ITS RECAPTURE TOPFOTO



THE ROAD TO BAGHDAD, BRITISH AND INDIAN TROOPS ENTER THE CITY TOPFOTO

a machine gun in the enemy's second line. During the rest of the day, he repeatedly carried messages and ammunition across 'no man's land.'" Winder was later promoted to company sergeant major, but died just nine days before the November 11, 1918 Armistice.

Further distinction

Despite the severity of his injuries, Thomas Steele was soon back on the front line and on August 15, 1917 was Mentioned in Despatches. In January 1918, Steele left the Persian Gulf and from then until February 1919 served in Egypt and Palestine. He was transferred to the army reserve that month and his investiture by George V took place at Buckingham Palace on April 10. For the remainder of his life, he was a keen supporter of the VC and GC Association, attending the Buckingham Palace garden party of June 1920.

Thomas was not the only member of the family to serve with distinction: his middle brother, Samuel, served with the Royal Scots and, having been wounded, was in hospital in Cardiff at the time of Thomas' VC award. The youngest brother, William, served with the Highland Light Infantry.

On April 9, 1920 Steele briefly re-joined the army only to be transferred back to the reserve less than two months later. On June 8, 1922 he was married in his home county of Lancashire to Bertha McCready. Steele played rugby league to a

high standard: playing three matches as a professional for Broughton, one of rugby league's founding clubs, and enjoyed a distinguished career as an amateur with his local club, Healey Street.

At some point in the late 1920s, Steele moved to Leicestershire where he worked for Central Motors of Leicester and also apparently as a wholesale fruiterer. During this time, he maintained his links to the military, enlisting in the Leicestershire Regiment (Territorial Army) on March 19, 1932 after which he became a sergeant.

In 1939, just before the outbreak of war, Steele was called up and served as a battery sergeant major with the Royal Artillery (Territorial Army). In 1941, by then aged 50, Steele was posted to Leicester and served in the Home Guard before being discharged in April the following year. After the war, he continued to live in Leicestershire, working as a telephone clerk and then with a car sales firm. He retired in 1956, aged 65, and continued to attend VC and GC events on a regular basis.

In a rare interview, with the *Evening Chronicle* in Oldham, Steele spoke of the difficult conditions for those serving in Mesopotamia, where they encountered dysentery and starvation. In December 1977 and following the death of his wife, Steele returned to his Lancashire roots, living with his sister-in-law in Saddleworth.

He died at his home on July 11, 1978 aged 87 and was cremated six days later

at Hollinwood Crematorium, Oldham.

In October 2003, Steele was one of three World War One VC recipients from Oldham honoured with a commemorative Blue Plaque.

This was unveiled by Councillor Valerie Sedgwick, the Mayor of Oldham, following a commemorative service at the local parish church. ●

Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume 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 and details about his VC collection may be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.

