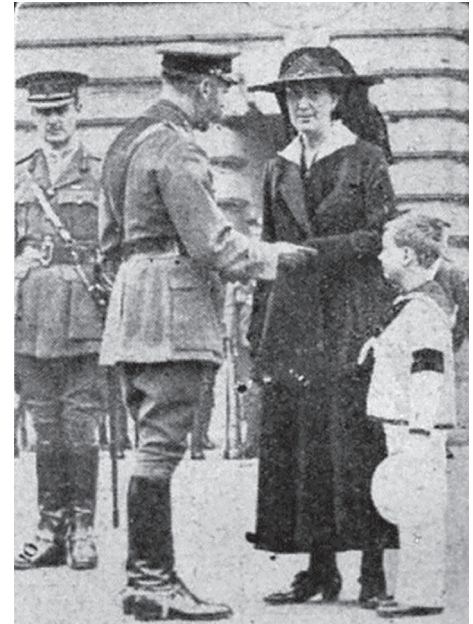


HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



A SHELL BURST IN THE SCARRED REMAINS OF GLENCORSE WOOD, SEPTEMBER 20, 1917 NATIONAL SCIENCE AND MEDIA MUSEUM



ABOVE THE INVESTITURE AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE ON SEPTEMBER 19, 1917. KING GEORGE V PRESENTING HAROLD'S MEDALS TO HIS WIDOW MABEL AND ELDEST SON, STEPHEN COURTESY OF IWM

"His heroism was the means of saving many lives, and provided a magnificent example of courage, cheerfulness and determination to the fighting men..."

The Royal Army Medical Corps has a tradition for producing some of the bravest and most selfless of military men, but few in the Corps' prestigious history have matched the dedication of Captain Harold Ackroyd.

An unlikely war hero – he was bespectacled with thinning grey hair, a stooped walk and who served beyond his 40th birthday – Ackroyd was on two separate occasions recommended for the Victoria Cross for his gallantry during the Great War. On the first occasion, however, the recommendation was downgraded.

To his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel B E Clay, Ackroyd was simply "the most gallant man I have ever met". To the young soldiers from his battalion, he was an inspirational figure who repeatedly risked his life to tend to their wounds just yards from the front.

It is fitting that this month a new biography of Ackroyd is being published, written by his grandson, Christopher, and historian Edward 'Ned' Malet de Carteret. The book, *White Feather to Victoria Cross*, tells the full story of this courageous medic's life and career for the first time.

My fascination with Ackroyd's life results partly from the fact that I am the proud custodian of his gallantry and service medals, having purchased them privately from the family in 2003. With great generosity, the family used the proceeds of the sale to endow an annual medical scholarship at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, Harold Ackroyd's alma mater.

In short, everyone was a winner from

the sale and the family welcomes the fact that the Ackroyd medal group is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London.

Harold Ackroyd was born in Roe Lane, Southport, Lancashire, on July 18, 1877. He was the son of Edward Ackroyd, chairman of the Cheshire Lines & Southport Extension Railway Company, and his wife, Ellen. Harold's ancestors appear to have worked in the wool industry. Young Harold, who was a bright boy, was educated locally at Mintholme College, Southport, and Shrewsbury School before taking a BA degree at Gonville and Caius College. After completing his studies in 1899 and then some travelling, he trained at Guy's Hospital, London, gaining his MB (Bachelor of Medicine) in 1904 and his MD (Doctor of Medicine) in 1910.

In the run-up to war, Ackroyd held several hospital positions before moving to Cambridge to start a career as a research scientist and academic.

He also married Mabel Smythe, the matron at Strangeways Research Hospital, Cambridge, in August 1908 and the young couple went on to have two sons and a daughter.

Divided loyalties

On February 15, 1915, he was commissioned as a temporary lieutenant into the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) aged 37. The RAMC had been formed in 1898 to provide medical care for British servicemen, particularly those

injured in battle. Its wartime alumni included Captain Noel Chavasse, the only VC & Bar from the 1914-18 war and one of only three double VCs in the decoration's history.

In July 1915, Ackroyd was sent to France attached as medical officer to the 6th Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment, part of the 53rd Infantry Brigade. Like many men of his generation, Captain Ackroyd had divided loyalties: he was a devoted family man who knew that his wife, Mabel, and their three young children needed him to survive if they were to enjoy future happiness together. Yet, he had an immense sense of duty, and, as he served in France and Belgium for two long years, the repeated risks he took made it clear that his commitment to his King, country and comrades was constantly endangering his life.

After his promotion to temporary captain in 1916, he saw action in France. Initially, his battalion met with success on the first day of the Battle of the Somme on July 1, 1916, but on July 19 he was at the centre of the carnage at Delville Wood. A three-day battle after an assault on one of the German's strongest positions saw some 700 British soldiers wounded in the mêlée of artillery and machine gun fire.

Under heavy shelling and braving snipers, Ackroyd remained cool and methodical, saving many lives. No less than 11 officers singled him out for praise in their written reports and he was recommended for the VC. Despite the recommendation for the higher award, his

HERO OF THE MONTH

bravery was recognised instead by the award of the Military Cross, announced in *The London Gazette* on October 20, 1916. At one point, Ackroyd was “blown up” and despite surviving the explosion he was showing signs of immense strain. On August 11, 1916, he was, reluctantly, invalided home, suffering from nervous exhaustion.

In November 1916, a month after being passed as fit for duty by a medical board, Ackroyd was eager to return to France, re-joining the Royal Berkshires in December. His family had concerns that he was returning to the front too soon, and longed for him to have a safer role. After a bitter winter of sporadic fighting, Ackroyd was given some leave with his family ahead of his 40th birthday but by the end of July 1917 he was in Belgium during the preparations for the Third Battle of Ypres (also known as the Battle of Passchendaele).

Out in the open

It was on the opening two days of Passchendaele, in those muddy

Flanders Fields, that the Royal Berkshires saw terrible losses as they advanced along and close to the Menin Road as part of the offensive by the 30th Division. The attack on Glencorse Wood on July 31 and August 1, though courageous, was confused and poorly organised. It saw the 6th Berkshires advance towards a well-prepared enemy, and into an area that was already thought to have been captured.

Ackroyd roamed up and down the line to treat casualties and was eventually awarded the VC for his gallantry over the two days. The citation for his decoration, announced on September 6, 1917, stated:

“During recent operations Captain Ackroyd displayed the greatest gallantry and devotion to duty. Utterly regardless of danger, he worked continuously for

many hours up and down and in front of the line tending the wounded and saving the lives of officers and men. In so doing he had to move across the open under heavy machine gun, rifle and shell fire. He carried a wounded officer to a place of safety under very heavy fire. On another occasion he went some way in front of our advanced line and brought in a wounded man under continuous sniping and machine gun fire.

“His heroism was the means of saving many lives, and provided a magnificent example of courage, cheerfulness, and determination to the fighting men in whose midst he was carrying out his splendid work.”

However, by the time that his Victoria Cross was announced, Ackroyd was dead: he had been killed by a sniper at Jargon Trench, having set out to find and treat

“...he was the most fearless man imaginable and to see him in his cool way picking up wounded and sending them off was a sight no one can ever forget”



ABOVE NEIL MCKENDRICK, THEN MASTER OF GONVILLE AND CAIUS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, AND CHRISTOPHER ACKROYD SIGNING THE ACKROYD SCHOLARSHIP DEED ON NOVEMBER 17, 2004 COURTESY OF THE ACKROYD FAMILY



ABOVE MIA PEARLMAN, GREAT GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER OF HAROLD ACKROYD, PRESENTING LILY-OF-THE-VALLEY TO PRINCESS ANNE, THE PRINCESS ROYAL, ON NOVEMBER 10, 2010 AT THE OPENING OF THE LORD ASHCROFT GALLERY IN THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM COURTESY OF IWM



ABOVE HAROLD'S GRAVE AT BIRR CROSSROADS CEMETERY, ZILLEBEKE, YPRES, BELGIUM COURTESY OF THE ACKROYD FAMILY



CAPTAIN ACKROYD'S MEDAL GROUP, CONSISTING OF VICTORIA CROSS, MILITARY CROSS, 1914-1915 STAR, BRITISH WAR MEDAL 1914-1920 AND VICTORY MEDAL
COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

the wounded on August 11, 1917. He was one of seven men shot dead in a short period by snipers and, at the time of his death, he was aware that he had, once again, been recommended for the VC.

A tragedy for all

Ackroyd's posthumous VC was presented to his widow, Mabel, and their son, Stephen (then five) by King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on September 26, 1917. There were numerous tributes to Captain Ackroyd's gallantry from comrades. Captain J N Richardson, one of his closest friends, wrote to his widow: "It's the biggest loss this battalion has ever suffered and it's nothing more or less than a tragedy for all of us."

"As you have probably heard before he was the most fearless man imaginable and to see him in his cool way picking up wounded and sending them off was a sight no one can ever forget. The hottest shellfire never stopped him going to a wounded man and the men used to simply stare in wonder at his bravery. In all fights he was worth a hundred men to us for morale's sake..."

Alfred Clark, one of Ackroyd's fellow officers, also wrote to his widow saying, "All our medical officers are wonderfully brave but your husband was quite in a class by himself."

Captain Harold Ackroyd VC MC MD, who died aged 40, is buried at Birr Cross Roads Cemetery, near Ypres. On the centenary of his death, some 30 members of the Ackroyd family travelled from their respective homes in England, Jersey and

Germany for a memorial service at his graveside. The service on August 11, 2017, was led by the Reverend Gillian Trinder, then vicar of St George's Church, Ypres. Some of the great great grandchildren contributed to the service and Christopher Ackroyd gave a eulogy on his grandfather's life. The Last Post and the Reveille were sounded by Colonel Michael Taylor, the VC recipient's great grandson-in-law. The party then went to the field below Glencorse Wood where Harold was killed and four of his great great grandsons planted a memorial plaque on the spot where he fell.

I commend the new book, *White Feather to Victoria Cross*, to readers of this magazine and, just to declare an interest, I have, in fact, contributed the foreword to it. The book ends with the words: "This is the story of Harold Ackroyd VC and his ancestors who were from humble origins, probably wool traders in Yorkshire. We hope this family history has shown that for all of us no matter what our social background, we are capable of achieving great things in life."

"We are immensely proud of our ancestor Harold, with his sporting, educational, professional, scientific and most importantly, military achievements."

"This profoundly exemplifies the determination that enabled him to develop his character into the family man with strong loyalties and principles who

was capable of supreme and sustained acts of bravery..."

"The fact that his memory and example live on into the 21st Century is a source of immense pride and satisfaction to all the family. We hope that his sacrifice will go on to inspire future generations of the family and the young doctors who have benefited from the scholarship in his name at Gonville and Caius College Cambridge since 2004." •

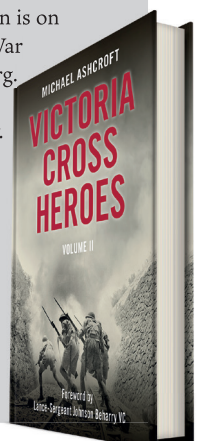
Victoria Cross Heroes, Vol.2



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His latest bravery book, *Victoria Cross Heroes 2*, was published in 2016

and is available in hardback and paperback. Visit www.victoriacrossheroes2.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London, www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. Details of his VC collection can 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.



White Feather to Victoria Cross
White Feather to Victoria Cross by Christopher E Ackroyd and Edward F Malet de Carteret is published this month by Reville Press, and can be purchased in hardback for £17.99