



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

A SIGNED PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH OF FREDERICK BRADLEY VC
COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT



'NO SURRENDER!', A RICHARD CATON WOODVILLE ARTWORK DEPICTING THE DEFENCE OF FORT ITALA HERITAGE IMAGES/TOPTFOTO

Frederick Bradley was serving as a driver when he displayed outstanding bravery during a battle that has been likened to the defence of Rorke's Drift. It was a wonderful example of what I call "spur-of-the-moment courage" in which a soldier, with his blood up during the heat of battle, risked his life to save a wounded comrade.

Bradley was a man of well-proven gallantry and generosity, and I am proud to be the custodian of this brave man's Victoria Cross medal group having purchased it at auction in 2015.

Frederick Henry Bradley was born in Shoreditch, London, on September 27, 1876. He was the son of Thomas Bradley, who served with the Royal Engineers, and his wife Caroline (née Smith). After leaving school, Frederick Bradley got a job as a blacksmith's hammerman before, on March 12, 1894, enlisting in the 2nd Depot Division of the Royal Field Artillery (RFA).

In May 1894, he joined the 41st Battery of the regiment as a driver. He also served with the 44th Battery before transferring to the 69th Battery in April 1897. Soon afterwards, his unit embarked for South Africa as part of the 1st Brigade, RFA. After the start of the Second Boer War in October 1899, Bradley was present at several early battles. In August 1900, he was among a handful of gunners chosen to accompany the 5th Division's Mounted

"Though known as Fort Itala, its defences were, in fact, limited: shallow trenches and low-lying stone walls"



BOER COMMANDANT-GENERAL AND FUTURE PRIME MINISTER OF SOUTH AFRICA, LOUIS BOTHA WELLCOMBE TRUST

Infantry Battalion, raised by Major A J Chapman. He was present on September 26, 1901 – the day before his 25th birthday – at the Defence of Fort Itala.

This little-known two-day battle is one some historians have compared to the defence of Rorke's Drift. In both cases, Natal was saved from an invasion by a small detachment of British soldiers who made a gallant stand despite being vastly outnumbered. A period artwork by Richard Caton Woodville – a prolific illustrator of battle scenes – that appeared in a 1902 account of the war was aptly named *No Surrender!*

Unrelenting Attack

The battle at Fort Itala took place because of Boer Commandant-General Louis Botha's second expedition to Natal. Louis, the man Winston Churchill claimed captured him in an 1899 ambush, was keen to exploit his earlier success at Blood River Poort, and ordered Assistant Commandant Chris Botha to attack a British position situated on the lower spur of the 2,800ft summit of Itala.

Though known as Fort Itala, its defences were, in fact, limited: shallow trenches and low-lying stone walls. The two sides were far from evenly matched; Botha had 1,400 men available while the British force, under Major Chapman of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, stood around 300 strong.

The British initially had two 15-pounder field guns and a Maxim machine gun at their disposal, but the latter jammed and the two 15-pounders were soon withdrawn because the gun teams suffered heavy casualties from Boer marksmen. The 17-hour engagement developed into a duel of rifles and bayonets, during which the British force expended a staggering 70,000 rounds.

An article on the battle, *Itala – Monument to Valour*, was written by M C Carter in the *South African Military History Society Journal*. This provides wonderful insight into the ferocity of the action: “A tornado of lead enveloped the post. Bullets screamed and howled, the ground rapidly became covered with a shower of broken branches and chopped leaves, the screams and groans of stricken men and of the pathetic unprotected horses filled the air; dust and earth flew in all directions and the constant ear-shattering crash of hundreds of rifles made a sound to match all the thunderbolts of hell, as the Boers tried to batter the defences to pieces with rifle fire.

“No cover could withstand this inferno, and men fell thick and fast, yet each attack melted away under the galling return cross-fire of the defenders...

“By late afternoon, after 17 hours of heavy, unrelenting attack, both sides were exhausted.

“Chapman’s force had taken a fearful toll of the attacking [Boer] Commando, but they had suffered 81 killed and wounded and lost a further 40 as prisoners. This was nearly half his total strength. The troops, bleary-eyed, with hands burned,

shoulders raw and faces scorched, their ammunition nearly exhausted, could hardly be expected to withstand another concerted attack. They were ready but hardly able.

“Chapman himself, shot through the right leg, waited and listened as the Boer fire slackened and died away. After an hour he sent out scouts who returned with the heartening news that Botha’s men were drawing off...”

There were more men defending Itala than had been defending Rorke’s Drift in 1879, but the task facing the garrison was still immense and at Itala, in addition to the cost in men, 153 British horses had been killed while the rest had been injured or had bolted.

The diary of the 69th Battery also provides a vivid description of the battle, and our first brush with Bradley’s gallant action: “At about 12.15am a very heavy fire was opened on the camp from all sides... The guns opened fire at once, firing shrapnel at the flashes at a range of 1,100 yards. There was a full moon...”

“About 11am Major Chapman called for volunteers to carry ammunition to a trench on the hill a distance of about 300 yards under a heavy fire. Six men volunteered. Gunner Boddy and Driver Lancashire started with the first box and got halfway when Driver Lancashire was hit. Gunner Rabb and Driver Bradley ran out to carry him in and brought him back. Major Chapman then ordered no more men were to be sent but Gunner Ball and Driver Bradley ran out before they could be stopped and succeeded in getting one box to the top of the hill. Gunner Rabb

and Driver Bradley were recommended for the VC.”

Praying for help

Research undertaken by Canon W M Lummis MC provides further information on Bradley’s bravery: “When Major Chapman called for volunteers to take ammunition up the hill to the infantry at Fort Itala on the Zululand border, Bradley was one of the volunteers. A tiny man, his services were declined; but Bradley insisted, and when others were wounded, he instantly rushed out to carry them out to shelter and then carried the ammunition uphill. Before doing so, however, he knelt down by a bush and prayed for God’s help.”

Bradley’s VC was announced on December 27, 1901, his citation stating: “During the action at Itala, Zululand, on September 26, 1901, Major Chapman called for volunteers to carry ammunition up hill; to do this a space of about 150 yards swept by a heavy crossfire had to be crossed. Driver Lancashire and Gunner Ball at once came forward and started, but halfway across Driver Lancashire fell wounded. Driver Bradley and Gunner Rabb without a moment’s hesitation ran out and caught Driver Lancashire up, and Rabb carried him under cover, the ground being swept by bullets the whole time. Bradley then, with the aid of Gunner Boddy, succeeded in getting ammunition up the hill.”

Bradley’s medal was presented to him by Lord Kitchener in an investiture at Pretoria on Peace Thanksgiving Day, June 8, 1902, when he was also awarded

“A tiny man, his services were declined; but Bradley insisted... he instantly rushed out to carry the wounded and then carried the ammunition uphill”

THE TRANSVAAL MOUNTED RIFLES DURING
THE BAMBATHA REBELLION
SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY HISTORY SOCIETY





BRADLEY'S VC, QUEEN'S SOUTH AFRICA, (WITH CLASPS), KING'S SOUTH AFRICA (WITH CLASPS), NATAL NATIVE REBELLION, 1914/15 STAR, BRITISH WAR AND VICTORY MEDALS, WITH HIS COLONIAL AUXILIARY FORCES OFFICERS' DECORATION (VD) AND COLONIAL AUXILIARY FORCES LONG SERVICE MEDAL COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

the Queen's Medal and five clasps, and the King's Medal and two clasps. Furthermore, he was promoted to bombardier. Rabb's award was downgraded to a DCM – the award also bestowed on Lancashire, Ball and Boddy.

After initially being placed on the 1st Army Reserve in South Africa, Bradley was later discharged on March 11, 1906. In that year too, for reasons that are best known to himself, Bradley changed his two first names from 'Frank George' to 'Frederick Henry'.

However, in March 1906, Bradley enrolled as a corporal in the Central South African Railway Volunteers (CSARV). He was serving with the Transvaal Mounted Rifles during the 1906 Zulu Rebellion (also known as the Bambatha Uprising) a revolt against British rule and taxation in Natal. It was a continuation of a lengthy career in the British Army and the South African Army/Union Defence Force.

In 1907, he married a South African, Florence Hillary, and the couple had two sons. After being discharged in February 1908, he re-joined the CSARV as a sergeant in January 1910. The following year he, at his own expense, accompanied the South African contingent to the coronation of George V in London. Bradley later transferred to the 10th Infantry, the Witwatersrand Rifles, in January 1913, in which regiment he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in July of that year, before being promoted to lieutenant in March 1914.

Mortarman

After the outbreak of World War One, Bradley served in German South West Africa (Namibia) from August 1914 until September 1915, initially as the commanding officer of 'C' Company before switching to work as a railway transport officer. Bradley was involved in

the same train crash that claimed the life of Sir George Farrar DSO.

In early 1916, Bradley travelled to France as an adjutant of 5th Trench Mortar Battery, 5th Brigade, 2nd Division. Later still, as acting captain, he commanded six mortar batteries on the Somme and was seriously wounded at Delville Wood. The Western Front presented two close brushes with death and, in July 1917, he returned to South Africa to recuperate from his injuries.

Here, from July 1, 1918, he served in the South African Defence Force, once again with the Witwatersands. By the time the war ended in November 1918, Bradley was 42 but still his military career was not over.

In December 1919, he transferred to the 2nd Mounted Rifles (the Natal Carbineers) from the supernumerary list of the Active Citizen Force. While serving with this regiment, he received promotion to the rank of captain in December 1923. In 1924, Bradley was awarded the Colonial Auxiliary Forces Long Service Medal and in 1919 the Colonial Auxiliary Forces Officers Decoration. Bradley also attended the coronation of George VI in 1937 as a member of the South African Contingent (Medal) and he remained on the reserve of officers until September 1938, when he was granted the honorary rank of major.

During the later years of his service, Bradley worked as a publican and manager of a general store. A keen shot and angler, he also wrote several books. Bradley was not the first publican to drink too much on the job. Major Geoffrey Tylden, who knew him well, said: "He was a damn good chap and kept a pub in Zululand... He used to say: 'My nerve is gone, so I drink,' and he did, poor chap."

Bradley's bravery was further matched by his generosity. In 1935, the South

African daily *Cape Argus* reported: "In the balance sheet of the Royal Chelsea Hospital there appears a brief entry reading: 'From the Bradley VC Fund. £10.'" In an act of great generosity – since £10 was a vast sum at the time – Bradley had secretly started donating his VC pension paid by the British government to his local hospital in Johannesburg.

Bradley finally settled in Gwelo, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where he worked as a telephone exchange operator. He died on March 10, 1943, aged 66. He was buried in Gwelo Cemetery and his name is listed on a memorial at the Royal Artillery Chapel in Woolwich, southeast London. ●

Victoria Cross Heroes, Vol II



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

