



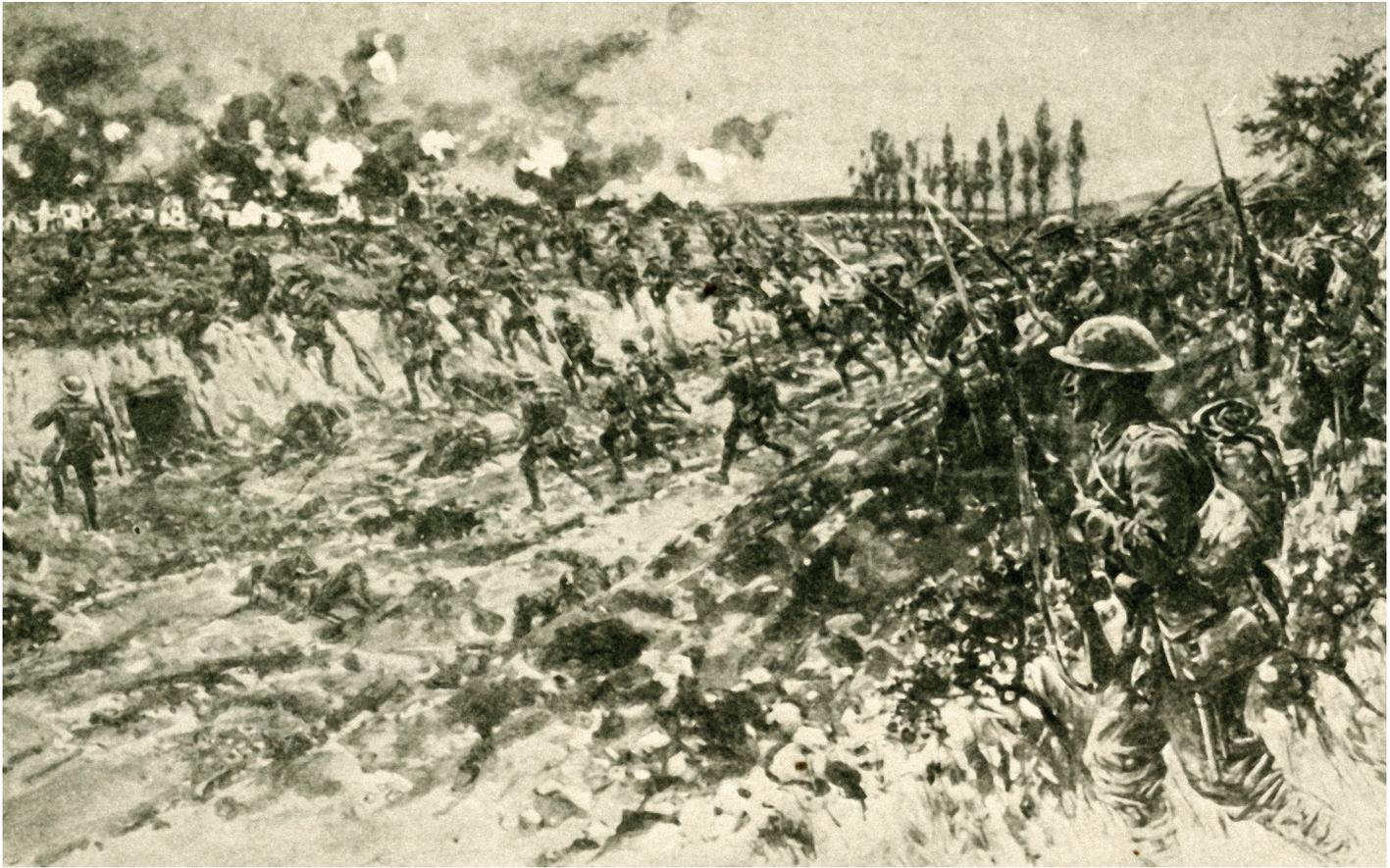
Second Lieutenant
Frank Bernard
Wearne VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

PHOTO: LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION/IWM



BRITISH TROOPS ADVANCE OVER THE SUNKEN ROAD AHEAD OF MONTAUBAN DURING THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME. THE CAPTURE OF THE VILLAGE WAS A RARE SUCCESS ON THE BLOODY FIRST DAY OF THE BATTLE S BEGG (ARTIST)/HERITAGE IMAGES/TOFFOTO

“More than ten months after Wearne received his injuries, he was passed fit for general service despite having limited use in his right hand and fingers”

Slightly built, bespectacled and often sporting a worried frown, Bernard Wearne was an unlikely war hero. Yet in the heat of battle, his leadership skills were matched only by his incredible displays of courage.

It is little wonder that he was so respected by his comrades and that he was ultimately decorated with Britain and the Commonwealth's premiere award for valour in the presence of the enemy: the Victoria Cross. I am delighted to be the proud custodian of Wearne's medal group having purchased it at a Spink auction in London in 1997.

Frank Bernard Wearne was born in Kensington, west London, on March 1, 1894. The second of four brothers, he was the son of Frank Wearne, a wine merchant, and his wife Ada (née Morris). With his father also called Frank, Wearne was always known by his second Christian name, often abbreviated to 'Bernie'. For much of his early years, his family lived in Worcester Park on the border of southwest London and Surrey.

Wearne attended Bromsgrove School in Worcestershire from 1908 onwards, where he went on to become head monitor. He was interested in the military during his teenage years and joined the Officers' Training Corps. In 1912, when 18, he won

a scholarship to Oxford University and he attended Corpus Christi College in the following year. His studies, like so many of his generation, were interrupted by the outbreak of World War One.

On September 5, 1914, just days after the start of that conflict, Wearne volunteered to serve in a public school battalion and he soon joined the 18th Battalion, The Royal Fusiliers. Two of his brothers also took part in the war effort: his elder brother, Keith, served in the 1st Battalion, The Essex Regiment and one of his younger brothers, Geoffrey, served in the Canadian Army. On November 22, 'Bernie' Wearne was promoted to lance corporal but five weeks later he voluntarily reverted back to the rank of private.

Somme success

On May 15, 1915, Wearne was commissioned as a second lieutenant into the 3rd Battalion, The Essex Regiment. He had earlier expressed a desire to the serve in the regiment's 1st Battalion, presumably to be with his elder brother, but this did not happen.

On December 13, 1915, he was embarked with his battalion for France. On June 5, 1916, Wearne became attached to the 10th Battalion, The Essex Regiment. At this

point, the battalion was part of the 53rd Brigade, 18th (Eastern) Division which was preparing for the Battle of the Somme. In the run-up to the battle, Wearne and his colleagues were serving in the Carnoy region, close to the front.

As a scout officer, Wearne and three comrades succeeded in catching a German soldier on one of their night patrols. It was quite a coup because he was the first soldier captured by the battalion during the war.

The Battle of the Somme, which resulted in nearly one million men from both sides being killed or wounded, began on July 1. During the heavy fighting, which saw Wearne's advancing unit help gain Montauban Ridge and Pommiers Redoubt, Wearne was seriously wounded, receiving gunshot wounds in four places on July 3. He was invalided home but the wounds on his right hand proved particularly troublesome.

On April 16 1917, more than ten months after he received his injuries, he was passed fit for general service despite having limited use in his right hand and fingers.

Trench raiders

In May, Wearne was transferred to the 11th Battalion of his regiment, once again serving in France, this time near Lens.

On June 28, 1917, three parties from

'C' Company, 11th Battalion, The Essex Regiment, along with a company from the 2nd Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, took part in a raid between Lens and the mining town of Loos. They were accompanied by an officer and 20 men from the 3rd Australian Tunnelling Company.

The men from the Essex Regiment were led by Captain S E Silver. The three parties consisted of: 'A' party under the command of Lieutenant M R Robertson with 30 other ranks in three squads, 'B' under Wearne with 20 other ranks in two squads, and 'C' with one NCO and six men. The role of the party that Wearne commanded was to guard the left flank of the main attacking force.

The raid was well-planned, following detailed reconnaissance and special training in the Le Brebis region. The firefight began with a box barrage and the Germans retaliated with artillery fire. Next, the raiding party gathered at the junction of Scots Alley and the British reserve line to the east of Loos.

'A' and 'B' parties set off at the same time, 7.12pm on June 28. Leaving their trenches, 'A' advanced into the German line, rushing an enemy trench and capturing it. As the Germans retreated into dug-outs, 'A' party bombed their new positions. The men then collected prisoners and carried out mopping-up exercises.

'B' party's brave bomber

'B' party also had initial success, capturing a section of the German line. However, the enemy then launched a fierce counter-attack and 'B' party suffered a large number of casualties. Wearne's VC citation takes up the story: "For most conspicuous bravery when in command of a small party on the left of a raid on the enemy's trenches.

"He gained his objective in the face of much opposition and by his magnificent example and daring was able to maintain this position for a considerable time, according to instructions.

"During this period Wearne and his small party were repeatedly counter attacked. Grasping the fact that if the left flank was lost his men would have to give way, Wearne, at a moment when the enemy's attack was being heavily pressed and when matters were most critical, leapt on the parapet and, followed by his left section, ran along the top of the trench, firing and throwing bombs.

"This unexpected and daring manoeuvre threw the enemy off his guard and back in disorder. Whilst on the top of the trench Wearne was severely wounded, but refused to leave his men. Afterwards he remained in the trench directing operations, consolidating his position and



A PARTY OF BRITISH SOLDIERS LEAVE THEIR TRENCH FOR A NIGHT-TIME TRENCH RAID THE PRINT COLLECTOR/ALAMY

"...when matters were most critical, Wearne leapt on the parapet and ran along the top of the trench, firing and throwing bombs"

encouraging all ranks. Just before the order to withdraw was given, this gallant officer was again severely hit for the second time, and while being carried away [he] was mortally wounded.

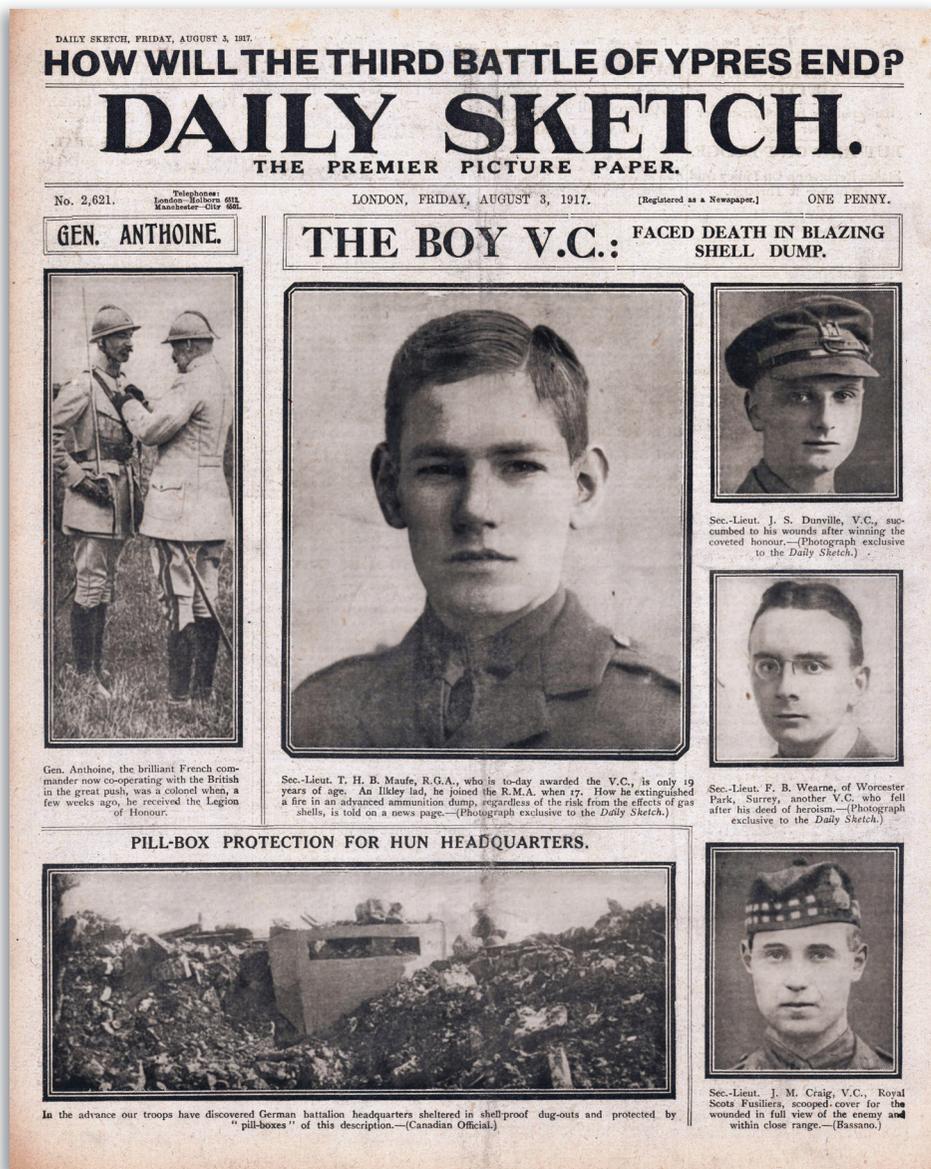
"By his tenacity in remaining at his post, though severely wounded, and his

magnificent fighting spirit, he was enabled to hold on to the flank."

Wearne, who was unmarried and left no children, died of his wounds on June 28, 1917, aged 23. His body was never recovered from the field. Wearne's posthumous VC was presented to his father by King



WEARNE'S MEDAL GROUP, COMPRISING HIS VC, 1914-15 STAR, WAR MEDAL, AND VICTORY MEDAL LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION/IWM



George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on October 20. Wearne had been recommended for the VC by the CO of the 11th Essex's, Colonel Spring, on account of the young officer's "superb courage, leadership and self-sacrifice".

It later emerged that on the eve of Wearne's VC action he and three other officers, including Major H S Roberts, had discussed the raid in a café over a modest meal of boiled rabbit and vegetables, washed down with local wine. It also emerged that his self-sacrifice in battle had distracted the Germans long enough to enable British survivors, including some wounded, to withdraw safely once they became outnumbered by the counter-attacking enemy.

'C' party, meanwhile, had started advancing after 'A' and 'B'. Their role had been to destroy as many dug-outs and mineshafts as they could. They, too, had enjoyed success knocking-out two dug-outs and three mineshafts. However, they had also been subjected to a fierce counter-attack and took part in fighting that lasted well over an hour. All in all, the raid was considered to have been a success but at a

heavy price – some 80 of the 100 British soldiers taking part had become casualties.

Fit to fight?

Part of the discussions by officers on the eve of Wearne's VC action related to the death of Wearne's elder brother, Captain Keith Morris Wearne. He had been killed by shell fire near Monchy-le-Preux on May 21 1917, just over a month before Bernard's death.

Their younger brother did not escape the war unscathed: he suffered from severe shellshock while serving with the Canadian Army, although he survived the war. However, the youngest brother of all, William, did not begin his overseas service until September 1918, two months before the end of the war. He served as second lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards and remained uninjured during his two months in France.

By the end of the war, Wearne's parents had lost two of their four sons and another, Geoffrey, would never be quite the same again: almost certainly suffering from what would now be categorised as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Some parents and families, of course, suffered even heavier losses. Six years ago, I wrote an article for *The Telegraph Magazine* that told the tragic story of how four Scottish brothers, from the wealthy Anderson family, went to war in 1914 and none of them came home. There is a bronze plaque in Glasgow Cathedral that is "to the memory of four brothers, natives of this city, who died for their country and in the cause of honour and freedom".

In his book *VCs of the First World War: Arras and Messines 1917*, Gerald Gliddon questions whether Wearne was medically fit to fight. This was nothing to do with the wounds he had received at the Somme but instead his poor eyesight.

Gliddon writes: "Despite Wearne's unquestionable gallantry, one has to ask how he managed to pass his medical, firstly in September 1914 and then again in the spring of 1917. For in all photographs of him he is always wearing strong spectacles; his effects, when they were sent home after his death, included three pairs of spectacles and two pairs of pince-nez. A fourth pair of glasses was left behind on the battlefield." Gliddon also noted that Wearne's estate was worth £243 gross, a fair sum more than a century ago.

Bernard Wearne's name is commemorated on the Loos Memorial in France and there is a memorial photographic display at his former school, Bromsgrove, in Worcestershire. His bravery and self-sacrifice must never be forgotten. **BW**

LEFT: WEARNE (CENTRE RIGHT) WAS ONE OF FOUR VC RECIPIENTS FEATURED ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THE DAILY SKETCH IN ITS AUGUST 3, 1917, EDITION JOHN FROST NEWSPAPERS/ALAMY

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES



Lord Michael Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *Victoria Cross Heroes* was published in 2006 and is available in hardback and

paperback – see victoriacrossheroes.com.

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For information, visit iwm.org.uk/heroes. Details about this

collection can be found at lordashcroftmedals.com.

For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit lordashcroft.com

and for his research on gallantry, visit lordashcroftonbravery.com. Follow him on

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