

Captain  
Harry Cator  
VC, MM



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Captain Harry Cator  
VC, MM, shown as a  
sergeant wearing his VC  
LORD ASHCROFT/IWM



British troops pause in a captured crater during the Battle of Albert, July 1916  
TOPFOTO

*“They faced the likelihood of death or capture but Cator was one of those who risked his life to rescue them from No-Man’s Land”*

**H**arry Cator experienced the highs and lows of war in the space of just three days during World War One. In spring 1917, he displayed such outstanding courage that he was later awarded the Victoria Cross. However, just three days afterwards – and before he was even recommended for Britain and the Commonwealth’s most prestigious gallantry award – he was almost killed by an exploding shell that left him with serious head and shoulder injuries.

Cator was born in Drayton, near Norwich in Norfolk, on January 24, 1894. He was the son of Robert Cator, who worked as a platelayer on the railways, and his wife Laura (née Shinn). He was educated at Drayton School but left aged 12. After working with farm horses, he followed his father onto the railways, working as a porter on the Midland and Great Northern Railway, with part of this role spent at Thursford station, near Fakenham, Norfolk.

At age 20, Cator married carpenter’s daughter Rose Alice Morriss at St Nicholas’ Church in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, and the couple eventually went on to have a son. However, there was no

time for a honeymoon. On the very day after his wedding, Harry enlisted into the 7th (Service) Battalion, The East Surrey Regiment, within weeks of the outbreak of World War One.

### Into No-Man’s Land

On June 2, 1915, Cator and his comrades arrived in Boulogne, France, and he was soon promoted to sergeant. Thrust into the thick of the action, for the next ten months he served near both Armentières, in the Hauts-de-France region, and opposite the nearby Hohenzollern Redoubt, close to Auchy-les-Mines. During this time, the East Surreys were part of the 37th Brigade, 12th Division, which took part in some of the heaviest fighting of the first two years of the war.

Just over a year later, on July 3, 1916, Cator showed such exceptional courage that he was awarded the Military Medal. During the Battle of Albert – the name for the Anglo-French offensive during the first two weeks of the Battle of the Somme – 36 men got caught up in German barbed wire. They faced the likelihood of death or capture, but Cator was one of those who risked his life to rescue them

from No-Man’s Land. The citation for his MM praised his “fine work” to bring the men back to safety.

Cator’s talents as a soldier were noticed and he was offered a commission. However, he declined, preferring to remain on the frontline with his comrades. While still a sergeant, he took part in the assault on Guedecourt on October 19, 1916, exactly a week after the Newfoundland Regiment had launched a heroic attack on the enemy during the Battle of Le Transloy, one of the major battles of the Somme.

The following year, Cator was still serving in France. On April 9, 1917, the first day of the Battle of Arras, the 7th East Surreys took part in a determined attack on the German line close to Monchy-le-Preux, some five miles east of Arras. This followed five days of heavy artillery bombardment.

Typically, Cator was at the centre of the action on April 9, taking part in attacks on enemy redoubts and machine gun posts. At one point, Cator’s platoon suffered heavy losses as a result of machine guns emplaced in ‘Hangest Trench’, near the Arras–Feuchy road. Cator decided he had

The East Surrey's part in the Battle of Monchy-le-Preux was preceded by a heavy five-day bombardment, possibly including these 60-pounder guns positioned west of the village  
TOPFOTO



*“Performed in contempt of death and of great odds, such deeds are as if inspired. Was ever the Victoria Cross bestowed more worthily?”*

to do something to stop the slaughter. He and another soldier advanced across open ground, through a hail of bullets and headed for a gun post at one end of the trench.

During this advance, his comrade was killed, but Cator continued to push on alone, picking up a Lewis gun and ammunition as he went. When he was close enough, he stopped, took aim and killed most of the machine gunners – which included a German officer – and took the others prisoner. He even went into the position to collect enemy papers, then – single-handedly – held on to the position, enabling his advancing comrades to take the rest, capturing 100 prisoners and five more machine guns. Feuchy Chapel Redoubt fell to the attackers the next day. On April 11, the Essex Yeomanry took part in the assault on Monchy.

Three days after his courageous action, on April 12, Cator was wounded by a shell burst that fractured his upper and lower jaw, while he also sustained shrapnel injuries to his shoulder. During that summer, Cator had to have several

operations to repair the damage to his jaw and face. It was while he was recovering in hospital in Bristol that he was told he had been awarded the VC. His decoration was announced on June 8, 1917, less than two months after his display of battlefield valour. Awarded “for most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty”, the citation detailed his astonishing gallantry in the face of overwhelming odds.

Cator was presented with his VC by King George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on July 21, 1917. The young soldier was fêted as a war hero and received numerous letters of congratulations. One letter, sent anonymously, heaped praise on him for his courage. Clearly written by a fellow soldier from the East Surreys, it read: “Allow me to offer you my heartiest congratulations in winning the most coveted honour it is possible to win. I am certain no one in the army has been more entitled to the Victoria Cross than yourself. Every time you have been in the line you have always inspired the men by your personal bravery, and when you were with me in ‘B’ and ‘C’ Company, I always knew things were all right when you were

about. I was extremely sorry to hear you were wounded, and trust that it is not of a serious nature.”

Another letter stated: “The act for which he [Cator] was awarded the Victoria Cross was magnificent. It is only deeds of simply colossal heroism which get the Victoria Cross, so you can imagine how proud and delighted [we were] when Sergeant Cator was awarded the most coveted honour.”

A local newspaper, the *Surrey Comet*, was equally fulsome in its praise of the East Surreys – and Cator in particular: “The gallant East Surreys have covered themselves in glory in this war and have a record for the highest honours of which any regiment might be proud and which few, if any, can rival. To its proud Honours’ Roll there is added now a fifth Victoria Cross, won by Sergeant Harry Cator, for the performance of deeds of gallantry which will fill everyone who reads them with admiration.

“This is indeed a glorious episode, for which the name and fame of Sergeant Harry [Cator] of the East Surreys will be enshrined for ever in the hearts of his countrymen and in the annals of the

Captain Cator's medal group: his VC, MM, 1914-15 Star, 1914-20 War Medal, Inter Allied Victory Medal (with MID oak leaf), Defence Medal, 1939-45 War Medal, 1937 Coronation Medal, 1953 Coronation Medal and Croix de Guerre (with palm) LORD ASHCROFT/IWM

regiment, which is proud of him. Performed in contempt of death and of great odds, such deeds are as if inspired. Was ever the Victoria Cross bestowed more worthily?"

## A much-admired guard

In March 1918, the Mayor of Norwich presented Cator with his Military Medal and French decoration, the Croix de Guerre avec Palme, on the village green at his home of Drayton. This presentation came after Cator, accompanied by his wife, had been given a hero's welcome, being met off the train by a four-wheeled carriage draped in a Union flag.

Cator survived the war and was discharged in 1919, by this point aged 25. Afterwards, he worked as a shoe repairer, a postman and, finally, a civil servant with the Unemployed Assistance Board. In 1927, he also became a Freemason, having been initiated into the Wanderers Lodge No.1604 in London.

During World War Two, he re-enlisted and, in 1942, was given the rank of captain quartermaster with the 6th Battalion, Norfolk Home Guard. Later in the war, he was posted to a transit camp in Newhaven, Sussex, where he learnt German. His final wartime role was as commandant of Cranwich POW camp in Norfolk, where he improved his German by speaking with the prisoners.

He was much liked by some of the POWs, so much so that they remained

in touch with him after the war, when they were back in Germany. Once again, he left his mark, as a letter from one of the former prisoners illustrates. Penned after the war, it said: "It took a long time before I realised that you taught us a lesson worth remembering. In a world full of passion, you demonstrated an independent unanimity. You showed all understanding of the former emergency that we, the prisoners of Hostel Cranwich, have all reason to be thankful to you. I think you gave us an example of how our attitude should be. This letter is to give you our sincere thanks."

Cator returned to his job as a civil servant and also joined the Territorial Army. He retired from this TA role in 1951. His great interests once he had retired were gardening, ornithology and mountaineering. He was also an active member of the VC and GC Association, the Old Comrades' Association and the local branch of the Royal British Legion.

Cator and his wife celebrated their golden wedding anniversary in 1964, by which

point they were living in Sprowston, Norwich. Captain Harry Cator, VC, MM, died of pneumonia in Norwich and Norfolk Hospital on April 7, 1966, aged 72. He still had shrapnel from his old war wounds in his body. In addition to his widow, Cator left behind a son, two grandsons and a granddaughter. He was buried at St Mary's and St Margaret's Churchyard in Sprowston.

Part of the engraving on his headstone reads: "I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith." His widow, Rose, died in January 1969 and was buried with her husband. I am delighted to say that I am the proud custodian of the Cator medal group, having bought them at auction from Spink in London in 1996. **BW**



Cator and one other man launched an attack on a German machine gun post, similar to this example, that was ripping through his comrades near the Arras-Feuchy road ATLAS/TOPFOTO



## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES



Lord 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. For more information, visit

[victoriacrossheroes.com](http://victoriacrossheroes.com). Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London.

For more information, visit [iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://iwm.org.uk/heroes) and details about his VC collection may be found at [lordashcroftmedals.com](http://lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). For Lord Ashcroft's work on gallantry, visit [lordashcroftonbravery.com](http://lordashcroftonbravery.com). Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.

