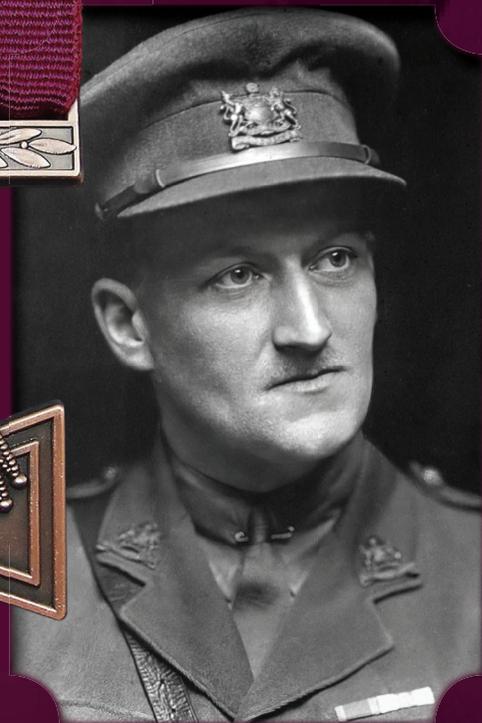


Temporary  
Lieutenant-Colonel  
Wilfrith Elstob  
VC, DSO, MC



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: Lieutenant-Colonel Wilfrith Elstob  
TAMESIDE LOCAL STUDIES AND ARCHIVES CENTRE

Temporary Lieutenant-Colonel Wilfrith Elstob was an inspirational leader of men and a man of his word, even when it meant near certain death for him and those serving under him. In the face of an overwhelming enemy attack at the start of Germany's Spring Offensive in 1918, he sent a message to his brigade commander: "The Manchester Regiment will defend the Manchester Redoubt to the last."

At the same time, he was equally candid with his men, telling them: "Here we fight and here we die." Both statements were equally true, and the bravery of Elstob and his men was quite incredible in the face of a far greater enemy force. It is little wonder that he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

Wilfrith Elstob was the third son of the Reverend John George Elstob and his wife, Frances (née Chamberlain). Elstob senior was the vicar of Capesthorpe with Siddington, Cheshire, and he later became the honourable canon of Chester Cathedral. Elstob junior was educated at Ryleys School, Alderley Edge in Cheshire, and Christ's Hospital School, near Horsham, Sussex, before going on to study for a BA at Manchester University. He finally completed his studies with a diploma in education at the Lycée in Bervais, France, followed by further studies at the Sorbonne in Paris.

In 1912, Elstob took up the role of senior French master at Merchiston Castle School, a preparatory school in Edinburgh.

After the outbreak of World War One, he initially enlisted in August 1914 as a private into the newly raised Private Schools Battalion. However, on October 30, 1914, he accepted a commission into the newly formed 1st Manchester Pals Battalion – later the 16th Battalion – Manchester Regiment. From 1914-1915, he underwent training at Heaton Park, in Manchester; Grantham, in Lincolnshire; and Salisbury Plain, in Wiltshire.

Elstob was tall, well-built and a formidable athlete – he was quickly promoted as a result of his many talents. By May 1915, he was serving in the rank of captain and also commander of 'D' Company. In November 1915, he and his men were posted to France.

### "Death seemed enviable"

As well as being a tough and brave soldier, Elstob wrote sensitive, thoughtful letters. In one to his friend Hubert Worthington, dated May 6, 1917, he wrote: "Hu, I hardly dare mention the losses, for my heart is full and I know how you will feel.

"On the battlefield as one moved about amongst shells and bullets – death seemed a very small thing and at times enviable. Here we are English and German – we, or rather those damned journalists, talk about hate – it seems to me to disappear on the battlefield. People who have not been there talk a lot of damned nonsense. We are all 'blind', as a private soldier on the night after the battle said to me. 'We know it is not their quarrel, Sir.'"

Elstob and his men took part in the heavy fighting on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, on July 1, 1916. For his valour in battle that day – which led to the capture of Montauban – Elstob was later awarded the Military Cross, but he also received a bullet wound to the neck in the bitter fighting. Despite his injury, he fought on. Then, on July 9, just eight days later, he was wounded a second time during fighting at Trônes Wood, helping to capture the strategically important area by July 14.

By this point, he was second-in-command of his battalion too.

On July 30, 1917, Elstob was again in the thick of the fighting – this time in Belgium – and he showed such outstanding valour at the Third Battle of Ypres that he was later awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Under a heavy fire, he had reorganised disordered units on the Ypres-Menin Road, and he had been responsible for mopping up local German resistance. Between August and December 1917, Elstob was given temporary command of 90th Brigade. In the New Year, he had some leave and returned to England, where he played rugby. In February 1918, during a break from the fighting, he captained the divisional football team against a French XI in a match staged in Paris.

### Masses from out the fog

It was for his astonishing bravery while commanding the 16th Battalion that Elstob was awarded the VC. On March 21, the battalion was based in and around

*"Hu, I hardly dare mention the losses, for my heart is full"*

WILFRITH ELSTOB, CAPTAIN, 'D' COMPANY, 16TH MANCHESTERS



The 1918 German Spring Offensive saw 47 divisions attack Allied lines in Operation Michael, the first of several near-simultaneous German offensives. The attacks were spearheaded by 'stormtroopers' and huge hurricane bombardments ALAMY

## HERO OF THE MONTH

a stronghold, which, since its capture by the 2nd Manchesters, was known as “Manchester Hill”

Control of this hill was vitally important – it meant control of the St Quentin-Savy Road. A few days earlier, Elstob had addressed his men and, pointing at the blackboard showing various company locations, said: “This is Battalion HQ. Here we fight and here we die.”

The British knew that there was going to be a massive German attack on its positions as part of the so-called Spring Offensive. It began at 0630hrs on March 21 with the roar of innumerable heavy guns. Soon there was heavy fighting in and around the German-held town of St Quentin, some 25 miles southeast of Bapaume, in the Hauts-de-France region.

A combination of thick fog and smoke from the heavy shelling made it impossible for the battalion to see the Germans advancing. Yet by 0830hrs, news came that ‘A’ Company was virtually surrounded. Minutes later, ‘B’ Company had suffered the same fate. By 1130hrs, as the fog lifted, the enemy could be seen advancing in massive numbers. However, using a buried telegraph cable, Elstob sent a message to his brigade commander: “The Manchester Regiment will defend Manchester Hill to the last man.”

The men on the hill soon became surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered. Other than ‘D’ Company, many of the men were not used to fighting. They were a collection of cooks, signalmen, regimental police and others, but battled on courageously.

When the enemy entered the area by a trench leading from the St Quentin-Savy Road, Elstob fought ferociously to stop them advancing, killing a German bombing party using only his revolver. When his ammunition ran out, he threw bombs and fired on the enemy with a rifle. Elstob was wounded but, after having his injury dressed, cheered on his men, shouting “You are doing magnificently, boys! Carry on – keep up a steady fire and they’ll think there’s a battalion here.”

In the afternoon, Elstob was even more inspirational and courageous. Sergeant Arrundale later recounted seeing him blown five yards by a shell and wounded three times. Yet Elstob told him: “Arrundale, they can’t damn well kill me.” Elstob asked Brigade HQ for a reinforcement of 20 men, but they could not be spared.

A staff officer at the HQ later reported: “At about 1400hrs he said that most of his men were killed or wounded, including himself; that they were all getting dead-beat, that the Germans had got into the



A set of keys found on the battlefield after Elstob's death by his batman. These include an engraved disc with 'Elstob' and are particularly poignant as his body was never found COURTESY MANCHESTER REGIMENT COLLECTIONS, TAMESIDE MBC

[Manchester Hill] Redoubt and hand-to-hand fighting was going on. He was still quite cheery. At 1530hrs he was spoken to on the telephone and said that very few were left and that the end was nearly come. After that no answer could be got.”

It is believed that his final message was one word: “Goodbye.”



Elstob's Victoria Cross COURTESY OF THE MANCHESTER REGIMENT COLLECTIONS, TAMESIDE MBC

### Never surrender

One survivor later recalled Elstob's last words to his comrades: “Tell the men not to lose heart. Fight on!” Elstob held his ground, firing up the trench towards the enemy when they were only some 25 yards away. As the enemy prepared for its final assault, he was called upon to surrender. “Never!” he replied, and moments later he was dead.

By 1600hrs, the final surviving members of the 16th, battered, blooded and wounded, surrendered. Elstob had been killed, six months before his 30th birthday, because he was determined to fulfil his pledge that the Manchesters would fight to the last to defend Manchester Hill. He was a single man.

Elstob's VC was not awarded until June 9, 1919, and this was because, with so many of his men killed, the authorities had to piece together information from former POWs who had been with him on the battlefield on March 21, 1918. His lengthy citation eventually stated:

“For most conspicuous bravery, devotion to duty and self-sacrifice during operations at Manchester Redoubt, near St. Quentin, on March 21, 1918.

“During the preliminary bombardment he encouraged his men in the posts in the Redoubt by frequent visits, and when repeated attacks developed controlled the defence at the points threatened, giving personal support with revolver, rifle and bombs. Single-handed he repulsed one bombing assault driving back the enemy and inflicting severe casualties.

“Later, when ammunition was required, he made several journeys under severe fire in order to replenish the supply.

“Throughout the day Lieutenant-Colonel



Elstob's medal group, comprising his VC, DSO, MC, 1914-15 Star, 1914-1920 War Medal and Inter Allied Victory Medal (with MID Oak Leaf) COURTESY MANCHESTER REGIMENT COLLECTIONS, TAMESIDE MBC

*“By means of the buried cable Lieutenant-Colonel Elstob was able to assure his brigade commander that ‘The Manchester Regiment will defend Manchester Hill to the last’”*

Elstob, although twice wounded, showed the most fearless disregard of his own safety, and by his encouragement and noble example inspired his command to the fullest degree.

“The Manchester Redoubt was surrounded in the first wave of the enemy attack, but by means of the buried cable Lieutenant-Colonel Elstob was able to assure his brigade commander that ‘The Manchester Regiment will defend Manchester Hill to the last.’

“Sometime after this post was overcome by vastly superior forces, and this very gallant officer was killed in the final assault,

having maintained to the end the duty which he had impressed on his men – namely, ‘Here we fight, and here we die.’

“He set throughout the highest example of valour, determination, endurance and fine soldierly bearing.”

Elstob's father, John, was presented with his son's posthumous VC by King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on July 24, 1919. He was accompanied by Captain Worthington, Elstob junior's friend and who had collected most of the statements that provided the evidence for the award of the VC. I do not own Elstob's gallantry and service medals which, in fact,

belong to his regiment and are usually – unless on loan – on display at the Museum of the Manchester Regiment.

Elstob's remains were never recovered and so he has no grave. However, the name of Temporary Lieutenant-Colonel Wilfrith Elstob VC, DSO, MC, is on several memorials, including the Pozieres Memorial in France. Furthermore, there is a memorial window in his honour at All Saints' Church, Siddington, Cheshire, and a schoolhouse at Ryleys School, Cheshire, is named after its courageous former schoolboy who attended along with his dear friend, Hubert Worthington. **BW**



Elstob VC is commemorated on the memorial walls ringing the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Pozieres  
STEVEN COTTAM/ALAMY

## 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 X (formerly Twitter) and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.

