

Lieutenant Edward
Benn Smith VC,
DCM

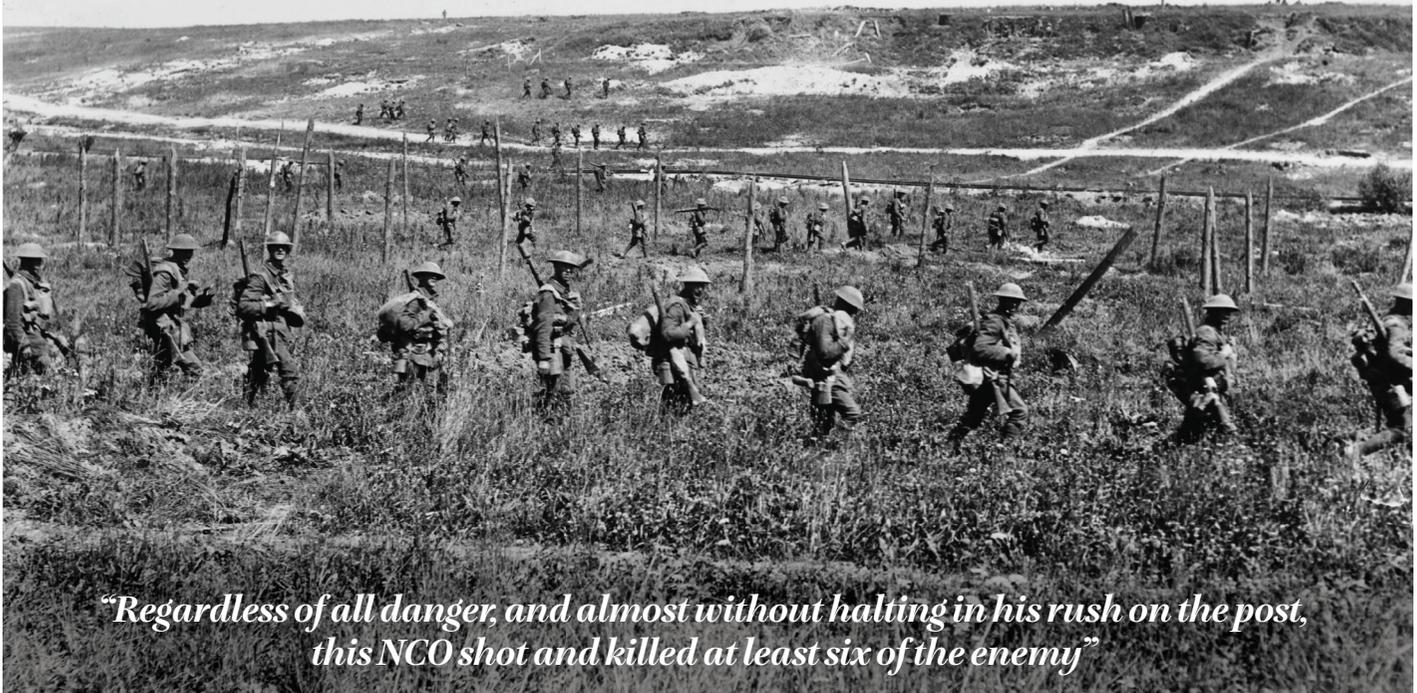


HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: Edward Benn Smith VC, DCM
LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION, IWM LONDON

British troops advance during the 1918 Battle of Albert, in which Benn Smith earned his VC just 11 days after earning his DCM at Amiens CHRONICLE/ALAMY



“Regardless of all danger, and almost without halting in his rush on the post, this NCO shot and killed at least six of the enemy”

Edward Smith, who tried and failed to enrol in the army when still only 17, was a young man in a hurry. When he did eventually serve on the frontline during the final months of World War One, he made his mark, when still only 19, in two separate actions in less than a fortnight.

His sheer bravery on those occasions led to him being awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Victoria Cross. As the proud custodian of Benn Smith’s medal group, purchased at auction in 1996, I am delighted to tell the story of his life and service career.

Edward Benn Smith, known as ‘Ned’ to family and friends, was born in Maryport, Cumberland (now part of Cumbria) on November 10, 1898. He was one of five children, with two brothers and two sisters, born to Charles Smith and his wife, Martha (née Benn). The small, coastal town of Maryport, situated just outside the Lake District National Park, was known for its fishing and coal mining. Smith’s father was a seaman, serving in the Royal Naval Reserve which, during 1915, led to him seeing action in the ill-fated Dardanelles campaign. His mother’s family on both sides had been fishermen.

After attending the National School in Maryport, Edward Smith became a miner, working in the Oughterside Colliery close to his hometown. On December 11, 1915, Smith attempted to enrol in the army, but was instead transferred to the reserves because of his tender age. In July 1917, by this point 18, he enlisted as a private with the Lancashire Fusiliers.

Smith arrived in France on December 10, 1917, where he joined the 1/5th Battalion, The Lancashire Fusiliers. An enthusiastic soldier, he was promoted to lance sergeant while serving in the Givenchy area of France. However, it was not until the following August that Smith was given the chance – in a series of frontline battles during the so-called Hundred Days Offensive – to show his formidable prowess as a soldier.

Two medals in 11 days

On August 10, 1918, during the Battle of Amiens, Smith showed both courage and leadership skills during an action south of Hébuterne in which he obtained useful information on enemy positions before inflicting heavy casualties too.

Major-General Arthur Solly-Flood, GOC 42nd East Lancashire Infantry Division, commended Smith’s actions in the following terms: “On August 10, southeast of Hébuterne, this NCO led a daylight patrol. By skilful handling and use of cover he examined two points of the enemy line about which information was required. This information he obtained. When on the point of returning, Sergeant Smith noticed a party of 40 of the enemy coming forward from their main line of resistance, obviously to take up night outpost dispositions.

“Smith decided to wait for the enemy, and engage them, though outnumbered. He inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy, who at once scattered. His initiative and determination to inflict casualties on the enemy was a fine example.”

This statement formed the basis of the citation for Smith’s DCM, announced in *The London Gazette* at the end of October 1918, shortly before the war ended.

Smith showed still greater courage during the Battle of Albert, which began on August 21, 1918, just 11 days after his DCM-earning action. The battle involved a sustained effort from III Corps of the British Third Army to advance the line a good distance north of Albert as far as the railway to Arras. In advance of the battle, the 1/5th Lancashire Fusiliers had gathered in positions west of Beaumont Hamel-Puisseux on August 20.

The battalion had been given three key targets: Hill 140 (known as ‘The Lozenge’), the high ground further east of Hill 140 and the village of Beaugard Dovecot.

Early the next morning, shortly before 5am, the battalion began to advance south of Puisieux towards Hill 140. They knew their objectives were heavily defended, but they had the advantage of having supporting heavy artillery fire and a thick mist. It was during the next 72 hours that Smith showed such outstanding courage, particularly in the attack on Beaugard Dovecot, that he was later awarded the VC.

The citation for his decoration, announced in *The London Gazette* on October 22, 1918, tells the story of his gallantry during intense fighting: “For most conspicuous bravery, leadership and personal example during an attack and subsequent operations.

“Sjt Smith, while in charge of a platoon, personally took a machine gun post, rushing the garrison with his rifle and

bayonet. The enemy on seeing him advance scattered to throw hand grenades at him. Regardless of all danger, and almost without halting in his rush on the post, this NCO shot and killed at least six of the enemy. Later, seeing another platoon requiring assistance, he led his men to them, took command of the situation and captured the objective. "During the enemy counter-attack on the following day, he led a section forward and restored a portion of the line. His personal bravery, skill and initiative were outstanding, and his conduct throughout exemplified magnificent courage and skill, and was an inspiring example to all."

"An A1 man"

Due to the exceptional bravery of Smith and others like him, the objective for the Battle of Arras had largely been achieved by the evening of August 23, after three days of heavy fighting - although Miraumont remained in German hands.

After the announcement of Smith's VC, it is believed that, still only 19 and a month short of his 20th birthday, he became the youngest holder of the decoration in the British Army. His investiture took place at Buckingham Palace on November 9, 1918, when he was presented with his VC by King George V. Two days later hostilities ended with the signing of the November Armistice.

Smith had played a key role in the Hundred Days Offensive, a series of major Allied advances that eventually ended the war. Beginning with the Battle of Amiens - lasting from August 8-12 and during which Smith took part in his DCM action - the Allies pushed back the Germans, thereby regaining territory lost during Germany's Spring Offensive. The Battle of Albert - lasting from August 21-23 and during which Smith took part in his VC action - had been another key victory in the offensive.

Shortly after the war, Smith returned to his hometown where he found the entire population keen to partake in his VC celebrations. As he arrived in Maryport, he was greeted by a crowd of 6,000 and several speeches were delivered in his honour at the marketplace. Smith was presented with a long-case clock, a silver tea-set, a gold watch and chain, and £200 in War Bonds - a considerable sum in those days. Smith was promoted to full

sergeant, but he declined the offer of a commission. His parents were also given gifts, including a gold brooch, while members of the Home Defence Corps escorted Smith back to his family home in North Quay, Maryport.

Two local newspapers, including The Whitehaven News, carried stories on the VC celebrations with one report stating: "Sergeant Smith is not only a VC but looks it. He is a British soldier every inch of him. He is an A1 man from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. [...] He has not only won [sic] the VC but he has a chest on which to display it."

Smith briefly left the army but decided not to return to his civilian job as a miner. Instead, he re-enlisted on May 5, 1919, initially serving with the Cameron Highlanders. A short time later, he transferred to the 1st Battalion, The

Lancashire Fusiliers, who were then based at Blackdown, Aldershot, Hampshire.

In 1920, Smith was made a drum major and in the same year he was one of numerous VC holders invited by the King to a garden party at Buckingham Palace, held on June 20. In 1924, Smith was promoted to company sergeant major and two years later he was posted to Malaya, where he had responsibilities for training the local volunteer force over the next three years.

Back to France

In July 1932, Smith was promoted to regimental sergeant major and he served in this rank in Colchester, Essex, and, later, in Shanghai and Tientsin, China. In 1938, as he approached his 40th birthday, Smith left the army and joined the Corps of Commissionaires in London.

Reproduction of a Daily Herald newspaper page from January 16, 1940. The main headline reads 'WHY GERMAN RAIDERS ARE GETTING AWAY'. Other headlines include 'FRANK FACTS about the War in the Air Over Britain', 'Dutch Steamer Torpedoed', 'Premier's Letter to Hore-Belisha', and 'U.S. Envoy Hurries to Belgium'. A large advertisement for 'Evan Williams' hair products is on the right side of the page.

Edward Benn Smith's death in early 1940 was front page news. This paper states that he "died of wounds" JOHN FROST NEWSPAPERS/ALAMY



Benn Smith's VC, Distinguished Conduct Medal, 1914-1920 War Medal, Inter Allied Victory Medal, 1939-1945 Star, 1939-1945 War Medal, George VI Silver Jubilee Medal, George VI Coronation Medal and Long Service and Good Conduct Medal LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION, IWM LONDON

However, within a year, the world was at war again and so Smith re-joined the army, accepting a short service commission as a lieutenant and quartermaster. He served with the 2nd Battalion, The Lancashire Fusiliers, as part of the British Expeditionary Force in France.

However, the exact circumstances of his subsequent death on January 12, 1940, are shrouded in mystery.

Smith was discovered dead in a storeroom with critical head wounds. How he received his injuries was a matter of conjecture. There was a suggestion he had been killed by 'friendly fire', but this seems unlikely.

Given his expertise in firearms, it was even more unlikely that he had shot himself accidentally. On balance, it seems more likely that Smith took his own life – but this is far from certain. Smith was an incredibly brave and courageous man, but it is possible that by this stage in his life he was struggling with what would today be described as mental health issues.

Smith, who was single, died aged 41. He was buried in Beuvry Communal Cemetery Extension, Pas de Calais, France. His parents were sent a telegram the day after his death saying that their son had been "killed in action." A colonel had written to

Charles and Martha Smith on the same day saying their son had died from a "bullet in the head" but without going into the exact circumstances of his death. Later in the war, his mother presented the army with her son's World War One uniform so that it could be used by a serviceman.

Smith's name is listed on the Maryport War Memorial in Cumbria but, given his outstanding and gallant career, it is perhaps sad that there are not more memorials in his memory. However, I am delighted that his medal group is on display at the gallery bearing my name at the Imperial War Museum, London. [IWW](#)

"The world was at war again and so Smith re-joined the army, accepting a short service commission as a lieutenant"



Benn Smith VC is buried in the CWGC Beuvry Communal Cemetery Extension, near Béthune. The cemetery contains the graves of 192 British and Commonwealth dead, including Benn Smith's and 17 others from World War Two WERNERVC

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. 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

and details about his VC collection may be found at lordashcroftmedals.com.

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

For Lord Ashcroft's work on gallantry, visit lordashcroftonbravery.com. Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.

