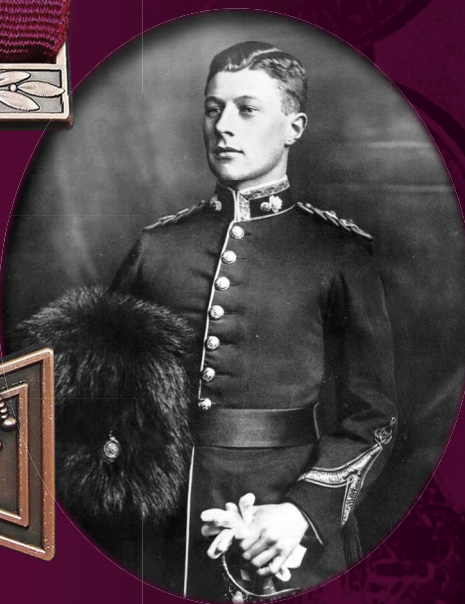


Lieutenant
Maurice James
Dease VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: Lieutenant Maurice Dease of the Royal Fusiliers with a bearskin and brass Royal Fusiliers cap badge TOPFOTO

Men of the 4th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (9th Brigade, 3rd Division) on August 22, 1914, resting in the square at Mons the day before the Battle of Mons. Minutes after this photograph was taken, these men moved into position at Nimy on the bank of the Mons-Condé Canal. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER



“The Germans attacked the bridge with greater intensity and Dease was wounded. As he defended his position, Dease was hit three more times, including in the neck”

Lieutenant Maurice James Dease was the first officer to be awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously during World War One. His decoration was for a heroic act of bravery and leadership in August 1914, just days after the outbreak of the war.

Born in Coole, County Westmeath, Ireland, on September 28, 1889, Dease was the only son of Edmund Dease, a Justice of the Peace, and his wife, Katherine (née Murray). He was educated at Frogna Park School in Hampstead, Stonyhurst College in Lancashire and the Army College, Wimbledon, before attending the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. A Roman Catholic, he took his religious beliefs very seriously both as a schoolboy and in his army career.

Dease was commissioned into the 4th Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment), as a second lieutenant on May 27, 1910. Later that year, he underwent a mountain warfare training course in Wales, then was promoted to a full lieutenant in April 1912. He was serving as an acting adjutant when the regiment was mobilised on August 5, 1914.

When war broke out, the British Expeditionary Force, then commanded by Field Marshal Sir John French, was assembled and dispatched across the Channel to assist the French and Belgians. In August 13, Dease's battalion was in Le Havre, then moved on to Belgium and, by August 22, was situated on the French-Belgium border at Mons. Dease and his men were in position and ready to fight just two days after Brussels fell to the Germans.

First contact

On August 23, the Germans attacked General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien's II Corps, which had been deployed along the Mons-Condé canal. A key part of the BEF, II Corps comprised 72,000 men and 300 guns.

The 4th Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers, was defending the

Nimy bridges to the north of Mons against a larger force from the German 1. Armee. In particular, the railway bridge was defended by two platoons and a company headquarters under Captain Ashburner, with its two-gun machine gun sections led by Lieutenant Dease.

Overnight, Dease had supervised the protection of the two guns with sacks of shingle. The left-hand gun was positioned on top of the embankment and the right-hand one below the railway bridge. Everyone knew the tasks of protecting both the guns and the bridge would be huge.

Shortly after 8am on a sweltering summer's day, the battle for the bridge began in earnest and the Germans' initial attack was seen off by a combination of the machine gunners and riflemen. The Germans attacked the bridge with greater intensity and Dease was hit and wounded. As he fought to defend his position, he was hit three more times, including in the neck. Close by were several other casualties, both dead and wounded.

Despite his injuries, Dease helped to feed ammunition to his men. When the man on the right-hand gun was badly wounded, Dease helped drag him away and ease him down the embankment to relative safety. He then manned the machine gun himself but, in doing so, exposed himself to heavy small arms and artillery fire. Refusing treatment, Dease rallied his men and tried to ensure both machine guns kept firing.

By this point, it seemed only a matter of time before Dease was killed and the final injury, his fifth wound, proved to be that fatal blow. He fell on the railway lines, having been fighting courageously for several hours, and was carried to safety by Lieutenant F W A Steele, but died shortly afterwards at around 15.30hrs. He was just 24 and unmarried.

Meanwhile, his men were forced to retreat but, yet again, they put up a brave fight against the numerically larger enemy force. After

Dease had been put out of action, Steele called for a volunteer to man the machine gun. Private Frank Godley, who had earlier assisted Dease, stepped forward and, despite coming under a murderous fire, held the bridge single-handedly for two hours while his comrades retreated. When Godley agreed to stay on alone, it effectively meant almost certain death or capture by the Germans.

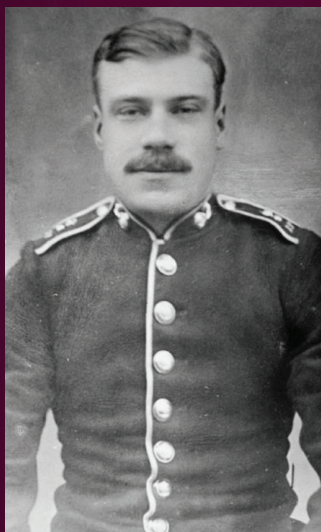
Eventually having run out of ammunition, Godley destroyed the gun and threw the pieces into the canal. By this point, he had been wounded twice, yet managed to crawl to a nearby road, where he was helped to hospital by two Belgian civilians. However, as the Germans advanced, Godley was taken prisoner.

Although the British had defended their positions well, the French were driven back on the BEF's right. This meant that, over August 24/25, the BEF had to stage a fighting retreat from Mons.

Perfect hail of fire

Dease was buried at St Symphorien Military Cemetery, near Mons, and is remembered with a plaque under the Nimy railway bridge and in Westminster Cathedral. His bravery also inspired a painting by the artist Albert Chevallier Tayler which is on display at the Refectory, Stonyhurst College.

It was his fellow officer, Lieutenant Steele, who wrote to Dease's family informing them of his courage: "Poor Maurice got shot below the knee or thereabouts about 9am, while he was attending



to a machine gun on the left side of the bridge. Ashburner and I begged him to go off and get fixed up at the hospital, but he refused. He then crawled over to the right-hand side gun. Almost as soon as he got there he was again shot somewhere in the side. I made him lie down near me and with great difficulty kept him quiet as he was worried about his guns. I promised to look after these for him and he settled down a bit quieter. I asked him if he was in any pain and he said 'No' and smiled more or less cheerfully. As soon as I managed to get the guns going again he seemed much more happy. He seemed to have been hit again while I was busy on his left. For the next two hours there was a perfect hail of machine gun fire as well as artillery and infantry fire. Maurice during this time became very quiet, and I fancy unconscious. When we retired Maurice had to be left behind."

It has to be said that the short citation for Dease's VC, announced in The London Gazette on November 16 1914, did not do full justice to his exceptional bravery, stating only: "Though two or three times badly wounded he continued to control the fire of his machine guns at Mons on August 23 until all his men were shot. He died of his wounds."

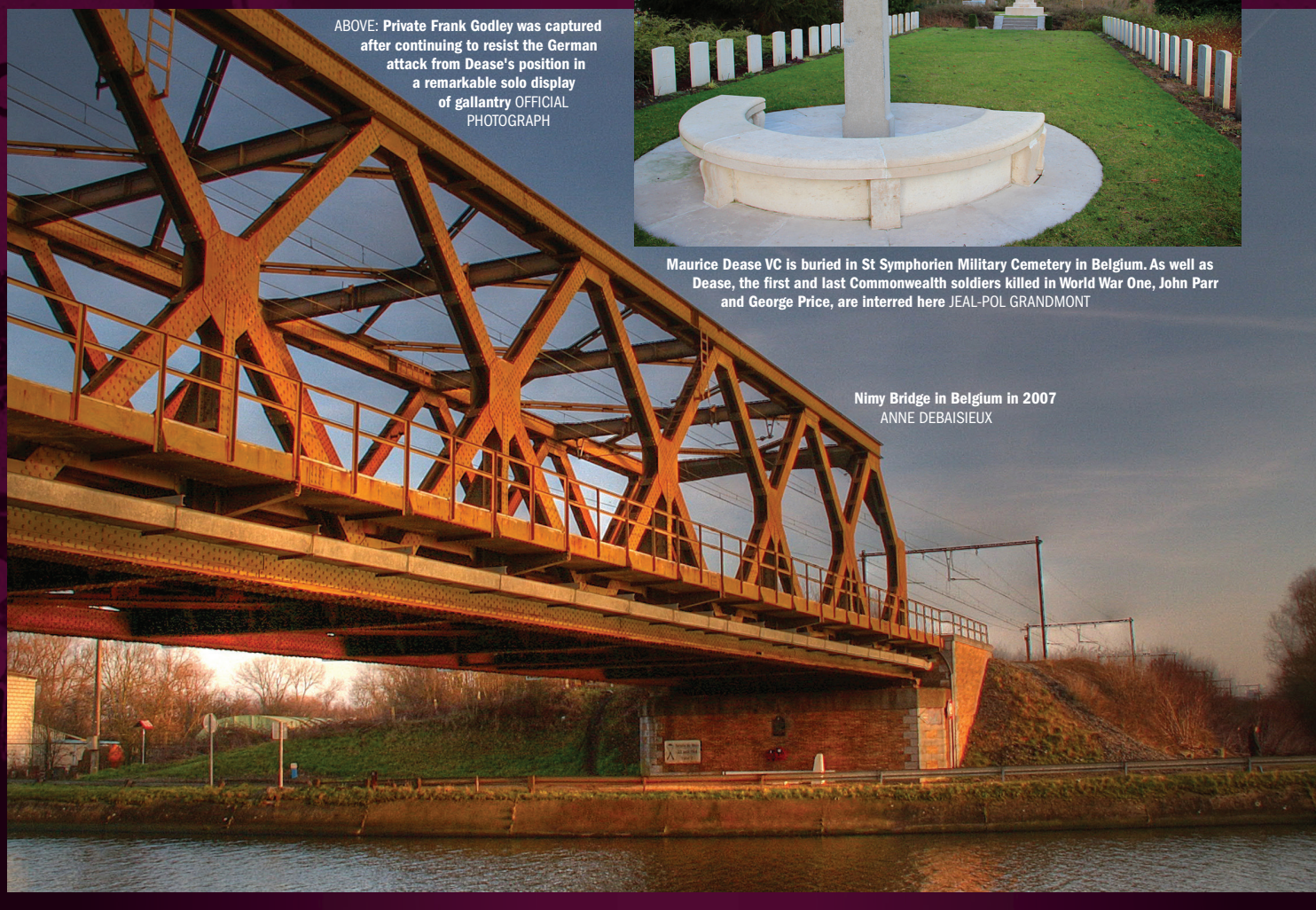
His VC was sent in the post to his parents' home in Ireland.

ABOVE: Private Frank Godley was captured after continuing to resist the German attack from Dease's position in a remarkable solo display of gallantry OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



Maurice Dease VC is buried in St Symphorien Military Cemetery in Belgium. As well as Dease, the first and last Commonwealth soldiers killed in World War One, John Parr and George Price, are interred here JEAL-POL GRANDMONT

Nimy Bridge in Belgium in 2007 ANNE DEBAISIEUX



“Real heroism”

Another account of Dease's bravery is provided by H C O'Neill in his book *The Royal Fusiliers in the Great War*: “The machine gun crews were constantly being knocked out. So cramped was their position that when a man was hit he had to be removed before another could take his place. The approach from the trench was across the open, and whenever a gun stopped Lieutenant Maurice Dease... went up to see what was wrong. To do this once called for no ordinary courage. To repeat it several times could only be done with real heroism. Dease was badly wounded on these journeys, but insisted on remaining at duty as long as one of his crew could fire. The third wound proved fatal, and a well deserved VC was awarded him posthumously.

“By this time both guns had ceased firing, and all the crew had been knocked out. In response to an inquiry whether anyone else knew how to operate the guns, Private Godley came forward. He cleared the emplacement under heavy fire and brought the gun into action. But he had not been firing long before the gun was hit and put completely out of action. The water jackets of both guns were riddled with bullets, so that they were no longer of any use.”

Godley himself was badly wounded and, as stated earlier, fell into the hands of the Germans. It is understood he received no less than 26 separate wounds during the intense fighting. His major injuries

“Whenever a gun stopped Lieutenant Dease... went up to see what was wrong. To do this once called for no ordinary courage. To repeat could only be done with real heroism”

on 23rd August Dease was in command of the machine gunners with No 9 platoon who were defending the bridge at NIMV.
On the attack developing on the bridge he was one of the first to be hit - some where somewhere about the knee - He continued to direct the fire of his guns although obviously in great pain until he was again hit, this time some where in the back of after which he remained for a short time under cover.
Shortly after towards the machine gunners having been shot Dease asked me why the gun was not firing - ~~although~~ and insisted on crawling to the gun emplacement in order to see what was the matter. He then having taken the place of the man who was shot - He then received a third wound which incapacitated him and subsequently I am of opinion

Dease's Victoria Cross citation DR BETH WRYLL/ THE FUSILIER MUSEUM LONDON



Dease's medal group MAJOR MICK MCCARTHY

included a head wound and a deep shrapnel wound in his back. Godley was decorated on November 25, 1914, thereby becoming the first private to be awarded the VC in World War One.

After being captured by the Germans, he had refused to answer questions. Nevertheless, he was well treated, being sent to Berlin for skin grafts. In fact, his back alone required 150 stitches and parts of missing and damaged bone were replaced by wire. When he was fit enough, he was transferred to Doberitz POW camp, where he remained for much of the war. While he was a prisoner, a senior German officer informed Godley that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross.

At the end of the war, Godley's camp guards deserted their position and he and five other men eventually made their way back to Britain via Denmark. He was presented with his VC at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on February 15, 1919, later becoming a school caretaker and retiring in 1951, after 30 years' service. He died in Epping, Essex, in June 1957, aged 67, and was buried with full military honours at Loughton cemetery in Essex, close to where he had lived in his later years.

In the 2014 television drama, *Our World War*, Godley was played by the actor Theo Barklem-Biggs. Dease was played by Dominic Thorburn in the same episode.

My admiration for the bravery of Dease and Godley is immense. I do not own either's medal group, but I did research their bravery as part of a Channel 5 television series, *Victoria Cross Heroes*, that I presented in 2006. Dease's medal group is on display at the Fusilier Museum at the Tower of London, while Godley's medal group was sold to a private collector at auction in 2012. **BW**

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES VOLUME II

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster.

His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II*, was published in hardback in 2016 and is also available in paperback. For more information, visit victoriacrossheroes2.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. Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook: @LordAshcroft

