

Sergeant
William Bernard
Traynor VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Sergeant William Bernard Traynor of the 2nd West Yorkshire
Regiment, February 1901 LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION/IWM

Traynor served in India with the West Yorks, a well-travelled regiment. Here, the regiment's 1st Battalion parades in Gibraltar ahead of its 1896 deployment to Hong Kong
BALEAN/TOPFOTO



Sergeant William Traynor earned his Victoria Cross for a rare night action during the Second Boer War. His decoration was also the only VC awarded to a non-commissioned officer or private soldier from the West Yorkshire Regiment during the conflict. Furthermore, I am pleased to say that I am the proud owner of his medal group having bought it at auction in 2012.

William Bernard Traynor was born in Hull, Yorkshire (now in the East Riding of Yorkshire), on December 31, 1870. He was the son of Francis Traynor, a flax dresser originally from Ireland's County Monaghan, and his wife Rebecca (née Longfield). After being educated at Pryme Street Roman Catholic School in Hull, Traynor Jr worked as a labourer.

On November 14, 1888, Traynor, just a month short of his 18th birthday, joined the 2nd Battalion, West Yorks Regiment (the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment) at Beverley, Yorkshire (also now East Riding). From January 1891, he served with his regiment in India, including postings to the garrisons at Mooltan, Lahore and Lucknow. On June 12, 1897, back in Britain, he married Jane Martin, and the couple went on to have two daughters and four sons – including twin boys.

On October 20, 1899, and having earlier extended his service to 12 years, Traynor went with his regiment to South Africa. The Second Anglo-Boer War was fought at the turn of the 20th century between the British Empire and the two independent Boer republics: the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal).

War was declared on October 11, 1899, the Boers striking first by invading Cape Colony and Natal Colony before the end of

January 1900. In a period known as 'Black Week', December 10-15, 1899, the British forces led by General Sir Redvers Buller suffered devastating losses at Magersfontein, Stormberg and Colenso. The Boers also besieged the towns of Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley, where the townspeople suffered terrible hardship.

There were further defeats for the British in the first five weeks of 1900 but, when reinforcements arrived on February 14,

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H W WILSON, IN AFTER PRETORIA:
THE GUERRILLA WAR

troops under the command of Field Marshal Lord Roberts launched a series of successful counteroffensives. Kimberley was relieved the next day and there were further victories before the relief of Ladysmith. However, it was the relief of Mafeking in May 1900 that prompted the biggest celebrations in Britain.

Sweeping the veldt

As 250,000 British troops, under the overall command of Lord Kitchener, gained control of both republics, the Boers resorted to guerrilla tactics while the British built large-scale concentration

camps to hold refugees (including women and children) created by their 'scorched earth' policy. The war rumbled on until the last of the Boers surrendered in May 1902, with the Treaty of Vereeniging signed on May 31.

Traynor was present at several major engagements: Colenso, Spion Kop, Laing's Nek, Tugela Heights and the Relief of Ladysmith, and was promoted to sergeant on June 1, 1900. He received the VC – one of 78 awarded during the conflict – for his bravery displayed at the defence of Bothwell Camp, in the Transvaal.

As a result of Boer attacks on the Delagoa Bay (now Maputo Bay) railway line, Lieutenant-General John French was ordered to clear Boer commandos (regional groups of volunteer militia – good riders typically skilled in fieldcraft and/or marksmanship) from the area south of the line as far as the Johannesburg–Natal railway. The aim was to encircle General Louis Botha and his troops near Ermelo.

On the night of February 5, 1901, French's column camped at Bothwell, at the northern end of Lake Chrissie and around halfway between Ermelo and Carolina. At 0300hrs, the Boers attacked and for an hour they kept up a relentless assault on the British encampment. In his book *After Pretoria: The Guerrilla War*, H W Wilson painted a vivid picture of the day's events:

“On February 5, General Smith-Dorrien, on the British left, reached Bothwell Farm, in the neighbourhood of Lake Chrissie – which is famous as being one of the very few sheets of fresh water in South Africa. Here he halted for the night and, with the studious attention to all reasonable precautions which had won him so good a reputation in this protracted war, entrenched his camp

strongly.

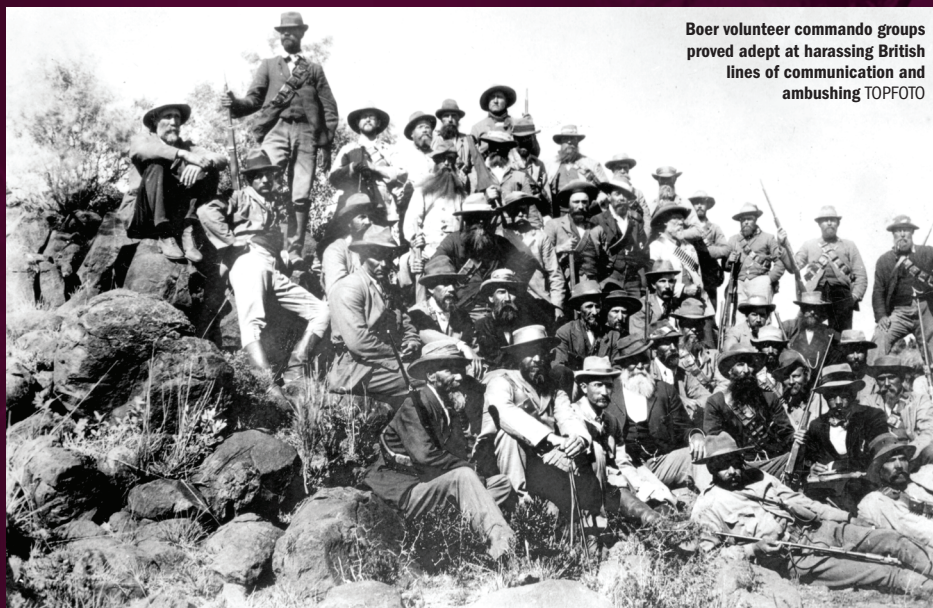
“The night was intensely dark, and the obscurity was increased by a heavy mist which hung over these uplands, rendering it impossible for the sentries and outposts to see anyone at a few yards’ distance. It was fortunate that so much care was shown on the British side, as Louis Botha during the day had reinforced Lukas Meyer, who was conducting the Boer retreat in this quarter and had determined upon a night attack with 2,000 men, to cover the withdrawal northwards of the great bulk of his force, now menaced with the danger of being driven into Natal or penned in upon the Swazi frontier.

“At 3am on the 6th the assault was delivered.”

Battle at Bothwell

The Boers were able to crawl close into the British outposts before they were seen and challenged. Wilson described how their “forlorn hope” then rushed between two trenches held by the West Yorks, driving in front of them loose horses – the aim being to lead the British to think they were being charged by mounted men.

Although this did cause momentary confusion, the experienced soldiers of ‘G’



Boer volunteer commando groups proved adept at harassing British lines of communication and ambushing TOPFOTO

and ‘H’ Companies of the West Yorks held their position, while the British supports caught the Boers by surprise. Vicious hand-to-hand fighting followed in which the British forces gained the upper hand.

Wilson said of the fighting: “Many men were killed or wounded as they lay asleep. But order was swiftly restored; the tired

troops as they awoke collected their wits, snatched up their rifles, and dashed forth to repel their assailants. They had no mark at which to fire except the fitful flashes of the Martinis and Mausers, yet there is evidence that many of the British bullets found billets in the enemy’s ranks. “Long before day broke, seeing that their



Traynor VC (one of the last survivors of the Second Boer War) greeted by Winston Churchill at the opening of a convalescent home for war veterans in Sevenoaks, Kent, October 1946 J WILDS/KEYSTONE/GETTY

onset had failed, the Boers withdrew, well knowing that the British were too ignorant of the ground to attempt pursuit until day came. They seem to have made off to the north, sending a detachment eastward to make the British think that they were retiring in that direction. At daybreak Smith-Dorrien despatched his mounted infantry to follow them up, but they had already got so far that touch could not be recovered."

British casualties at the action – often described as the Battle of Chrissiesmeer – had been heavy: 24 killed and 53 wounded, with the West Yorks hardest hit. However, it was during the height of the battle that Traynor showed such great courage that he was awarded the VC. He was, however, badly wounded – so grievously that his wife initially received a telegram saying that he had been killed. He had received splinter and bullet wounds to his chest and thigh.

Traynor's VC was announced on September 17, 1901, when his citation stated: "During the night attack on Bothwell Camp, on February 6, 1901, Sergeant Traynor jumped out of a trench and ran out under an extremely heavy fire to the assistance of a wounded man. While running out he was severely wounded, and being unable to carry the man himself, he called for assistance. Lance Corporal Lintott at once came to him, and between them they carried the wounded soldier into shelter. After this, although severely wounded, Traynor remained in command of his section, and was most cheerful in encouraging his men till the attack failed."

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VC CITATION, LONDON GAZETTE

“True devotion to duty”

Traynor's injuries forced his discharge in September 1901, the same month his VC was announced. He was not well enough to travel to London for his investiture and so, instead, a presentation was made to him on July 2, 1902, at the West Yorkshire Barracks in York, close to his home.

The *Daily Mail* reported: "A brief but interesting ceremony took place at a full-dress parade of the troops of the York garrison at the infantry barracks this morning, when Sergeant W B Traynor, 2nd Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment, was presented with the Victoria Cross gained during the South African War... The officer making the presentation of the trophy, Colonel E S Browne, Assistant Adjutant-



Traynor's VC, Queen's South Africa Medal (with six clasps) and King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II coronation medals
LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION/IWM

General, North Eastern District, is himself a Victoria Cross man.

"Having referred to the circumstances under which Sergeant Traynor risked his life to help one under his command, Colonel Browne VC said one could not conceive a brighter example of true devotion to duty.

"Colonel Browne then called Sergeant Traynor, who was in muffi [civvies], forward and pinned the cross to his breast, and also the South Africa Medal with six clasps. Colonel Browne addressed the troops, remarking that owing to the state of Sergeant Traynor's health, it had not been possible for him to journey to London to receive the cross, in the way he otherwise would, but that circumstances had its compensating advantage for it enabled Traynor to receive it in the very cradle and home of the distinguished infantry regiment to which he had belonged."

For a short time, Traynor worked as an orderly room clerk but in September 1902 he was given the job of barrack warden at Dover. In fact, during World War One he was praised for his valuable service in this role. Following a dinner for holders of the VC in the Royal Gallery of the House of Lords in 1929, at which the Prince of Wales was present, Traynor joined the Dover branch of the Royal British Legion and became one of its most enthusiastic supporters, at one point serving as the branch's vice-chairman.

In 1935, he retired from his post as barrack warden. In his twilight years, Traynor was honoured as a non-Freemen of the Borough by an invitation to Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation lunch held at Dover Town Hall. Throughout his post-military career, Traynor had also remained a loyal friend of

his old regiment, regularly travelling north to attend reunions. At the time of his death, he had a son serving in the Royal Engineers and a granddaughter serving in the Women's Royal Army Corps.

In retirement, Traynor continued living in Dover until his death on October 20, 1956, aged 83. His funeral was attended by numerous representatives of the West Yorkshire Regiment, as well as the Mayor of Dover. He was buried in Charlton Cemetery in the town. **BW**

Victoria Cross Heroes Vol. 2



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II* was published in hardback in 2016 and is now 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 – visit iwm.org.uk/heroes to learn more. Details about his VC collection may be found at lordashcroftmedals.com.

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