

Temporary Major  
Stewart Walker  
Loudoun-Shand VC



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Temporary Major Stewart Walker Loudoun-Shand VC  
LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION



Men of the 10th (Service) Battalion, Yorkshire Regiment marching to the trenches JWM/GETTY

*“By the time the British were racing forwards, the Germans had their machine gunners in such positions as to be able to direct accurate and constant fire on their assailants”*

Like the very best and bravest of officers, Temporary Major Stewart Loudoun-Shand never asked his men to do what he would not do himself. Furthermore, as part of what he saw as his role as a leader, he displayed exceptional gallantry by inspiring his men to show courage on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. Sadly, these daring deeds cost Loudoun-Shand his life at the start of one of the bloodiest and longest battles of not just World War One, but that the world has ever seen.

Stewart Walker Loudoun-Shand was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) on October 8, 1879. He was the son of the unusually named John Loudoun Loudoun-Shand, a wealthy tea planter, and his wife, Lucy (née Lawson). The couple had ten children – five sons and five daughters. In 1880, with Stewart just a year old, the family moved to Britain, first apparently living in Scotland and later in Dulwich, southeast London.

The Loudoun-Shand sons attended Dulwich College, where Stewart proved himself to be a fine athlete, cricketer and golfer. However, his younger brother surpassed him at sport, playing rugby for Oxford University and, later, Scotland. Stewart left Dulwich College in order to take up a job with William Deacon's Bank.

After the outbreak of the Second Boer War in October 1899, just days after Loudoun-Shand's 20th birthday, he enlisted in the

London Scottish but was considered too young for frontline service. However, he switched to the Pembroke Yeomanry and served with them for 18 months during the war in the rank of lance corporal.

In 1901, Loudoun-Shand accepted a position with a mercantile company based in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and remained in the role for three years. His next job was back in his birthplace of Ceylon, working for a tea merchant in a position that had been arranged by his father.

### Rapid promotion

After the outbreak of World War One in 1914, Loudoun-Shand returned to Britain and volunteered to fight, being commissioned into the 10th (Service) Battalion, The Yorkshire Regiment, as a lieutenant. His training took place at Halton Park Camp, Buckinghamshire, and Witley Camp, Surrey.

In June 1915, Loudoun-Shand was promoted to captain and three months later fought in the Battle of Loos on the Western Front, which at the time was the largest offensive of the war. It also marked the British Army's first use of chlorine gas and was the first major test for the all-volunteer New – or Kitchener's – Army. Loudoun-Shand's battalion took heavy casualties during the battle, including its colonel and two majors being killed. This, in turn, resulted in other officers being promoted

earlier than might have been expected and, in December 1915, Loudoun-Shand was elevated to temporary major.

The Battle of the Somme, which involved more than six months of careful preparation, was a joint offensive by British and French forces that was intended to result in a decisive victory over the Germans on the Western Front. Indeed, the strategy of major attack had been decided upon by the Allies during the Second Chantilly Conference of December 1915.

For two days before the battle got underway, the men of the 10th (Service) Battalion, The Yorkshire Regiment – also known as the Green Howards – had been billeted in Buire, southwest of Dernancourt. However, on the night before the attack, they took up a position in a copse called Queen's Redoubt, south of Bécourt Wood.

At 0730hrs on July 1, 1916, the Battle of the Somme got underway when the British Fourth Army launched its attack against the German line. The assault, involving 14 British divisions along a front line spanning some 18 miles, was centred along the chalk downland overlooking the Somme valley from the north. Following a heavy, seven-day preliminary bombardment, the objective of the first day of fighting was to capture Montauban and Contalmaison in the south and, further north, push the Germans back to their second line, running east of the village of Pozières.

## HERO OF THE MONTH

British troops encouraged to go over the top and leave the safety of their trench during the Battle of the Somme  
GRANGER/TOFPOTO



Close to the start of the battle, the 10th (Service) Battalion, including 'B' Company led by Loudoun-Shand, took part in a major attack on the German line at Fricourt, three miles east of Albert. Before the assault began, there was a heavy artillery barrage, but it had little effect. By the time the British were racing forwards, the Germans had their machine gunners in such positions as to be able to direct accurate and constant fire on them.

Such was the extent of the fire that many in 'B' Company were understandably reluctant to advance. However, Loudoun-Shand led from the front in encouraging his company as the citation to his VC stated: "For most conspicuous bravery. When his company attempted to climb over the parapet to attack the enemy's trenches, they were met by very fierce machine gun fire, which temporarily stopped their progress. Major Loudoun-Shand immediately leapt on the parapet, helped the men over it, and encouraged them in every way until he fell mortally wounded. Even then he insisted on being propped up in the trench and went on encouraging the non-commissioned officers and men until he died."

Loudoun-Shand, a single man, had died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, aged 36. That day five officers and 117 other ranks from 'B' Company had gone into battle. By later that morning, only 28 men, including just one officer, were alive and unwounded. The 12th (Service) Battalion, The Northumberland Fusiliers, a sister battalion of The Green Howards, became all too aware of the extent of the carnage around midday on July 1. Ordered to advance, they found the ground already

full of dead, dying and badly wounded men from the 10th.

### A 'great debt'

On the evening of July 1, the surviving Green Howards moved north-eastwards towards Crucifix Trench, where they were relieved by other units. The brave actions of Loudoun-Shand had not gone unnoticed. Not only was the citation for his VC published in *The London Gazette* on September 9, 1916, but he was the subject of a moving tribute that appeared in *The Legion* newspaper.

Written by Corporal Harry Fellows of the 12th Northumberland Fusiliers, it read: "The Green Howards led the attack north of Fricourt, with my own battalion in support, some 400 yards to the rear. When the barrage lifted, the German machine gunners

had scrambled from their dugouts, manned the guns and swept a murderous hail of fire across No Man's Land. With such a savage fire overhead, the Green Howards had shown a reluctance to leave the trench. But the major mounted the parapet and urged his men over the top.

"Had the Green Howards faltered we should certainly have been called into action to advance over the open ground. It was then that we Northumberland Fusiliers realised the great debt we owed that one gallant officer. Since that day he has remained my hero of the Great War."

Loudoun-Shand's VC was presented to his father by King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on March 31, 1917. Stewart Loudoun-Shand was buried at the Norfolk Cemetery, near Albert in France, and his name appears on the war

German machine gunners were quick to return to their positions when the Allied bombardment lifted GETTY



memorial at Dulwich College and another at All Saints' Church, Freshwater, Isle of Wight. Furthermore, his name is engraved on a family memorial at the 40-acre West Norwood Cemetery in London. I am the proud custodian of the Loudoun-Shand medal group, having purchased it privately in 2005.

In terms of losses, July 1, 1916 – the opening day of the Battle of the Somme – was the worst day the British Army had ever experienced. There had been 57,000 casualties, including 19,240 deaths, among the estimated 100,000 men ordered 'over the top'. British commanders had been confident of victory, but their confidence was misplaced and they were unable to break through. More than 20 men died for each minute of battle that day. The gain in terms of territory had been three square miles. Small gains had been made in the south with Montauban and Mametz captured, while the 21st Division had established a salient north of Fricourt.

### Lessons from futility

The Battle of the Somme was to drag on for the best part of five months, until November 18, when the onset of winter made further fighting impossible. On that date the British called off the offensive. The Allies had only advanced seven miles since July 1 and there was still no major breakthrough in sight. During the fighting, Britain had suffered 420,000 casualties and the French 200,000. German losses were at least 450,000 killed and wounded. It meant that the Battle of the Somme witnessed well over a million casualties among the three million participants that fought in it.

For many, then and now, the Battle of the Somme exemplified the futile slaughter of so many young men and the military incompetence of the World War One



Major Loudoun-Shand's VC, Queen's South Africa Medal (with South Africa 1901, Orange Free State, and Cape Colony clasps), 1914-15 Star, War Medal and his Inter-Allied Victory Medal LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION

commanders. Yet others argue that the likes of General (later Field Marshal) Douglas Haig had no option but to fight on the Somme and that, despite the controversial tactics, the battle provided an invaluable lesson in how to fight a large-scale war. Perhaps the legacy of the Somme was a more professional and effective army, and the tactics developed there, including the first use of tanks at Flers-Courcelette in September 1916, laid some of the foundations of the Allies' success in 1918. One thing is certain, many stories of gallantry emerged from the first day of the Somme and it resulted in the award of no less than nine VCs. However, only three of those recipients survived the battle.

When I think about the inspirational bravery of Temporary Major Stewart Loudoun-Shand, I often reflect on the words that Thucydides, the Greek historian, penned more than two millennia before the Battle of the Somme and its bloody first day: "The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it." **BW**

### VICTORIA CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes*, was published in hardback in 2006 and, later, paperback. For more information,

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The men of the Northumberland Fusiliers, pictured here in 1918, were conscious of the life debt they owed to the gallantry of Loudoun-Shand and his comrades along the Somme  
PAUL THOMPSON/GETTY