

Sergeant  
Henry Edward  
Kenny VC



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Henry Kenny VC  
LORD ASHCROFT  
MEDAL COLLECTION

Sergeant Henry Kenny was awarded the VC for exceptional bravery on the first day of the Battle of Loos, an occasion that proved challenging for several reasons for the British forces. Indeed, the day became infamous for both the blunders of senior officers and for the heavy casualties suffered by the inexperienced British troops.

Henry Edward Kenny was born in Woolwich, southeast London, on July 27, 1888. His parents, John and Susan Kenny, were originally from County Limerick, Ireland, and his father worked as a coachman. Henry, the second eldest of eight children, was educated at St John's Certified Industrial School, Walthamstow.

Kenny enlisted in The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) in October 1906, aged 18. The regiment, formed in 1881 as part of the Childers Reforms, recruited primarily from Preston, Chorley, Bolton and Wigan but also accepted men from outside Lancashire and the north of England. Kenny was transferred to the Army Reserves in 1911 and immediately before the outbreak of World War One he was employed by Abdulla & Company Ltd, cigarette manufacturers.

After the outbreak of war, Kenny was soon mobilised and he travelled as part of the 1st Battalion, The Loyal Regiment, to France with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in August 1914. The BEF at this point consisted of about 100,000 men that were sent to the Western Front early in the conflict to help stop the German advance. Queen Victoria's first grandson, Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany, was dismissive of the BEF, allegedly issuing an order on August 19, 1914, to "exterminate... the treacherous English and walk all over General [John] French's contemptible little army".

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It was not long before Kenny and his comrades were involved in the thick of the fighting: he was present at Mons, the retreat from Mons and the Battles of the Marne and the Aisne. Then in October 1914, he was involved in the defence of Ypres, a town in West Flanders, Belgium, during the First Battle of Ypres.

### Desperate rescues

In December 1914, Kenny was present at Festubert, France, before enjoying a break from fighting over Christmas. However, he was soon back in the line, taking part in the fighting at La Bassée, Neuve Chapelle and, finally, Loos.

The first day of the Battle of Loos took place on September 25, 1915, but it was preceded by a four-day artillery bombardment. The primary role for the British forces was to launch an offensive north of Lens to support the French in their advance south of the city. The British used chlorine gas for the first time in the war but in the centre of the line, east of Vermelles, adverse wind conditions carried the gas back over British positions. Other problems faced by the advancing forces were that the artillery bombardment had not done sufficient damage to the German's barbed wire defences and so progress was slow, resulting in heavy casualties.

It was during this intense fighting that Private Kenny, then 27, went forward – ahead of his own company and despite heavy enemy fire – to rescue a wounded comrade. By the end of that day, he had done this no less than six times, each time



Kenny's VC made the front page of the Daily Sketch newspaper  
JOHN FROST NEWSPAPERS/ALAMY

carrying back a wounded man. However, on his last rescue mission, Kenny was shot and wounded in the neck. His injuries were serious enough for him to require hospital treatment, first at the Duchess of Westminster's Hospital in Le Touquet, France, and, later, at Lady Astor's Hospital in Taplow, Buckinghamshire.

By Christmas 1915, Kenny had recovered sufficiently to rejoin his battalion. His VC was announced on March 30, 1916, when his citation stated: "For most conspicuous bravery. Private Kenny went out on six different occasions on one day under a very heavy shell, rifle and machine



British infantry advancing into a gas cloud during the Battle of Loos  
GL ARCHIVE/ALAMY

gun fire, and each time succeeded in carrying to a place of safety a wounded man who had been lying in the open. He was himself wounded in the neck while handing the last man over his parapet." Kenny received his VC from King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on May 20.

### Raider to reveller

Kenny continued to serve with distinction for the remainder of World War One, including taking part in the Zeebrugge Raid of April 1918. This was an attempt by the British to block the key Belgian port: the aim to sink obsolete ships in the canal entrance to prevent German vessels, including U-boats, from leaving.

On April 23, 1918, there were concurrent attacks on both Zeebrugge and Ostend with blockships scuttled. However, they were sunk in the wrong place and after a few days the Germans had opened the canal to submarines and light shipping and so the audacious attack was not a success. Of the 1,700 men involved in the operation, more than 200 were killed and more than 300 had been wounded.

Kenny was discharged at the rank of sergeant in March 1919, four months after the end of the war. Back in civilian life, he worked in London for Spencer Press Ltd, a subsidiary of Abdulla Ltd, his pre-war employers.

As a proud recipient of Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious gallantry award, Kenny was keen to play a full role in various social events organised for those who had been awarded the decoration before and during the conflict. In June 1920, he attended a garden party hosted by the King at Buckingham Palace. Later that



Kenny's medal group, comprising his VC, 1914 Star (with 5th Aug – 22nd Nov 1914 clasp), War Medal, Inter-Allied Victory Medal, 1939-45 Defence Medal, George VI Coronation Medal, Elizabeth II Coronation Medal, and Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal  
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year, he attended the official opening of the Cenotaph. The monument, built from Portland stone, was unveiled by George V at 11am on November 11, 1920. He was also a member of the VC Guard at the interment of the Unknown Warrior, in Westminster Abbey, on the same date.

On November 9, 1929, Kenny attended the British Legion dinner for VC recipients staged at the Royal Gallery in the House of Lords, when he was reunited with other soldiers who had taken part in the Zeebrugge raid 11 years earlier. After the outbreak of the World War Two in September 1939, Kenny was again keen to support his country in its hour of need. He served in the Local Defence Volunteers

(LDV), the forerunner to the Home Guard. The men serving in its ranks were intended to be the "last line of defence" against a German invasion.

Kenny met George VI when the King came to inspect the LDV men at their headquarters in Woodford, Essex. The King recalled having met Kenny at an event in 1920 when he was still the Duke of York.

After World War Two, Kenny attended the Victory Parade and a celebration dinner on June 8, 1946. A decade later, he was present at the VC Centenary Review on June 26, 1956, which was also attended by Queen Elizabeth II. Kenny also attended the first two dinners for VC and GC recipients held in July 1958 and July 1960.

Kenny, who had a daughter, died at St Peter's Hospital, Chertsey, Surrey, on May 6, 1979, aged 90. He was cremated, under the name of "Harry Kenny", nine days later at Woking Crematorium, Surrey, and his ashes were interred at St Mark's Church, Whiteley, near Hersham, Surrey. There is a display commemorating his VC action at Whiteley village club.

### Valorous fiasco

I became the proud custodian of the Kenny medal group after buying it at an auction in London in 1992. In fact, in my medal collection there are two other VCs that resulted from bravery on the very same day as Kenny's action: September 25, 1915.

King George V, the Princes and other dignitaries arriving at Westminster Abbey for the burial of the Unknown Warrior, passing the VC Guard PA/ALAMY



The Royal Gallery at the House of Lords during the November 1929 dinner in honour of VC recipients from across the Empire  
KEYSTONE/GETTY



The first decoration was awarded posthumously to Private George Peachment, aged just 18, of the 2nd Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps, killed as he tended his Company Commander, Captain Dubs, in no-man's land during the Battle of Loos. The moving citation to Peachment's VC stated: "The enemy's fire was intense, but, though there was a shell hole quite close, in which a few men had taken cover, Private Peachment never thought of saving himself. He knelt in the open by his officer and tried to help him, but while doing this he was first wounded by a bomb and a minute later mortally wounded by a rifle bullet. He was one of the youngest men in his battalion and gave this splendid example of courage and self-sacrifice."

The second decoration, also a posthumous award, was to Captain Arthur Kilby, of the 2nd Battalion, The South Staffordshire Regiment. He was killed leading his men from the front against a well-defended position. His citation stated: "The company charged along the narrow towpath [by a canal], headed by Captain Kilby, who, though wounded at the outset, continued to lead his men right up to the enemy wire under a devastating machine gun fire and a shower of bombs. Here he was shot down, but, although his foot had been blown off, he continued to cheer on his men and to use a rifle. Captain Kilby has been missing since the date of the

performance of this great act of valour, and his death has now to be presumed."

The events on the opening day of the Battle of Loos had given the British forces some hard lessons in trench warfare. The first use of chlorine gas by the Allies came despite warnings from engineers that the weather conditions were not suitable for such warfare.

As Second Lieutenant George Grossmith, of the 3rd Battalion, The Leicestershire Regiment, reported to his fiancée in a letter penned two days later: "The gas hung in a thick pall over everything, and it was impossible to see more than ten yards. In vain I looked for my landmarks in the German line, to guide me to the right spot, but I could not see through the gas."

The fierceness of the fighting during the opening day was such that only 2,000 of the 8,500 soldiers killed on September 25, have a known grave. The battle, part of the "big push" of 1915, eventually lasted until October 8, 1915, by which point the British had suffered some 60,000 casualties – roughly twice the total losses of the enemy.

The failures at Loos contributed to Field Marshal Sir John French being replaced as Commander-in-Chief of the BEF by Douglas Haig, who was later also given the rank of field marshal.

The leadership's failings that became all-too apparent at Loos should never diminish the outstanding bravery displayed by men such as Henry Kenny VC. **BW**

## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes*, was first published in 2006. For more information, see: [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).

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). Follow him on X and Facebook: @LordAshcroft

