

Midshipman  
George Leslie  
Drewry, VC



George Drewry VC IWM Q79788

# HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft

The *River Clyde* was deliberately run aground off 'V' Beach with lighters used to disgorge its troops onto Gallipoli. The botched assault saw no end of bravery, but also heavy casualties BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE



George Leslie Drewry was so accident-prone during his life, both as a boy and as a young sailor, that in some ways it is remarkable that he made it to the age of 23. Despite his tendency to get into the most dangerous situations, one thing was certain: he was extremely brave and this, coupled with his gritty determination and loyalty to his senior officers, made him a first-rate serviceman during World War One.

Drewry was born in Forest Gate, London, on November 3, 1894. The third eldest of four sons, his parents were Thomas Drewry and Mary (née Kendall). Thomas had a job as a works manager for The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O), so the family had links with the sea.

George attended Merchant Taylors' School in Blackheath, southeast London, but as a youngster he nearly died on at least two occasions. He had a serious accident when he was run over and injured by a car, on another occasion he and one of his brothers, Ralph, fell into a bog while playing in Wanstead Park. By the time their cries for help were answered, they were up to their necks in mud, but both were fortunately rescued relatively unharmed.

Aged 14, Drewry enlisted in the Merchant Navy, and it was not long before his run of misfortune continued with yet another life-threatening calamity. While taking part in a training exercise on board the sailing boat *Indian Empire*, he fell from the ship's mast into the sea. Only the heroic actions of the ship's mate, who dived into the sea,

saved Drewry's life. In yet a further disaster in 1912, his ship was wrecked on the uninhabited Hermite Island in Tierra del Fuego as it rounded Cape Horn. Drewry and several crewmates survived for two weeks on a diet of roots and shellfish before being found and rescued.

Later in 1912, after returning to Britain, Drewry joined P&O as a fourth officer, sailing on long-distance routes to destinations including Australia, China and Japan. The following year, on July 1, he joined the Royal Naval Reserve.

On August 3, 1914, following the outbreak of World War One, he was called up and posted as a midshipman aboard the ageing torpedo boat-turned-minesweeper HMS *Hussar*. His early roles included taking part in mail and other deliveries when operating in the Mediterranean. However, in April 1915, he was transferred to SS *River Clyde*, a modified collier converted into an assault ship, and instructed to take part in the preparations for the Gallipoli landings. The ship was captained by Commander Edward Unwin, then aged 51 and having



George Drewry VC (left) with William Malleon VC and Midshipman Greg Russell on shore leave at Imbros IWM Q13406

Commander Edward Unwin VC (left), who took *River Clyde* into 'V' Beach, as the Beach Master at Suvla TOPFOTO



been called out of retirement, to whom Drewry, then 20, was devoted, according to comrades.

The Gallipoli campaign began in the early hours of April 25, 1915, when the 29th Division landed on Cape Helles. The first wave put ashore were from the steamship *River Clyde* on one of the designated landing points: 'V' Beach, which was 300 yards long and dominated by an old fort at Sedd-el-Bahr at its eastern end. This was the landing place allotted to some 2,000 men from the Dublin Fusiliers and Munster Fusiliers. Once the initial landing had taken place, the plan devised by Commander Unwin was to bring in further troops from *River Clyde*, which was to be run aground just offshore. The gap between *River Clyde* and the shore was to be bridged by a small flat-bottomed steamboat, *Argyll*, augmented by three lighters.

Under heavy fire from the enemy, events did not go to plan and *River Clyde* grounded too far from *Argyll* to be of immediate use. Amid the chaos, Unwin, accompanied by Able Seaman William

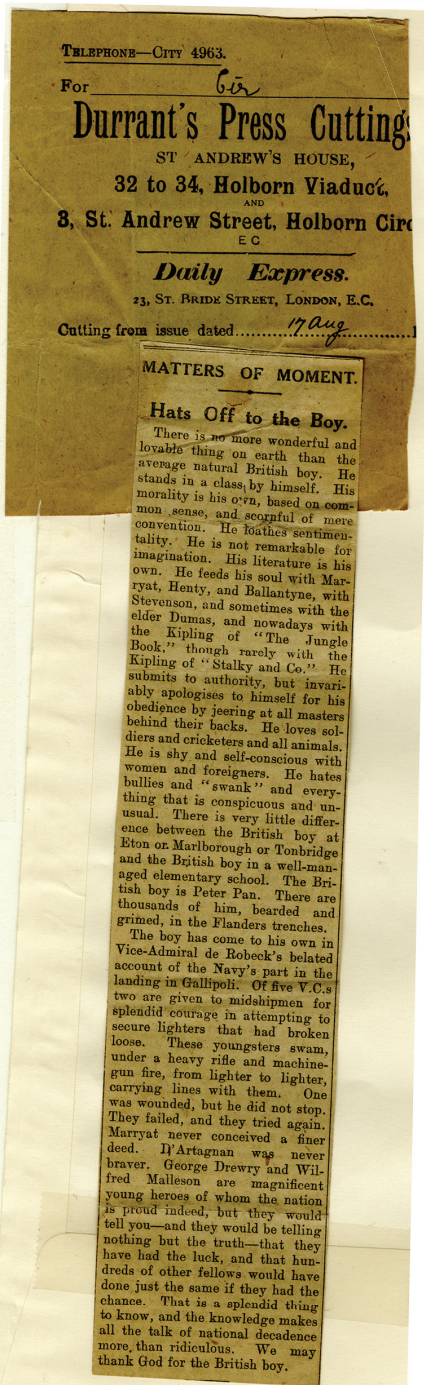
*“Despite his tendency to get into the most dangerous situations, one thing was certain: George Drewry was extremely brave and this, coupled with his gritty determination and loyalty, made him a first-rate serviceman”*

Williams, leapt into the water and dragged the lighters forward to form a bridge to the shore via a shoal of rocks that jutted out into the sea close to the fort. However, there was nothing to which the mooring ropes could be attached, so Unwin and Williams had to stand in the water holding the ropes in place. After more than an hour in the water, Williams was fatally wounded by a Turkish shell and this, in effect, cut the link to the shore.

As chaos ensued, Midshipmen Drewry and William Malleeson, along with Seaman George Samson, again under fire, formed

a bridge of lighters between *River Clyde* and *Argyll*. Drewry later wrote: “I got a rope from the lighter to the spit and then, with difficulty, I hauled the captain onto the lighter – he was nearly done and I was alone. He went inboard and the doctor had rather a job with him. All the time shells were falling all around us and into the ship, one hitting the casing of the ship but doing no further damage. Several men were killed in the No.4 hold. I stayed on the lighters and tried to keep the men going ashore, but it was murder and soon the first lighter was covered with dead and wounded and the spit was awful, the sea round it for some yards was red. When they got ashore, they were little better off, for they were picked off many of them before they could dig themselves in.”

As the fighting continued, Drewry was seriously wounded while standing on one of the lighters helping troops from another transport ship to come ashore. He wrote: “Just as we hit the hopper, a piece of shrapnel hit me on the head, knocking me down for a second or two and covering me with blood. However, we made the lighter fast to the hopper and then I went below. A

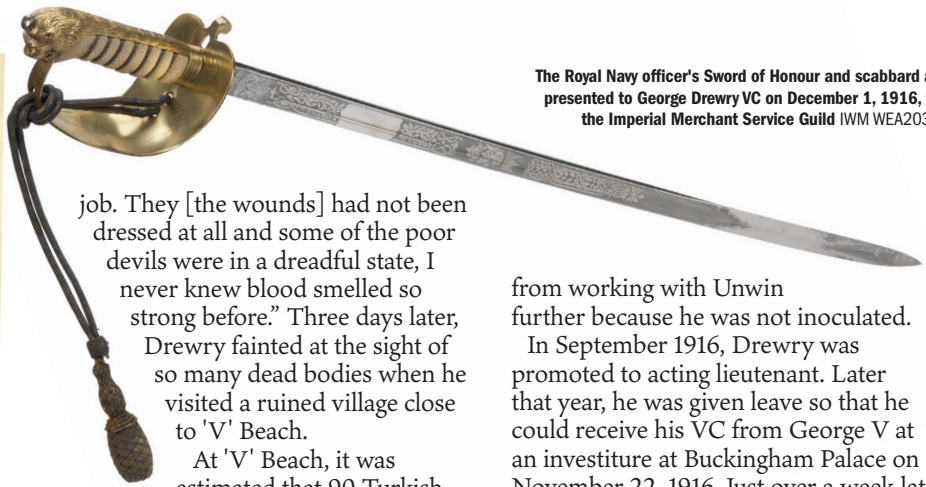


A cutting from the *Daily Express* of August 17, 1915, describing Drewry's award. This was kept by his father and presented to the Imperial War Museum in 1918 IWM LBY BOS 66

Tommy put a scarf around my head and I went up again."

Next, Drewry leapt into the water to try to reach another lighter that had drifted out to sea. However, the rope he had taken with him was too short and he had to give up. Eventually, after a chaotic period of more than four hours, the assault was suspended and many of the wounded were recovered thanks to the brave deeds of Unwin and his men.

For the rest of the day and into the night, Drewry took wounded men from the hopper and the lighters and placed them in a trawler that was situated alongside *River Clyde*. He later described this as "an awful



The Royal Navy officer's Sword of Honour and scabbard as presented to George Drewry VC on December 1, 1916, by the Imperial Merchant Service Guild IWM WEA2036

job. They [the wounds] had not been dressed at all and some of the poor devils were in a dreadful state, I never knew blood smelled so strong before." Three days later, Drewry fainted at the sight of so many dead bodies when he visited a ruined village close to 'V' Beach.

At 'V' Beach, it was estimated that 90 Turkish soldiers with machine guns caused more than 500 casualties among the initial landing party of some 950 men. Six VCs were awarded for bravery displayed on that beach alone, one of them to Drewry. Five of the six decorations were announced in *The London Gazette* on the same day – August 16, 1915 – with Drewry's modest citation failing to do justice in many ways to his prolonged bravery: "Assisted Commander Unwin at the work of securing the lighters under heavy rifle and Maxim fire. He was wounded in the head but continued his work and twice subsequently tried to swim from lighter to lighter with a line."

The other four VC recipients announced that day were Commander Unwin, Midshipman Malleson, Able Seaman Williams and Seaman Samson. Sub Lieutenant Arthur Tisdall, who had also helped in the rescue operation on 'V' Beach, was awarded his VC posthumously on March 31, 1916 – he had been killed on May 6, 1915, at Achi Baba during further fighting on the peninsula.

Commander Unwin's citation was the fullest and ended with a moving tribute to his courage. "He was later again attended by the doctor for three abrasions caused by bullets, after which he once more left the ship, this time in a lifeboat, to save some wounded men who were lying in shallow water near the beach. He continued at this heroic labour under continuous enemy fire until forced to stop through pure physical exhaustion."

On July 1, 1915, Drewry again helped with the landings, this time at Suvla Bay. Here he found it "uncanny" that the troops could be landed with hardly any reaction from the Turks. He later wrote: "I thought of Helles and then wondered if we had landed instead at Lemnos [the British base] or if we were [going to be] ambushed and if the Maxims were going to clear the beach of living in one sweep."

For five days, Drewry worked hard delivering men and supplies and he later received a Mention in Despatches for his courage and duty. However, he rejoined *Hussar* on August 11 having been prevented

from working with Unwin further because he was not inoculated.

In September 1916, Drewry was promoted to acting lieutenant. Later that year, he was given leave so that he could receive his VC from George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on November 22, 1916. Just over a week later, on December 1, he was presented with a Sword of Honour from the Imperial Merchant Service Guild for being the first officer from the RNR and the Merchant Navy to be awarded the VC.

By summer 1918, Drewry had his own command on HMT *William Jackson*, a decoy trawler. On the evening of August 2, 1918, while serving aboard his ship at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, he was struck by a block that fell from a derrick. He fractured his skull and broke an arm, dying from his head injuries the next day, aged 23. Drewry was buried in the City of London Cemetery, Manor Park, and a memorial window was later erected in his honour at All Saints Church, Forest Gate, close to where he was born.

From the day he was born to the day he died, George Drewry had always been a modest man devoted to duty. As his brother Ralph put it, George never expected the VC and always played down the award: "When I showed him all the newspaper cuttings about him that we had kept, he told me to put them in the toilet."

This fits with my own experiences of meeting with and speaking to scores of recipients of gallantry awards in recent decades: the bravest individuals are invariably also the humblest too. **BW**

#### VICTORIA CROSS HEROES VOL II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes Vol II*, was published in 2016. For more

information, visit [victoriacrossheroes2.com](http://victoriacrossheroes2.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Visit his website about courage at [lordashcroftonbravery.com](http://lordashcroftonbravery.com). Follow him on X and Facebook: @LordAshcroft