FORGOTTEN VOICES OF THE VICTORIA CROSS

RODERICK BAILEY

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

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‘I can’t tell you how I escaped being hit, as I was a good target, running about 100 yards with a man on my back. I was still in the firing line when the colonel of an East Yorkshire regiment shook hands with me and told me I was a brave lad. I told him anybody would have done the same.’
PRIVATE ROBERT DUNSIRE on winning his VC in 1915

The Victoria Cross, awarded to the most courageous and determined servicemen, is the highest military decoration that can be bestowed.

In *Forgotten Voices: Victoria Cross*, first-hand accounts of soldiers, sailors and airmen describe the incredible events that earned these extraordinary men the VC in the last century.

Captivating and often humbling, these stories depict exceptional acts of bravery in unimaginable situations, of men who would say they were just doing their duty.

INTRODUCTION BY GENERAL SIR RICHARD DANNATT

About the Author

A graduate of Cambridge and Edinburgh Universities and a former Alistair Horne Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford, **Roderick Bailey** is a historian attached to the Imperial War Museum. He is the author of *Forgotten Voices of D-Day*, *Forgotten Voices of the Secret War*, which was a *Sunday Times* Top Ten bestseller, and the acclaimed *The Wildest Province: SOE in the Land of the Eagle*.

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Author’s Preface

For almost four decades, the Sound Archive of the Imperial War Museum has been recording and preserving the recollections of men and women with experience of recent war and conflict. It is a vast resource, running to almost 60,000 hours of eyewitness testimonies. This book is a collection of unique personal accounts, transcribed from recordings held in the archive, shedding light on the character and exploits of a selection of men who, during the last century, were awarded the Victoria Cross.

Introduced by Royal Warrant in 1856, the Victoria Cross was created as the highest award in the British armed forces for gallantry in the face of the enemy. It is a simple bronze medal of a basic design: a cross pattée, bearing a crown, a lion, a scroll and the inscription ‘For Valour’, beneath a bar decorated with laurel leaves and a crimson ribbon.[fn1] It takes precedence over all other orders and medals and, at the time of writing, has been awarded only 1,358 times.

The first VC was earned in 1854 by a Royal Navy midshipman, Charles Lucas, for picking up and hurling overboard a live enemy shell, its fuse still burning, that had landed on the deck of his ship during an action in the Baltic against Russian shore positions. More than one hundred VCs were awarded for the Crimean War of 1854–56, nearly two hundred for the Indian Mutiny of 1857–58 and eighty-one for the Anglo–Boer War of 1899–1902. Further VCs were earned in smaller colonial wars and campaigns, including eleven, the most for a single action, for the

famous defence of Rorke’s Drift during the Anglo–Zulu War of 1879.

The First World War saw more than six hundred awards, almost half the total ever made: a stark illustration of that struggle’s vast and terrible scale. In the Second World War, 182 VCs were won. Ten men received the medal in the period between those two great conflicts. To date, fifteen have been earned since: four in Korea; one in Borneo; four by Australians in Vietnam; two in the Falklands; one in Iraq; and three, including one award each of the new Victoria Cross of New Zealand and the Victoria Cross of Australia, in Afghanistan. Since the end of the nineteenth century, when eligibility was extended – informally, at first – to men who had died as a result of their actions, 299 awards have been posthumous. Although women are eligible, none have yet received a VC.

The accounts that follow range from the testimonies of soldiers, sailors and airmen who have themselves been given the medal to the recollections of civilians and other servicemen, including close comrades and friends, who saw VCs being won. Many add graphic detail, much of it unpublished until now, to the official citations issued with the announcement of each award and convey a sense of emotion and wonder that the citations, which tend to be formal in tone and guarded in detail, often lack. ‘I was lying about ten yards behind Wakenshaw at the time,’ remembers one soldier who watched this anti-tank gunner earn a VC in the Second World War. ‘He had the top of his head off, his arm was away and he was blind and that, and his two mates was dead, and he was just shouting, “Left a bit! Right a bit! Up a bit!” and he was firing…’

Most accounts here relate to VCs won in the Second World War. Since embarking upon its task of collection and conservation, the Sound Archive has inevitably found veterans of that conflict more numerous than those of

others. Nevertheless, several rare interviews exist that describe or touch upon VCs awarded on the Western Front and in the air in the First World War, including the memories of a regular soldier, a scarce survivor of the British Army of 1914, about the earliest VC action of the war. Here also is the first-hand account of a Royal Navy officer who received his Victoria Cross for his exploits in 1919 during Britain's little-known intervention in the Russian civil war.

Many of these stories serve as subtle reminders of the fact, sometimes obscured by the awe with which VC-recipients are rightly viewed, that those who are awarded the medal are ordinary men, albeit capable of the most extraordinary feats. 'I said, "Cheer up, old boy. What's wrong?" remembers a Royal Flying Corps engineer of his final words with Albert Ball, moments before the famous First World War fighter ace, who would be awarded a posthumous VC, took off on his final flight and was killed.

> He said, 'Oh, I've got a hunch I don't think I am going to last very long.'
>
> I said, 'That's absurd, that's absurd, you'll be here for a long time yet. Don't you worry.'
>
> He said, 'I don't think so, I don't think so.'
>
> Well, we got his machine repaired and he got into it and that was the last that was seen of him.

Especially poignant are memories like those of a First World War stretcher-bearer who spotted a VC ribbon on the tunic of a soldier lying dead in a field ambulance post, as are the testimonies recorded for broadcast by Bomber Command aircrew who were subsequently killed in action.

Also striking is the modesty, understatement and self-deprecation that runs through the accounts of those awarded the Victoria Cross. The words of Patrick Porteous,

for example, a commando officer who earned the medal in the 1942 raid on the French port of Dieppe, are made no less revealing by the fact that it is left to other soldiers to draw attention to his courage. Indeed, appreciating men like Ball and Porteous as distinct individuals with personalities, hopes and fears can show their actions to be still more impressive and, perhaps, go some way to understanding what it takes to earn a VC.

While personal recollections can add significantly to our understanding of the past, oral history has its limits. The scope and structure of this book is defined by the interviews in the Sound Archive, which, of course, are themselves dependent on the willingness and ability of veterans to share their stories and the museum's capacity to record and preserve them. Moreover, since memories can be distorted by time, hindsight and a host of other factors, care has been taken to select accounts whose likely accuracy is borne out by other sources.

Yet care has also been taken not to defer blindly to written records. The eyewitness accounts required to support recommendations for a VC are themselves subjective and can be coloured or clouded by the confusion of battle. One remarkable testimony printed here is that of Edward Chapman, an infantryman who received the Victoria Cross in 1945 and whose careful dissection of his VC citation is a lesson in why even official documents may not always be infallible sources of fact.

Chapman's account is especially detailed. Others in this book are simple and short. Yet sometimes a few words are enough to throw light on the character of a man who has received a Victoria Cross. 'From time to time we'd say to him, "So how did you get your VC?"' recalls the daughter of Gabriel Coury who was awarded the medal for his actions as a twenty-year-old second lieutenant on the Somme in

1916. ‘He just said, “For being a bloody fool”. It was never made much of. He never mentioned the war.’

Roderick Bailey, June 2010

fn1 When the ribbon alone is worn, it bears in its centre a small bronze representation of the cross. Until 1918, naval recipients of the VC were awarded a medal with a blue ribbon.

Introduction
by General Sir Richard Dannatt

Since shortly after its inception in 1856, the Victoria Cross has established itself as the supreme symbol of courage, bravery and selfless commitment. Quite properly the simple inscription upon the plain bronze medal – *For Valour* – is itself a masterpiece of understatement. This important new book by Dr Roderick Bailey seeks to get inside the mind and character of some of the 1,358 men, to date, who have been decorated with this medal. Almost without exception those that survived the action for which they were honoured emerge as men of modesty and humility, speaking of just doing their duty for Sovereign, country and their mates, or not even speaking at all. Indeed, if anything has to be said, that simple cross and crimson ribbon says it all.

In the century and a half of the Victoria Cross's existence, the criteria that qualify a soldier, sailor or airman to be awarded the medal have been jealously guarded to preserve the stature of the award. In the conflicts since 9/11 only one VC has been given in Iraq, to a British soldier, and three in Afghanistan, one posthumously to a British soldier, one to a New Zealander and the latest to an Australian. The degree of scrutiny of contending citations is immense, along with the George Cross – for equivalent actions, but not in the face of the enemy – the final recommendations being made at the level of the Chiefs of Staff. I participated in one such deliberation; no stone was left unturned to ensure that the recipient was indeed worthy of the highest recognition. And it is in the

spirit of this rigour that Roderick Bailey's book makes such an important contribution. The voices heard here underline, in terms of great awe and respect, the integrity of the awards made to remarkable, but often ordinary, people.

As a young Green Howards officer, I grew up on the proud regimental stories of Henry Tandy VC, the most decorated private soldier in the First World War, Stan Hollis VC, who won the only VC on D-Day and the Seagrim brothers, Derek and Bunny, the only siblings to have been awarded a VC and a GC respectively. But this book digs deeper beyond the well-known stories and, through the medium of first-hand accounts drawn exclusively from interviews recorded with veterans and preserved in the sound archive of London's Imperial War Museum, provides some unique insights. The accounts provide snapshots of the deeds and characters of a selection of men who have been awarded the VC in a broad range of conflicts and campaigns of the last century. Some come from men who have received the VC; some from men who have seen VCs earned, or who knew or met men – or were friends with men – who were awarded the medal. The vast majority of these accounts are previously unpublished and provide personal perspectives and detail that cannot be found in other books.

Given Roderick Bailey's use of interviews in the Imperial War Museum's sound archives it is not surprising that the book focuses predominantly on twentieth century VCs from the Second World War onwards. However, the rarity of such oral history reflecting the Great War makes the insights from that earlier and terrible war even more special. Throughout, a wide variety of deeds are described, from saving the lives of wounded men while under fire, to storming enemy machine-gun nests, to nursing crippled aircraft to the target and back, to manhandling unexploded

bombs out of a damaged submarine. Airmen (both pilots and other aircrew), sailors (including submariners and a Royal Marine) and soldiers (all of diverse ranks and backgrounds), are represented. Furthermore the book features VC recipients of many nationalities: British (English, Scotsmen, Ulstermen and Welsh), New Zealanders (including Charles Upham VC, one of only three men to be awarded the VC twice), an Australian (Rawdon Middleton VC), Indians (Nand Singh VC, Umrao Singh VC), a Canadian ('Hammy' Gray VC), a Gurkha (Thaman Gurung VC), a white Kenyan (Nigel Leakey VC) and a British-born Lebanese–Frenchman (Gabriel Coury VC).

Many of the accounts provide graphic and vivid detail that goes far beyond the formal language of a VC citation, which itself must dwell on fact, letting those facts illuminate the wider drama for evaluation by the scrutiny committee before an award is made. However some of the accounts here are very detailed: for example, the memories of men who watched Tommy Durrant VC and John Cruickshank VC earn their medals. Not all accounts in the book deal with VC deeds: some serve to illuminate the personalities of men who have been awarded the Victoria Cross. Corran Purdon's memories of Charles Upham VC are a good example; so, too are memories of John Harman VC. As I suggested at the start of this introduction, the modesty present in the personal accounts given by VC recipients speaks volumes in the revealing of a man's character. It is the people behind the deeds that make this book so compelling.

It is sad reality of the world in which previous, present and future generations live or will live that conflict and violence characterise our human existence. Yet it is how we respond in these extreme circumstances that marks out one man from another, or one woman from another. This profound study by Roderick Bailey goes a long way to

identifying the common characteristics of the bravest of the brave. The word ‘hero’ has become massively over-used in recent times, but these men were truly heroes, yet they would not recognise that accolade for themselves. They were soldiers, sailors and airmen simply doing their job in the best way they knew how. However, their stories provide great inspiration to all who read or hear them – Roderick Bailey knew that these stories must not become forgotten voices, and he has ensured that this will not happen. Here is a testament to what is good about humankind against the backdrop of what can be the worst. The abiding thought with which the reader is left is one of hope; that adversity can indeed bring out the best in us. These ‘forgotten voices’ are eloquent in proclaiming this enduring truth.

Richard Dannatt, July 2010

The First World War

THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914–16

FOR BRITAIN AND its Empire, the First World War began in August 1914 when German troops marched into Belgium. The British and Belgian governments had previously accorded a treaty of mutual assistance to acts of aggression and, within days, an advance force of British troops – the British Expeditionary Force – was dispatched to the Continent in support. Very soon the BEF was engaged in heavy fighting.

For several weeks the German army pressed steadily through Belgium and into northern France. By the end of 1914, however, movement by either side was grinding to a halt. Trenches stretched from the Channel to the Swiss border. For more than three years, both sides were to search repeatedly for a decisive breakthrough. Artillery, machine guns and protective belts of barbed wire ensured that the front remained largely static with the defender invariably having the advantage. Casualties reached staggering proportions.

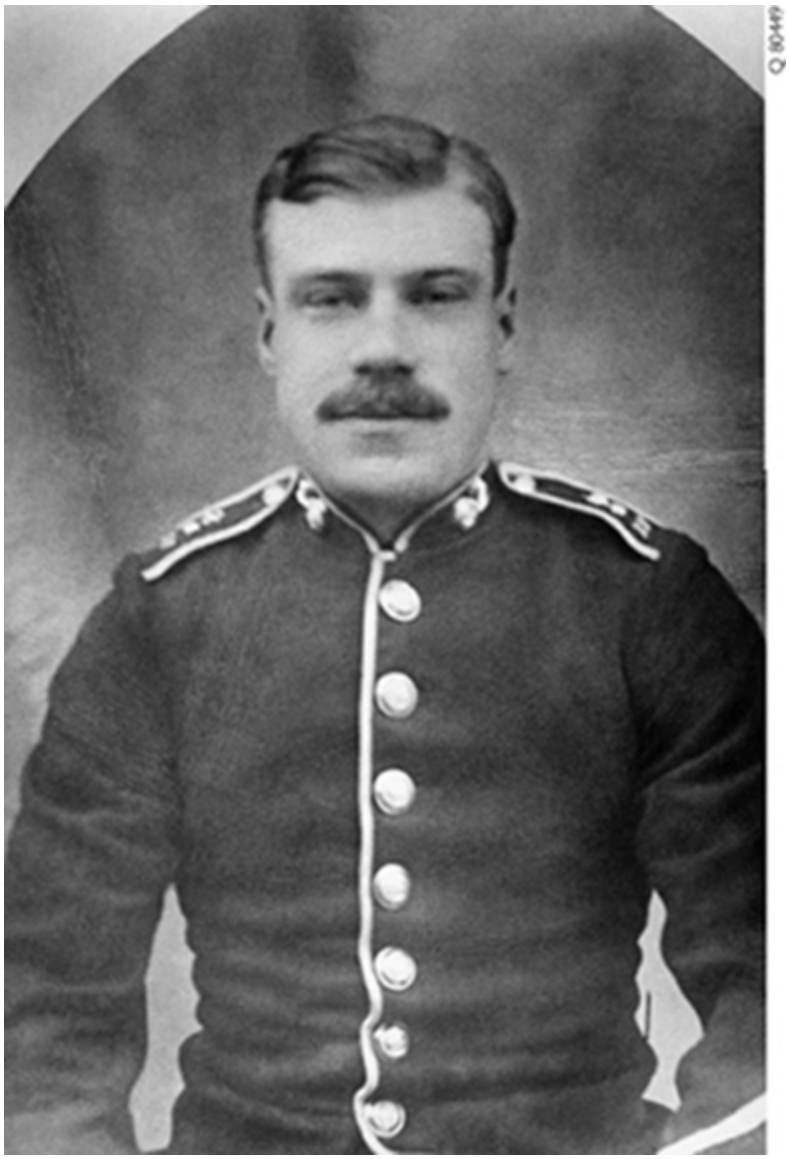
For acts of gallantry in British offensive and defensive actions from the great battles at Mons and Ypres to those at Loos and the Somme, and in the day-to-day grind of trench warfare, forty-three Victoria Crosses were awarded to soldiers fighting on the Western Front in 1914 and more than one hundred in 1915–16.

Private Sidney Godley
4th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers

Sidney Frank Godley received the first Victoria Cross of the First World War to be awarded to a private soldier. Born in East Grinstead on 14 August 1889 and brought up in Willesden, London, he had left school at fourteen and worked for a time in a Kilburn ironmongers before joining the Royal Fusiliers in 1909. When the war broke out his battalion was sent immediately to France as part of the BEF. Within days, at Mons, Belgium, it was in the thick of the fighting against the advancing German army; and it was there, on 23 August 1914, that Godley earned his VC.

Godley's battalion was ordered to hold two bridges over the Mons-Condé canal to allow other units to retreat. It was for his actions in keeping the enemy at bay for two hours despite heavy enemy fire and his own wounds, which included a bullet lodged in his skull, that he was awarded the Victoria Cross. For his own actions on one of the bridges, the battalion's machine-gun officer, twenty-four-year-old Lieutenant Maurice Dease, received a posthumous VC. 'It was a suicide job,' Godley recalled twenty-five years later. 'The Germans were advancing on the French frontier and greatly outnumbered our "contemptible little army" as the Kaiser called it. Lieutenant Maurice J. Dease and I were detailed to defend the Nimy bridge with our lives. All we had was a single machine gun.'[fn1]

Godley saw out the war as a prisoner in Germany and returned to Britain after the armistice. Later he worked for thirty years in London as a school caretaker and, dressed as Bruce Bairnsfather's character 'Old Bill', to whom the walrus-moustached Godley bore a strong resemblance, raised money for service charities. He died in 1957.



Private Sidney Godley VC, the first soldier to earn the Victoria Cross in the First World War.

Private William Holbrook
4th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers

Godley, I was in his barrack room at Aldershot. He was quite a sportsman; he played football. Oh yes, I knew him quite well, we were very friendly. He could be a little bit quarrelsome at times; he was a very nice fellow, mind you, but if there was any trouble going on Godley would be in it.

War broke out on 4 August and we left for France after we'd got the reserves on 14 August. From Cowes we went across to Southampton by boat and from Southampton we got a troopship to Le Havre. We camped there for about three or four days, then we entrained at Le Havre and went up to the front – we didn't know where we were going – and the whole brigade came together. Then we got to Mons and we lined a canal bank. The ground was rather rough. It was hilly; there was quite a few rises in the ground. Machine guns were on the bridge on our left, that's where Godley and Dease were. Bit of cover. Nothing much. No trenches or anything like that.

I could see the Germans coming, they were getting close to the canal bank, they were in waves coming over. As far as I could see there was quite a number, more than what we'd got. There was shelling – shrapnel shells – and rifle fire across the canal and we had a few casualties where I was; but the machine-gun party on the bridge, they had the worst part of it and quite a number of those got killed and wounded. That left Lieutenant Dease, the officer in charge of the machine-gun party, and Godley.

Dease wasn't with the machine-gun party at first, he was away from it as far as I can remember. But when things got a bit closer and he was wounded about three times, he still went to the gun and he got killed there, Dease did, leaving Godley in charge of it. There were some villagers, some kids, up there, I remember, quite near the riverbank, and I remember Godley shouting at them, 'Get away!' during the attack; these kids were within about fifty yards. And when the Germans started crossing the bridge Godley got sense enough to take the breech-block out of the gun and tipped the gun over the bridge into the water so that they couldn't use it on us, see, as we were retreating. Course, he got captured there.

Able Seaman Alf Bastin
Royal Naval Division, imprisoned in Doberitz prisoner-of-war camp, Germany, 1915–18

One Sunday the whole camp, the whole British section, was turned out and we were told it was to hear some news from the American Ambassador. We thought, 'Well, what the hell is this going to be?' Of course, America wasn't in the war at this stage.

It transpired that the American Ambassador had been requested to inform Private Godley of the Royal Fusiliers that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross for his courageous efforts in the early weeks of the war when the 'Contemptibles', as they were called, were being hounded out by the Germans. Apparently what had happened, this Private Godley was a machine-gunner and he had got on to a certain position on a bridge and kept firing, stopped the Germans from advancing by shooting them down as they tried to get to the bridge. That went on for quite some time and eventually he got captured and joined in with the others.

He was quite an unassuming sort of chap. He was congratulated by all the British, of course, and they cheered when the announcement was made. The German commandant of the camp shook Godley's hand.

Lieutenant Philip Neame
15th Field Company, Royal Engineers

Philip Neame was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions at Neuve Chapelle, northern France, on 19 December 1914. An engineer officer who specialised in trench construction and defence, Neame earned his medal when he single-handedly checked an enemy counter-attack, killing and wounding several by

throwing bombs, and oversaw the safe evacuation of British wounded from his own position.

Born in Faversham, Kent, on 12 December 1888 into the Shepherd Neame brewing dynasty, Neame had been educated at Cheltenham College and joined the Royal Engineers in 1908. He survived the war and in 1924 became the only man to receive both a Victoria Cross and an Olympic gold medal when, at the Paris Olympics, he was part of the winning four-man rifle team in the running-deer competition. A career soldier, he rose to the rank of lieutenant general and served again during the Second World War, being captured in North Africa in 1942 (though he subsequently escaped). Later he served for eight years as Lieutenant Governor of Guernsey. Interviewed by the Imperial War Museum in 1974, he died in 1978.

Lieutenant Philip Neame
15th Field Company, Royal Engineers

I was stationed at Gibraltar when war broke out and we didn't get to France until the beginning of October 1914. By that time trench warfare had really started and it had become fairly clear that there was not going to be a rapid war of movement ending in a quick, decisive campaign.

By the time of the First Battle of Ypres the trenches were very elaborate and, where the ground was not waterlogged and so on, the front-line trenches were six foot deep with a firing step on the side of it which you stood on, standing up, to fire. Every ten yards there was a traverse, so that if a shell dropped into one length of trench its effect was limited to that particular short length of trench. Trenches were also designed with traverses between each fire bay, as it was called, with the purpose of preventing the enemy, if they captured a length of trench, from enfilading

the whole length of trench. And because you can’t shoot the enemy in the next fire bay, the only way of getting at him is by lobbing a hand grenade over the traverse into the next bay of the trench. Then the hand grenade goes off with a terrific explosion and will probably kill or wound all the soldiers in that length of trench: that’s the use of the hand grenade in trench warfare.

Philip Neame VC, who was awarded his Victoria Cross for his actions at Neuve Chapelle, France, in 1914.

The Germans were very well supplied with very well-made hand grenades and they started using them in trench warfare and we had no proper reply. Although there was an official British hand grenade, it had never been used, hardly at all in peacetime training, and there was a very, very limited supply. Therefore, the Royal Engineers in France started devising home-made hand grenades, which were called bombs, made out of empty used jam tins which were filled with rivets, hobnails, any small bits of metal. The explosive was usually two small bits of gun-cotton with a detonator and the necessary bit of fuse projecting from the end of the jam tin. The only snag about this was the difficulty of igniting the fuse and the easiest way of doing this was with a fusée. This was easily struck on a matchbox and then the glowing head of the fusée held against the end of the fuse which leads into the jam tin. They were made locally in each division in a little home-made factory purely for producing jam tin bombs, the sappers manufactured them, and in the winter of 1914 they were kept busy manufacturing as many as were needed.

The 8th Division carried out an attack on 18 December near Neuve Chapelle, and during the early hours of the nineteenth, in fact in the middle of the night, I was ordered to go up to the area of the attack with my Royal Engineers section to help consolidate the captured area. When I got up to the front I was told that the Germans were counter-attacking and the CO of the infantry battalion concerned asked me to go up into the line and see what I could do in making our defences strong. I took my sapper section forward, got up into the front and heard noise of fighting and bombs – they were called bombs then, they were hand grenades – heard the noise of these exploding. I thought it best to go forward myself and I left my section of sappers – about thirty-six men – under a sergeant in our old front line while I crawled forward up a ditch and got into the German

trenches, where our leading infantry were, to see what was happening. When I got there I saw the infantry officer in command who said the Germans were counter-attacking with bombs and that his own bombers had all been wounded and that the bombs that were left would not go off. So I went up to talk to one of the few remaining unwounded bombers whom I found up in the front and discovered that he couldn't light our own bombs because there were no fusées left and he didn't know how to light the safety fuse without a fusée. Well, I did know how, because you can do it by holding a match-head on the end of the fuse and striking the matchbox across it, so I got up to the front and started throwing bombs back at the Germans and that's how the whole affair started.

There were crowds of our infantry all crowded up into the remaining bit of trench we'd captured from the Germans and the Germans were throwing their bombs at us from two different directions, so I had rather a business being the only person there who knew how to light our bombs. I quickly shouted for all our available bombs to be sent up to me and told two or three of the infantry – the West Yorks – to stay by me in a bit of trench in case the Germans tried to rush us. I then started lighting and throwing bombs in the two different directions from which the Germans were throwing bombs at us. I very quickly stopped the Germans bombing from a trench away on the right, which didn't run into ours, it was some branch trench, and any further trouble from that stopped. Then I had a good deal of bombing coming from straight in front of me, from Germans throwing from about twenty or thirty yards away, and so I quickly threw several bombs as quick as I could and with as good an aim as I could. To do this, I had to stand up on the fire-step and expose myself so that I could see where I was throwing with some accuracy. Every time I stood up a German machine gun fired at me, but

luckily he was a bit slow and I always managed to pop down again having thrown my bomb before the stream of machine-gun bullets came over more or less where I'd been standing.

Anyway, after some little time and at all events the German bombing eased off very much. I might say that after I'd thrown one or two bombs I heard what sounded like shouts and screams from the Germans in the trench where I'd been throwing my bombs, so evidently they had been effective. And after about a quarter of an hour or so the German bombing almost stopped – only one came over at longish intervals – and after a bit it stopped altogether. So I was able to hang on to the trench we'd captured, having only had to withdraw by one bay, that's to say some eight or ten yards. And then, with two or three West Yorks infantrymen whom I'd hung on to in case the Germans tried to rush along the trench, we stayed there.

The West Yorks officer in command, Captain Inkpen, came along to see how things were going on and he offered to send more infantry up. I said, 'No, I don't want any more. These three fellows are quite enough to hold this bit of trench. It's only a case of a few Germans trying to run along the trench bottom, so if you'll leave two or three of your best men here that's all that's necessary.' He also told me that he had had orders to evacuate the German trench and take all his men back to the British line from where we'd started the attack, so I stayed there for the next half an hour, or three-quarters of an hour, holding that bit of line.

Then I got a message to say that all the British troops had got back safely. Mind you, a great many had been killed and wounded by the German bombs and by machine-gun fire before I'd got up there and when I'd gone up, and also still more when I was going back. In the bottom of the trench were numbers of dead British soldiers lying there

and a certain number of wounded who hadn't been got back, so we managed to help some of the wounded to get back to our own line. And when we finally had a message to say we were to come back, I finally gave a quick two or three bombs as a final goodbye to the Germans, really to keep them quiet while we moved back down the trench.

I went back and reported to our own battalion headquarters thinking I'd done my day's work. My task had been to go and prepare the captured German trenches for defence and, as there were no longer any captured German trenches, I presumed I could go back to our billets behind the line. However, the two infantry colonels, from the West Yorks and the Devons, asked me to take my section of sappers back to the front line again and make sure that our own original line was in a good state for defence, because they were afraid the Germans might now set-to and counter-attack. So, after this very exhausting morning's work I'd already had, not so much work as an hour and a half's fighting, I had to take my section back again to the front line and set my men to patching up broken breastworks and trench defences and so on for the rest of the day.

All I knew was that the CO of the Devons, Colonel Travers, whom I knew very well from working in the trenches, in fact he was quite a great friend of mine, said, 'I will see that the brigadier knows what you've done today.' I just thanked him and didn't think any more about it. Then, when I got back to my field company headquarters that evening and told my OC what had happened during the day, he said, 'If you're not careful, Neame, you'll be getting the VC.' Well, I never thought anything about it. I thought he was just joking in a sort of way.

Then, one or two days after, the chief engineer of the corps, a brigadier, came up, which he did from time to time to visit the field companies of the division. And having been

told about this by the CRE and the field company commander, he said to me, ‘I’ll see that my corps commander hears about this, Neame.’ I thanked him and didn’t think anything special about it until on Christmas Day, that’s six days after, our divisional commander, Major General Davis, came to our billets just to wish the people who weren’t out working – and I wasn’t that morning – a Happy Christmas. And he said to me, ‘A Happy Christmas to you, Neame. I’ve recommended you for the Victoria Cross.’ And that was the first time I really knew about it seriously. I just said, ‘Well, thank you very much, sir,’ and his ADC came up to me afterwards and said, ‘Well, that’s a nice Christmas present, Neame, isn’t it?’

Well, I still didn’t write home and tell my parents. I’d written in my letters and told them about the exciting battle I’d had, but I still didn’t tell them about being recommended for the VC because I’d still no conviction that I would get it and I didn’t want them to be disappointed. However, they heard in a roundabout way from an officer in our division whose parents lived near us at home – he’d heard all about it and wrote to his parents – and it got through that way.

Private John Lynn DCM
2nd Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers

Private John Lynn was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions on 2 May 1915, near Ypres, Belgium, when German infantry assaulted the British lines behind thick clouds of asphyxiating chlorine gas: one of the first gas attacks of the war.

Born in Catford, South London, on 21 April 1888, Lynn had joined the Lancashire Fusiliers as a band boy in 1901 and served until 1913. As a reservist, he had been recalled at the outbreak of war and was

soon sent out to France. In Deceber 1914 he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for taking charge of a Vickers machine gun after his sergeant was killed. He died from gas poisoning the day after the act that earned him his VC.

Lieutenant Victor Hawkins
2nd Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers

Sunday 2 May dawned the most lovely day; but it was the only lovely thing about it, as it turned out. The Hun strafed us in the morning with some big stuff but didn't do much damage. Actually we weren't in trenches, we were behind a bank with a hedge on top and a ditch which we'd wired a bit, and our left was resting on the moat of rather a famous farm called Shell Trap Farm, up in the [Ypres] Salient. We had a pretty quiet day after the preliminary strafing and at about a quarter to five I went along to my company headquarters to have a cup of tea. I'd only just poured out my tea when the sentry in front called out, 'Will you come and look, sir?' So I got up to look. And out of the German trenches – I suppose about six hundred to eight hundred yards away – great jets of yellow cloud were shooting up in the air like water out of a hose. We had come up and seen the effect of the first gassing on our way so we knew what it was; and I didn't get my cup of tea, we had to get busy.

The first thing I saw was a man called Jackie Lynn, who was a Vickers machine-gunner with us, getting his gun out of its proper position and putting it up on top of the parapet and getting up behind it without putting his so-called gas mask on. We had been given bits of flannelette to tie round our faces – I'd got back to my platoon as quick as I could, warning all the men on the way – and the only thing to do was to try to get these flannelette things over our mouths and shoot. We had to wet them and there wasn't very much to wet them with on the spur of the moment. I know some