

Heroes of The Boys' Brigade



Officers and Old Boys who won the Victoria Cross

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Introduction

When reflecting on the thousands of young men who passed through the ranks of the Boys' Brigade before, between, and during the two World Wars the service rendered by old members at the front line is impossible to indicate. However, their extraordinary duty at a time of great stress for the country cannot be overstated.

It is estimated that many hundreds of thousands of Officers and Old Boys of the Boys' Brigade served in the Army, Navy, and Air Force during the First World War with many thousands making the ultimate sacrifice.¹ Countless more offered themselves and answered the country's call during the Second World War.

These pages contain the names of men who were awarded the Victoria Cross as received by the Brigade Executive and subsequently notified in the Boys' Brigade Gazette. Recorded are details of the eleven men from the First World War and four from the Second World War, and one from the Second Boer War, whom the King conferred the highest honour in his power.

*All these were honoured in their generations
And were the glory of their times -
Their name liveth for evermore²*

¹ Heroes of The Boys' Brigade. Officers and Old Boys Who Won the Victoria Cross in the Great War, 1914 - 19, (London: The Boys' Brigade, 1920), p.5.

² Ibid, p.3.

*When Britain's might was called to fight for sanctity of word,
To men there came, in Freedom's name, a call that honour heard.
Among the men who answered then, the first to give their aid,
Were those who'd been, in days serene, bred in The Boys' Brigade.
Anon 1916³*

³ "Men of The Boys' Brigade", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, February 1916, p.91.

The Second Boer War. Recipient of the Victoria Cross.

Sergeant Donald Farmer, V.C.

12th Edinburgh Company





Sergeant Donald Farmer, V.C.
12th Edinburgh Company

Sergeant Donald Farmer, V.C.

12th Edinburgh Company

“He saved the life of an Officer”⁴

Sergeant Farmer was a former member of the 12th Edinburgh Company. He was said to be fond of athletics, and “a grand football player” who had enlisted in 1892.⁵ He served in Malta, Gibraltar, and the Nile Expedition of 1898, as well as several engagements in South Africa.⁶

On 13 December, 1900, at the Battle of Nooitgedacht, Farmer was serving with the 1st Cameron Highlanders under Lieutenant Sandilands.⁷ As a member of a party of fifteen, Farmer and his comrades went to the assistance of a picquet which had been heavily engaged, with most of the men either killed or wounded.⁸ The enemy opened fire on the party, killing 2 and injuring 5, including Lieutenant Sandilands who had been shot through the liver.⁹ Farmer went to the aid of the wounded Officer and carried him away to safety under close and heavy fire. After attending to Sandilands, Farmer returned to the action and took bandoliers from the other wounded men before distributing the cartridges amongst those able to use them.¹⁰

Sergeant Farmer returned to the firing line before eventually being taken prisoner.¹¹ He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his act of bravery.

⁴ “The V.C. for an Old Brigade Boy”, The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, May 1901, p.141.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “War Office, April 12, 1901”, The London Gazette, 12 April, 1901, p.2540.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid; “The V.C.”, p.141.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “War Office, April”, p.2540

*They learnt at play but yesterday to strive and never yield -
'Tis much the same to play the game upon the battlefield.
In days since sped 'twas we who led; 'tis they who lead to-day -
They pay the price of sacrifice to point the nobler way.
Anon, 1916 ¹²*

¹² "Men of The Boys' Brigade", p.91.

First World War. Recipients of the Victoria Cross.

Corporal Frederick William Holmes, V.C.	62nd London Company
Lieutenant-Colonel John Henry Stephen Dimmer, V.C.	1st Barnet Company
Private James Caffrey, V.C.	12th Nottingham Company
Drummer W. Ritchie, V.C.	44th Glasgow Company
Lieutenant Edgar Kinghorn Myles, V.C.	17th South Essex (East Ham) Company
Lieutenant Robert Shankland, V.C.	2nd Ayr Company
Lance-Corporal John Brown Hamilton, V.C.	2nd Dumbarton Company
Captain Henry Strachan, V.C.	1st Bo'ness Company
Second-Lieutenant Ernest F. Beal, V.C.	13th Brighton Company
Piper James Richardson, V.C.	2nd Rutherglen Company
Corporal Frank Lester, V.C.	1st Hoylake Company
Acting-Sergeant John Crawshaw Raynes, V.C.	1st Sheffield Company *



* This recipient was not recorded in The Boys' Brigade Gazette



Corporal Frederick William Holmes, V.C.
62nd London Company

Corporal Frederick William Holmes, V.C. 62nd London Company

“The British made a stand at Le Cateau, and it was here that Corporal Holmes performed two acts of gallantry”¹³

Frederick W. Holmes was in his early 20s when he was awarded the Victoria Cross for two separate acts of gallantry on the Western Front during the First World War. Holmes joined the 62nd London Company aged twelve during a time when the Company was renowned for its successes in the *Daily Telegraph* competition for drill. After a spell as a packer in a firm of tea merchants, he joined the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and was among those who formed the original Expeditionary Force.¹⁴ He maintained his connection with the 62nd and attended Old Boys’ meetings when home on furlough.¹⁵

Corporal Holmes was the first Old Boy of the Boys’ Brigade to be given the Victoria Cross and was also one of the earliest recipients of the award in the British Armed Forces during the First World War.¹⁶ At the retreat from Mons on 26 August, 1914, Holmes performed two acts of valour which were recognised by both the British and French authorities, with the latter awarding the ‘Medaille Militaire’ to recognise the bravery Holmes displayed.¹⁷ The first act of valour saw Holmes carry a wounded comrade out of the trenches to safety under fusilade of shell and rifle fire. Later, he went to the aid of a wounded driver and - although not an artillery man - successfully drove one of the guns out of action under heavy fire.¹⁸

On 13 October, 1914, Holmes received a severe bullet wound to his leg and would later recover at the Weybridge Military Hospital. He was promoted from the rank of Lance-Corporal to Corporal during his period of recovery.¹⁹ Although not fatally wounded, Holmes was unable to re-join the Army and was discharged from duty.

To mark his heroism it was suggested by Brigade Authorities that an account of the acts of valour should be read on parade to every Company in the Brigade.

¹³ *Heroes*, p.6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

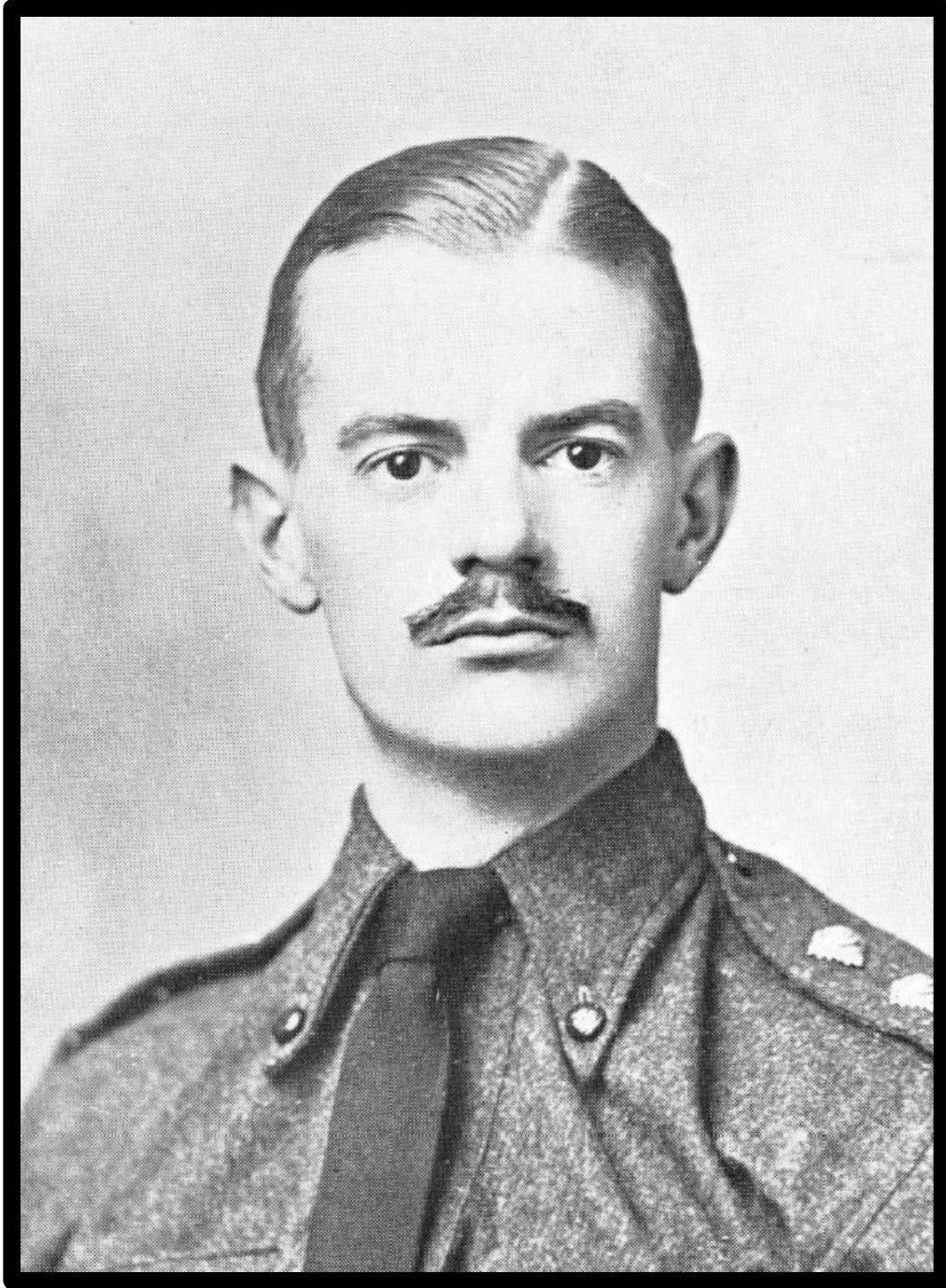
¹⁵ “Victoria Cross Won by Two Old Boys”, *The Boys’ Brigade Gazette*, January 1915, p.68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “War Office, 25 November, 1914”, *The Edinburgh Gazette*, 27 November 1914, pp.1435-6; p.1436.

¹⁸ “Victoria Cross Won”, p.68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*



Lieutenant-Colonel John Henry Stephen Dimmer, V.C.
1st Barnet Company

Lieutenant-Colonel John Henry Stephen Dimmer, V.C. 1st Barnet Company

“Though five times wounded, and the last man left of his section, he continued to fight”²⁰

John Henry Stephen Dimmer was a distinguished serviceman who won the Victoria Cross for his actions at Ypres in November 1914. Dimmer was a former member of the 1st Barnet Company where he retired from the ranks as a Sergeant in 1902.²¹ Soon after he joined the Militia, and served with the King’s Royal Rifle Corps during the South Africa War.²² He received his commission on the recommendation of the distinguished Army veteran, Lord Methuen, and in 1907 Dimmer obtained a first-class Army Certificate for Education.²³ He would work in the Colonial Office in Africa before joining the British Expeditionary Force in 1914.²⁴

Dimmer went to France and had charge of a Machine-Gun Section during the Battle of Ypres.²⁵ On 12 November, 1914, during intense fighting, Dimmer’s section was in the forefront of the battle. Though he was five-times wounded (four-times in the shoulder and once in the face) and the last man left in his section, he continued to fight till his last gun was out of action.²⁶ Commenting on his actions, his Commanding Officer stated “Lieutenant Dimmer saved the whole Battalion if not the whole line on at least three occasions”.²⁷

After recovering from his wounds he was promoted to the rank of Captain and returned to the front with the Machine-Gun Corps where he would go on to win the Military Cross.²⁸ Later he became Brigade-Major of the 92nd Infantry Brigade and was given command in the Royal Berkshire Regiment upon promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel.²⁹ J.H.S. Dimmer fell in action on 21 March, 1918 aged 35, leaving behind his wife who he had married in the January of that year. ³⁰

²⁰ Heroes, p.8.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Victoria Cross Won”, p.68.

²⁴ Ibid; Heroes, p.8.

²⁵ Heroes, p.8.

²⁶ Ibid; “Victoria Cross Won”, p.68.

²⁷ Heroes, p.8.

²⁸ “Lieut-Colonel Dimmer, V.C., Killed”, The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, May 1918, p.110.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.



Private James Caffrey, V.C.
12th Nottingham Company

Private James Caffrey, V.C. 12th Nottingham Company

“With the utmost coolness and bravery [Private Caffrey] had risked his own life to save others”.³¹

Private James Caffrey was a former member of the 12th Nottingham Company who served with the 2nd Battalion Yorkshire and Lancashire Regiment during the First World War.³²

On 16 November, 1915, Private Caffrey was engaged in operations near La Brique, France, when one of his comrades had been badly wounded and was laying in the open unable to move. The wounded man, who was from the West Yorkshire Regiment, was only 300 - 400 yards from the enemy trenches.³³ Caffrey, with support from Corporal Stirk of the Royal Army Medical Corps, attempted a rescue but, despite their efforts, were soon driven back by shrapnel fire.

The two men started again, this time under heavy sniper and machine-gun fire, and managed to reach the wounded man. However, soon after, Stirk was shot in the head. Caffrey bandaged the injured Corporal and brought him back to safety before returning once more for the wounded man who was also safely returned.³⁴

In total, Private James Caffrey made three journeys across the open whilst under close and heavy fire from the enemy.³⁵

³¹ Heroes, p.12.

³² “The Country’s Call”, The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, April 1916, p.123.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Heroes, p.12.

³⁵ Ibid.



Drummer W. Ritchie, V.C.
44th Glasgow Company

Drummer W. Ritchie, V.C. 44th Glasgow Company

“One of those brilliant acts of bravery which thrill the imagination.”³⁶

Drummer Ritchie was an Old Boy of the 44th Glasgow connected to St. Peter’s Episcopal Mission on Gardner Street, Cowcaddens.³⁷

Ritchie served with the Seaforth Highlanders from the first days of the war and was awarded both the Victoria Cross and the French Military Cross from his actions at the Battle of Ypres in 1916.³⁸

At a critical moment in the advance of his Battalion, with all Officers lost and men wavering and beginning to retire, Ritchie leapt on to the parapet of an enemy trench under heavy fire, and rallied the men by repeatedly sounding the ‘charge’.³⁹ He escaped unscathed and, throughout the remainder of the day, carried messages over the fire-swept ground.⁴⁰

He returned home for several months for rest and recovery and, when asked if he would prefer to stay at home than return to the front, his response was “what! Stay at home when I know what’s going on out there?”.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid, p.10.

³⁷ “Another V.C. for The Boys’ Brigade”, The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, October 1916, p.14; David M. Bertie, Scottish Episcopal Clergy 1689 - 2000, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p.602.

³⁸ Austin E. Birch, The Story of the Boys’ Brigade, (London: Frederick Muller, 1959), p.87; Heroes, p.10.

³⁹ Heroes, p.10.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Another V.C.”, p.14.



**Lieutenant Edgar Kinghorn Myles, V.C.
17th South Essex (East Ham) Company**

Lieutenant Edgar Kinghorn Myles, V.C. 17th South Essex (East Ham) Company

*"The V.C. was awarded to him for most conspicuous bravery in rescuing wounded men under fire."*⁴²

Lieutenant Myles joined the 17th South Essex (East Ham) Company in January 1907, becoming a Staff-Sergeant in 1910.⁴³ He retired with this rank in 1912 and would move a few miles north from East Ham to Wanstead.⁴⁴ Myles would enlist with the 9th Worcestershire Regiment at the outbreak of the war, receiving his Commission on the recommendation of his Colonel in November 1914.⁴⁵

Myles was appointed Bombing Officer in the Gallipoli campaign where he was awarded the Victoria Cross for most conspicuous bravery in rescuing wounded men whilst under fire. On several occasions, in front of the advanced trenches and under heavy fire, Lieutenant Myles went out to rescue his injured comrades. In one instance, he carried a wounded Officer to a place of safety whilst under circumstances of severe danger.⁴⁶

After a period of rest in Egypt Myles was transferred to the Welsh Regiment where he was granted a permanent commission.⁴⁷ He was later ordered to Mesopotamia where he was injured in his wrist and would spend time recuperating in India.⁴⁸

⁴² "A Fifth Old Boy Wins the V.C.", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, November 1916, p.30.

⁴³ Ibid; Heroes, p.14

⁴⁴ "A Fifth", p.30.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Heroes, p.14.

⁴⁷ "A Fifth", p.30.

⁴⁸ Ibid.



Lieutenant Robert Shankland, V.C.
2nd Ayr Company

Lieutenant Robert Shankland, V.C. 2nd Ayr Company

*"His courage and splendid example inspired all ranks"*⁴⁹

Born and educated in Ayr, Robert Shankland was a former member of the 2nd Ayr Company who was commended for his keenness and regular and punctual attendance at Company meetings.⁵⁰ He distinguished himself during his formative years at school and won a medal in every class, finishing with the *Dux Medal* of his school.⁵¹ He worked in an accountants office in Ayr before emigrating to Canada.⁵²

He joined the Canadian forces as a Private and quickly rose up the ranks. He was among the first Canadian troops to serve in France and in the summer of 1916 - as a Regimental Sergeant-Major - won the Distinguished Conduct Medal.⁵³

Shankland was awarded the Victoria Cross for "conspicuous bravery and resource in action" at Passchendaele on 26 October, 1917.⁵⁴ Lieutenant Shankland gained a position and rallied the remnant of his platoon and men from other Companies and disposed them to command the ground in front. They inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and successfully dispersed a counter-attack, with the latter action enabling troops to come up uninterfered.⁵⁵ In addition, Shankland provided a valuable report as to the position on the British frontage and rejoined his command until relieved.⁵⁶

Lieutenant Shankland was the first Ayr man to receive the Victoria Cross and was presented with the freedom of the town at a ceremony held on 31 December, 1917.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Heroes, p.16.

⁵⁰ "Two Old Boys Win the V.C.", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, January 1918, pp. 60 - 61; p.61.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Heroes, p.16.

⁵⁴ Canada in the Great World War: Special Services, Heroic Deeds, Etc., (Toronto: United Publishers of Canada, 1921). p.308.

⁵⁵ Heroes, p.16.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Presentation to Lieutenant Shankland, V.C.", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, February 1918, p.69.



Lance-Corporal John Brown Hamilton, V.C.
2nd Dumbarton Company

Lance-Corporal John Brown Hamilton, V.C. 2nd Dumbarton Company

“While others were considering the next step, Lance-Corporal Hamilton was already taking it”.⁵⁸

John Brown Hamilton joined the 2nd Dumbarton Company (Bridgend United Free Church) at the beginning of the 1907-08 Session and had perfect attendance at Company meetings during his four years in the Brigade.⁵⁹ Hamilton would experience great successes in the 2nd Dumbarton where he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant.⁶⁰ His achievements with the Company were most clearly demonstrated with physical pursuits. He was an integral member of the team which won the Lord Overtoun Shield for physical drill for four successive years during his time as a member.⁶¹ His connection with the Company ended when his parents relocated to Cambuslang.⁶²

At twenty-one years old John Brown Hamilton was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery displayed in France during 1917 when serving with the Highland Light Infantry.⁶³ Supplies to the trenches had reached a seriously low ebb, with issues in providing both the front and supply lines with sufficient small arm ammunition a particular problem. On several occasions - and on his own initiative - Brown Hamilton carried bandoliers of ammunition through the enemy's fire to the front. Then, in full view of snipers, he distributed the ammunition to the men on the front line. His actions ensured a steady continuance of the defence by rifle fire and, in doing so, displayed a devotion to duty during the enemy attack.⁶⁴

Lance-Corporal Brown Hamilton was honoured by citizens from Cambuslang for his actions on the front, receiving a gold watch from residents at a public meeting in January 1918.⁶⁵ On 7 February 1918, members of the 2nd Dumbarton honoured their former member at a meeting where he inspected the Company whilst wearing his coveted Cross.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ “Two Old Boys”, p.61.

⁵⁹ Ibid; “Presentations to Corporal J. Brown Hamilton, V.C.”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, March 1918, p.85.

⁶⁰ “Two Old Boys”, p.61.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Austin E. Birch, The Story of the Boys' Brigade, (London: Frederick Muller, 1959), p.88; Heroes, p.18.

⁶⁴ Heroes, p.18.

⁶⁵ “Presentation to Corporal Hamilton, V.C.”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, February 1918, p.69.

⁶⁶ “Presentations”, p.85.



Captain Henry Strachan, V.C
1st Bo'ness Company

Captain Henry Strachan, V.C

1st Bo'ness Company

"He rallied his men and fought his way back at night through the enemy's line".⁶⁷

Henry 'Harcus' Strachan was born and educated in Bo'ness and was - according to his former Company Captain at the 1st Bo'ness - a "quiet and modest" man.⁶⁸ Strachan had an impressive schooling having attended the Royal High School, Edinburgh and Edinburgh University.⁶⁹ In addition, he was considered to be a "good, all-round athlete", who was a keen baseball, football, and rugby player.⁷⁰ In 1905 he emigrated to Canada, acquiring a farm in Alberta.

He joined the 'Famous Forty Three' - the Fort Gary Horse - and enlisted as a Trooper, later training in England.⁷¹ He was delayed in joining the war effort due to his vision being considered defective but once assigned to the front line displayed bravery and leadership during combat operations.

In May 1917 Henry Strachan was awarded the Military Cross for actions which led to the destruction of the enemy's defensive organisation and capture of eight prisoners without losing a single man of the party.⁷² He was injured in a trench raid in July 1917 and was out of action for six weeks. However, on returning to the front, Strachan was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions at Masnières, Northern France, on 20 November, 1917.⁷³ Displaying fearless and exemplary leadership he took command of a squadron when their leader was killed. Strachan led the men through the enemy line of machine-gun posts and led the charge, killing seven gunners with his sword.⁷⁴ When the battery had been silenced he rallied his men and fought back through enemy lines to bring wounded men and fifteen prisoners to safety.⁷⁵

The operation, which resulted in silencing the battery and cutting the three main telephone lines of the enemy two miles in rear of their front line, was possible only through Strachan's gallantry and leadership.

⁶⁷ Our Eighth V.C.", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, February 1918, p.67.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Canada in the Great, pp. 309 -310.

⁷⁴ Heroes, p.20.

⁷⁵ Ibid.



Second-Lieutenant Ernest F. Beal, V.C.
13th Brighton Company

Second-Lieutenant Ernest F. Beal, V.C. 13th Brighton Company

*“One of the finest of the younger generation of Officers produced by the Brighton and Hove Battalion”.*⁷⁶

Prior to the First World War Ernest Beal was, for many years, an Officer with the 13th Brighton Company.⁷⁷ Beal came from a Brigade household. His father was a Vice-President of the Brighton and Hove Battalion and his two brothers served as Officers.⁷⁸

Whilst serving with the Yorkshire Regiment during the Spring Offensive in March 1918, Second-Lieutenant Beal was in command of a Company detailed to occupy a section of trench. However, it was found that a gap of 400 yards existed between the neighbouring unit which was strongly held by enemy forces.⁷⁹ With no troops available to clear the gap, Beal organised a party of fewer than twelve men against the enemy. This party went on to inflict severe casualties and capture a total of four guns.⁸⁰

After displaying exceptional leadership on the front line under testing circumstances, Beal was killed by a shell the following morning.⁸¹ He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions, with his parents receiving the Cross for their son from the King at a public investiture on 3 July, 1918.⁸²

Tributes to Second-Lieutenant Beal were paid on 23 October, 1918 at Lewes Road Congregational Church, Brighton where a portrait was unveiled and placed in the Church Hall where the boys of the local Company met for drill and games.⁸³ The Ernest Beal Watch - the top award in the Brighton and Hove Battalion - was created and awarded to the most efficient member of the Battalion.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ “Ernest Beal. An Appreciation”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, May 1918, p.110.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*; Heroes, p.22

⁷⁸ “Ernest Beal”, p.110.

⁷⁹ “Our Ninth V.C.”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, September 1918, p.9; Heroes, p.22.

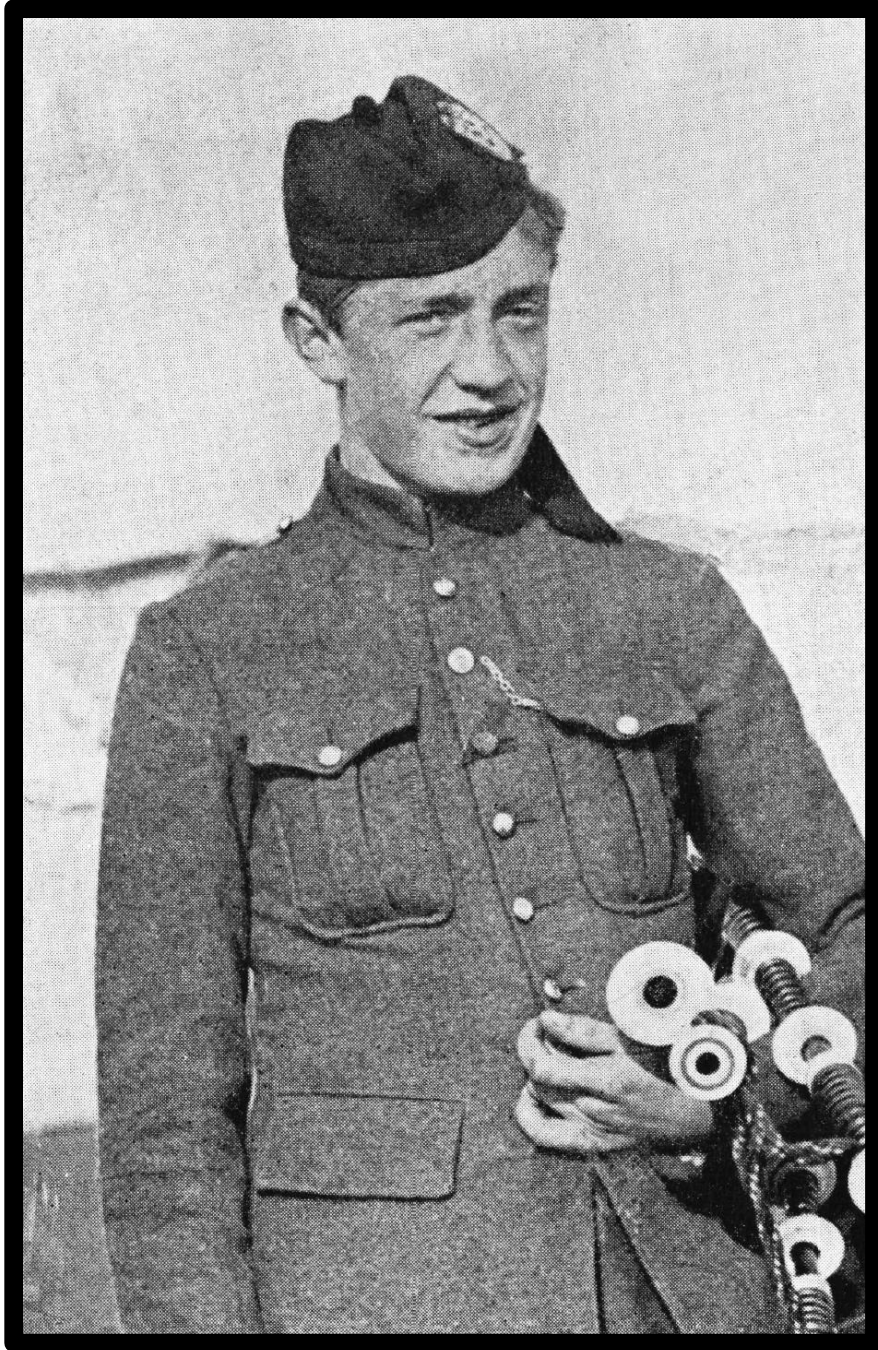
⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

⁸¹ *Ibid*.

⁸² “Investiture by the King”, The Daily Telegraph, 4 July 1918, p.6.

⁸³ “Portrait of Lieutenant Ernest F. Beal, V.C., Unveiled”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, December 1918, p.46.

⁸⁴ “Here and There”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, January 1919, p.35.



Piper James Richardson, V.C.
2nd Rutherglen Company

Piper James Richardson, V.C. 2nd Rutherglen Company

“In winning his Victoria Cross he gave his life for his country”.⁸⁵

Piper James Richardson was a member of the 2nd Rutherglen Company from the ages of 12 to 16 and during his time in the Boys’ Brigade he learnt to play the pipes.⁸⁶ Richardson left the 2nd Rutherglen when he relocated to Canada with his parents.⁸⁷

James Richardson served as a Piper in the 16th Battalion of the Manitoba Regiment and was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions prior to an attack at Regina Trench, near Thiepval, in October 1916.⁸⁸ Before the attack, Piper Richardson received permission from his Commanding Officer to play his Company over the top. As the Company approached the objective it was held up by strong wire and came under intense fire from the enemy, thus resulting in heavy casualties and a demoralised formation.⁸⁹ Realising the situation, Richardson strode up and down outside the wire playing his pipes. The effect was “instantaneous” and, inspired by his example, the Company rushed the wire and captured the position”.⁹⁰

After participating in bombing operations, Richardson was instructed to take back a wounded comrade and prisoners. However, after proceeding around 200 yards, he realised he had left his pipes behind. Although strongly urged not to, he insisted on returning to recover his pipes, and was not seen again.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Heroes, p.24.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Our 10th V.C.”, The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, November 1918, p.26.

⁸⁸ Ibid; Canada in the Great, p.305.

⁸⁹ Heroes, p.24.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Canada in the Great, p.305.



Corporal Frank Lester, V.C.
1st Hoylake Company

Corporal Frank Lester, V.C. 1st Hoylake Company

*“To save their lives he sacrificed his own”.*⁹²

Corporal Frank Lester was described as an “enthusiastic” member of the 1st Hoylake Company.⁹³ He was also a keen musician and played the organ at his local chapel in Irby, Birkenhead⁹⁴

Corporal Lester joined the Forces on 30 March, 1916, coming away from Chelsea Military School with the highest honours and certificates that qualified him for the post of Sergeant-Major. However, he was reduced to the rank of Private when he left England for the front to serve with the 10th Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers.⁹⁵ On 30 March, 1918, he returned to England on rest leave after suffering a wound, returning to the front in September 1918.⁹⁶

Lester was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions when clearing the village of Neuville, France, on 12 October, 1918.⁹⁷ With a party of seven under an Officer, Lester was the first to enter a house from the back door and shot two German soldiers as they attempted to leave via the front door. Soon after, a fall of masonry blocked the door by which the party had escaped, with the only exit into the street under fire at point-blank range.⁹⁸ Observing that an enemy sniper was causing severe casualties to a party across the street, Lester dashed out and shot the sniper at close quarters. However, on doing so, he was mortally wounded and died at the age of 22 protecting his comrades.⁹⁹

⁹² *Heroes*, p.26.

⁹³ “Our Eleventh V.C.”, *The Boys’ Brigade Gazette*, February 1919, p.63.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Heroes*, p.26; Birch, *The Story*, p.89.

⁹⁸ *Heroes*, p.26.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; “Our Eleventh”, p.63.



Acting-Sergeant John Crawshaw Raynes, V.C.
1st Sheffield Company

Acting-Sergeant John Crawshaw Raynes, V.C. 1st Sheffield Company

“For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty”.¹⁰⁰

In a reflection of fifty years of Sheffield Church life, the Reverend William Odom - on assessing the city during the First World War - commented that John Crawshaw Raynes was the first Sheffield man to win the Victoria Cross.¹⁰¹ In addition, Odom referred to Raynes as a former member of The Boys’ Brigade at Christ Church, Heeley, who is said to have returned to his old school and show his Victoria Cross to the scholars.¹⁰²

The 1st Sheffield Company, with Odom as the Chaplain, was registered as a new Company attached to The Christ Church in September 1898.¹⁰³ However, Raynes was not reported by The Boys’ Brigade Executive at the time as being a former member who had been awarded the Victoria Cross, possibly due to the 1st Sheffield Company being closed by 1909.¹⁰⁴

Whilst this was not reported in The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, the act of valour shown by Raynes is worthy of reference.

On 11 October, 1915, Raynes was a member of the ‘A’ Battery, 71st Brigade, Royal Field Artillery which came under heavy bombardment by armour-piercing shells and gas.¹⁰⁵ On ‘cease-fire’ being ordered, Raynes went out to assist his comrade - Sergeant Ayres - who had been wounded some forty yards away.¹⁰⁶ Raynes reached Ayres, and brought him back to relative safety before returning to action. A few moments later, after ‘cease-fire’ was called again, Raynes carried Ayres into a dug-out before running across the open to fetch his smoke helmet to give to his Sergeant.¹⁰⁷ The following day, despite being wounded in the leg and head, he insisted on remaining under heavy fire to assist the rescue of his fellow soldiers.

¹⁰⁰ “War Office, 18th November, 1915”, Third Supplement to the London Gazette of Tuesday, the 16th of November, 1915, 18 November, 1915, pp. 11447 - 53; p.11449.

¹⁰¹ William Odom, Fifty Years of Sheffield Church Life, 1866 - 1916, (Sheffield: J.W. Northend, 1917), pp. 82 - 94.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ “New Companies”, The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, September 1898, p.15.

¹⁰⁴ 1st Sheffield Company Record and Statistical return 1909.

¹⁰⁵ “War Office, 18th November”, p.11449.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

*To live they care; yet die they dare 'midst rending shot and shell.
With failing breath they laugh at death, and God He smiles as well;
For death and life, in selfless strife, are one in cause of right.
We die to live; we die to give, in place of darkness, light.
Anon, 1916¹⁰⁸*

¹⁰⁸ "Men of The Boys' Brigade", p.91.

Second World War. Recipients of the Victoria Cross.

Sergeant John Hannah, V.C.

237th Glasgow Company

Sergeant Hanson Victor Turner, V.C.

6th Halifax Company

Corporal Thomas Peck Hunter, V.C.

67th Edinburgh Company

Guardsman Edward Charlton, V.C.

32nd Manchester Company





**Sergeant John Hannah, V.C.
237th Glasgow Company**

Sergeant John Hannah, V.C.

237th Glasgow Company

*“The bomb compartment became an inferno”*¹⁰⁹

Sergeant John Hannah was a former member of the 237th Glasgow Company (St. David's Church).¹¹⁰ He was the first Old Boy of the Boys' Brigade and first Scottish man to receive the Victoria Cross during the Second World War.¹¹¹ Aged 18 he was the Royal Air Force's youngest recipient of the Victoria Cross and was, at the time, the youngest to receive the award during the Second World War.¹¹²

On the night of 15/16 September, 1940, John Hannah was the wireless operator and air gunner with the No. 83 Squadron on a Hampden Bomber engaged in the successful attack on enemy barge concentrations at Antwerp.¹¹³ His aircraft was subjected to intense anti-aircraft fire which pierced both the port and starboard petrol tanks.¹¹⁴ This resulted in a fire which enveloped the cockpits of the wireless operator and rear-gunner who both evacuated the aircraft. With a high risk of the fire spreading, Hannah forced his way through to reach extinguishers and remained to fight the fires for ten minutes. He was almost blinded by the heat and fumes, and received second-degree burns to his face, but successfully extinguished the fire, thus enabling the pilot to land the aircraft safely at its base.¹¹⁵

On receiving news of the award, the Captain of the 237th Glasgow reported that the Boys of the Company were “excited and proud as if every one of them had got the V.C. himself”.¹¹⁶ Sergeant Hannah was discharged from the Royal Air Force on medical grounds and died of tuberculosis aged 25.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ “For Valour”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, November 1940, p.35.

¹¹⁰ J. Berend Shaw, The Glasgow Battalion of The Boys' Brigade 1883 - 1983, (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1983), p.72.

¹¹¹ “For Valour”, p.35.

¹¹² John Springhall, Brian Fraser, and Michael Hoare, Sure and Stedfast. A History of The Boys' Brigade. 1883 -1983, (London: Collins, 1983), p.174; “Brigade Notes” The Boys' Brigade Gazette, November 1940, p.34.

¹¹³ “Hannah”, AIR2/5686 (18C), The National Archives, Recommendation for Honours and Rewards, 16 September, 1940; “For Valour”, p.35.

¹¹⁴ “Royal Air Force”, The London Gazette, 1 October, 1940, pp. 5788-9.

¹¹⁵ “Hannah”; “For Valour”, p.35.

¹¹⁶ “For Valour”, p.35.

¹¹⁷ Springhall et al, Sure and Stedfast, p.174.



Sergeant Hanson Victor Turner, V.C.
6th Halifax Company

Sergeant Hanson Victor Turner, V.C. 6th Halifax Company

“He died on the battlefield in a spirit of supreme self-sacrifice”.¹¹⁸

Sergeant Hanson Victor Turner was a former member of the 6th Halifax Company who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for heroism displayed in Burma during the Second World War.

On the night of 6/7 June, 1944, a strong force of Japanese soldiers - armed with machine-guns - made an attack on a British position held by 20 men under Sergeant Turner. The enemy used grenades to deadly effect, destroying three of the four machine-guns held by the force. Turner re-organised his party and for several hours the enemy made repeated attempts to capture the position but to no avail.¹¹⁹

Having successfully resisted the onslaught Turner was determined to counter-attack. However, his remaining men were in no condition to do so. This did not deter Turner, who single-handedly attacked the strongly-posted enemy, loaded with all the hand grenades he could carry, whilst under heavy fire. His supply extinguished, he returned for more grenades to renew his attack. In total, he made six solo attacks against impossible odds until the inevitable end.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ “Service Awards”, The Boys’ Brigade Gazette, December 1944, p.22.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.



**Corporal Thomas Peck Hunter, V.C.
67th Edinburgh Company**

Corporal Thomas Peck Hunter, V.C. 67th Edinburgh Company

“Offering himself as a target, Hunter lay in full view of the enemy”¹²¹

Corporal Thomas Peck Hunter was a former member of the 67th Edinburgh Company - St. Aidan's - who served with the 43rd Royal Marine Commando during the war in Italy.¹²²

On the night of 1/2 April, 1944, Corporal Hunter, 21, was in charge of a Bren group during the advance of the Commando to its final objective.¹²³ Realising his troop was in danger from the enemy stronghold of a group of houses, Hunter seized the Bren gun and charged alone across 200 yards of open bullet-swept ground. Attracting most of the fire on himself, he advanced on the enemy, with six German soldiers surrendering to him as he went from house-to-house.¹²⁴ His Troop, advancing to support him, came under fire from forces across the canal. Once again, Hunter offered himself as a target, and drew most of the fire, thus enabling his troop to occupy the captured houses.¹²⁵

Corporal Hunter was eventually struck by a burst of fire and was killed instantly. However, thanks to his self-sacrifice, the troop gained their final objective and the position was won.¹²⁶

¹²¹ “Service Awards”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, October 1945, p.13.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ J. B. Barclay, Pill Box & Service Cap, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Battalion, The Boys' Brigade, 1985), p.18.

¹²⁴ “Service Awards”, The Boys' Brigade Gazette, October 1945, p.13.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.



**Guardsman Edward Charlton, V.C.
32nd Manchester Company**

Guardsman Edward Charlton, V.C. 32nd Manchester Company

"Someday you will be proud of me".¹²⁷

Guardsman Edward Charlton - 25 - was a former member of the 32nd Manchester Company. He was a Guardsman in the Irish Guards and had served since 1940.¹²⁸ Charlton was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross in 1946 for his actions during an attack on his unit in northern Germany in the closing days of the war.¹²⁹

On 21 April, 1945, Charlton was co-driver of a tank in a Troop which had seized the village of Wistedt, near Hamburg.¹³⁰ Shortly after the capture, the enemy attacked the position under cover of artillery and with great strength of 15 Panzer Grenadiers and six self-propelled guns.¹³¹ All tanks of the Troop were hit, and the infantry were in danger of being over-run. On his own initiative, and in order to retrieve his comrades from a perilous situation, Charlton advanced alone - firing his Browning gun from his hip - up the road in full view of the enemy.¹³² For ten minutes he kept up his fire, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, until he was wounded in his left arm.¹³³ He then mounted his machine-gun on a near-by fence and stood firing for a further ten minutes until he was hit again, shattering his already injured arm.¹³⁴ Despite losing an arm, experiencing immense pain, and severe loss of blood, Charlton maintained his fire until he was struck for a third time.¹³⁵ He died shortly after in the hands of the enemy.

The actions of Guardsman Charlton enabled the position to be quickly recaptured. His boldness had halted the enemy and retrieved his comrades from a desperate situation. Furthermore, his actions were met with amazement by his German captors who were astonished at his display of valour.¹³⁶

¹²⁷ "Service Awards", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, June 1946, p.80.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid; Springhall et al, Sure and Stedfast, p.174.

¹³⁰ "Service Awards", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, June 1946, p.80; Supplement to the London Gazette, 30 April 1946, p.2119.

¹³¹ Supplement to the London, p.2119.

¹³² Springhall et al, Sure and Stedfast, p.174; "Service Awards", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, June 1946, p.80.

¹³³ "Service Awards", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, June 1946, p.80.

¹³⁴ Supplement to the London, p.2119

¹³⁵ "Service Awards", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, June 1946, p.80.

¹³⁶ Supplement to the London, p.2119

*Their dreams to serve England were not denied:
They lived and laughed in city desolate,
And laughing, passed; with us remains the pride
Of lives unfledged but great.
P.L. 1940.¹³⁷*

¹³⁷ "Boys in the Battle", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, November 1940, p.35.

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In 1923 The Boys' Brigade Executive authorised the publication of a small book, entitled "Heroes of The Boys Brigade, Officers and Old Boys who won The Victoria Cross in The Great War, 1914-19"

This current book follows the format of the original, adding the Victoria Cross winners from the Second Boer War, the four winners of the Victoria Cross from the Second World War, and one additional Victoria Cross winner which was not mentioned in the original publication or The Boys' Brigade Gazette.

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Dr Chris Spackman is a researcher and historian who graduated with a Ph.D from the University of Portsmouth in 2016.

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