



“When I get out, we will
win the war”

Victoria Cross Online
Issue 18 March 2024

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the 18th edition of Victoria Cross Online Magazine. The feature article this month by yours truly is the story of the youngest and possibly the smallest Victoria Cross recipient of World War II all whilst his father was in an internment camp in the North East as an Italian national.

There is also the next two instalments in the Medical VCs series with the stories of Valentine McMaster VC and Anthony Home VC.

There is also news of the upcoming auction at Noonans in London, of the VC and DSO of Lt Commander Edgar Cookson, and the latest VC renovation project of Steve Davies, Military Grave Restorer, with his work on the grave of Ernest Beckwith Towse VC.



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“When I Get Out, We Will Win The War”

Dennis Donnini (1925-1945) was born on 17th November 1925 in Easington, County Durham, the son of Alfredo Donnini and Catherine (nee Brown).

His Italian father had settled in England in 1899 and moved in 1915 to Easington Colliery, where he became an ice cream vendor and proprietor of a billiards saloon. Dennis attended Corby Grammar School in Sunderland, now known as St. Aidans School. During the war, Donnini's two older brothers, Alfred and Louis Dino, served in the British Army, with Louis dying on 1st May 1944 while employed as a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps. Alfred was captured at Dunkirk and spent the rest of the war in a POW camp. His two older sisters, Corrina and Silvia, enlisted in the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

Dennis' father Alfredo being an Italian national, would spend the war interned at a POW camp at Harperley, near Wolsingham, by authorities suspicious that his proximity to the sea meant he could send messages to enemy craft. Easington colliers, so local legend has it, formed up to try to prevent police taking Alfredo away. They regarded him as one of their own and, besides, he made jolly good ice cream.

Dennis was not the epitome of the perfect candidate as a soldier. To begin with he was just 4ft 10in tall, quite possibly the smallest VC recipient of the Second World War, as well as certainly the youngest.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/dennis-donnini-vc/>

“When I Get Out, We
Will Win The War”



Fusilier DENNIS DONNINI

This 19-year-old private of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, though wounded in an assault on enemy positions between the Rivers Ouer and Mass on January 18, 1945, with superb self-sacrifice drew the enemy fire from his comrades to himself. He died from wounds.

“When I Get Out, We Will Win The War”

When the call to arms came, 19 year Dennis did not hesitate. He reportedly told his mother “when I get out, we will win the war”. He was later described by his sister as “a lovely little soldier, like a little drum major.”

Dennis had enlisted in the Royal Scots Fusiliers Regiment in 1944, and posted to 4/5th Battalion, and had been only been in the Army for just over 9 months prior to Operation Blackcock.

In North-West Europe, on 18th January 1945, a Battalion of The Royal Scots Fusiliers supported by tanks was the leading Battalion in the assault of the German positions between the rivers Roer and Maas. This consisted of a broad belt of minefields and wire on the other side of a stream.

As the result of a thaw the armour was unable to cross the stream and the infantry had to continue the assault without the support of the tanks. Fusilier Donnini’s platoon was ordered to attack a small village. As they left their trenches the platoon came under concentrated machine gun and rifle fire from the houses and Fusilier Donnini was hit by a bullet in the head. After a few minutes he recovered consciousness, charged down thirty yards of open road and threw a grenade into the nearest window.

The enemy fled through the gardens of four houses, closely pursued by Fusilier Donnini and the survivors of his platoon. Under heavy fire at seventy yards range Fusilier Donnini and two companions crossed an open space and reached the cover of a wooden barn, thirty yards from the enemy trenches.

“When I Get Out, We Will Win The War”

Fusilier Donnini, still bleeding profusely from his wound, went into the open under intense close range fire and carried one of his companions, who had been wounded, into the barn. Taking a Bren gun he again went into the open, firing as he went.

He was wounded a second time but recovered and went on firing until a third bullet hit a grenade which he was carrying and killed him. The superb gallantry and self-sacrifice of Fusilier Donnini drew the enemy fire away from his companions on to himself. As the result of this, the platoon were able to capture the position, accounting for thirty Germans and two machine guns.



“When I Get Out, We Will Win The War”

TUESDAY, 20 MARCH, 1945

War Office, 20th March, 1945.

The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the posthumous award of the VICTORIA CROSS to:—

No. 14768011 Fusilier Dennis Donnini, The Royal Scots Fusiliers (Easington Colliery, Co. Durham).

In North-West Europe on 18th January, 1945, a Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers supported by tanks was the leading Battalion in the assault of the German position between the Rivers Roer and Maas. This consisted of a broad belt of minefields and wire on the other side of a stream.

As the result of a thaw the armour was unable to cross the stream and the infantry had to continue the assault without the support of the tanks. Fusilier Donnini's platoon was ordered to attack a small village.

As they left their trenches the platoon came under concentrated machine gun and rifle fire from the houses and Fusilier Donnini was hit by a bullet in the head. After a few minutes he recovered consciousness, charged down thirty yards of open road and threw a grenade into the nearest window.

The enemy fled through the gardens of four houses, closely pursued by Fusilier Donnini and the survivors of his platoon. Under heavy fire at seventy yards range Fusilier Donnini and two companions crossed an open space and reached the cover of a wooden barn, thirty yards from the enemy trenches.

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The superb gallantry and self-sacrifice of Fusilier Donnini drew the enemy fire away

from his companions on to himself. As the result of this, the platoon were able to capture the position, accounting for thirty Germans and two machine guns.

Throughout this action, fought from beginning to end at point blank range, the dash, determination and magnificent courage of Fusilier Donnini enabled his comrades to overcome an enemy more than twice their own number.

War Office, 20th March, 1945.

REGULAR ARMY.

ROYAL ARMOURD CORPS.

Lt. (War Subs. Capt.) J. E. Saxby (105963) to be Capt., 28th Feb. 1945, with seniority, 18th Jan. 1944.

Lt. G. H. A. Hartman (328732) to be Capt., 28th Feb. 1945, with seniority 16th May 1944.

Lt. (War Subs. Capt.) H. H. Firth (137736) to be Capt., 17th Jan. 1945, with seniority, 13th July 1944.

Lt. F. R. McFadyen (134838) to be Capt., 28th Feb. 1945, with seniority, 26th Nov. 1944.

Lt. (War Subs. Capt.) C. A. Windsor (121088) to be Capt., 28th Feb. 1945, with seniority, 5th Dec. 1944.

Lt. (War Subs. Capt.) J. C. Parkhouse (149867) to be Capt., 5th Feb. 1945.

2nd Lt. J. K. England (255222) to be Lt., 15th Mar. 1945.

ROYAL REGIMENT OF ARTILLERY.

Lt.-Col. P. N. Ellis (1793) on completion of tenure of service as Regtl. Lt.-Col. remains on full pay (supern.), 18th Mar. 1945.

Lt. (War Subs. Capt.) C. B. C. Ward (151381) to be Capt., 20th Mar. 1945.

Retd. Offr. Re-Employed.

Maj. Sir R. de V. Shaw, Bt., M.C. (195875):—
1. at his own request reverts to the rank of Lt., 5th June, 1940, whilst so employed.

2. is restored to the rank of Capt., 26th Nov. 1940.

3. is restored to the rank of Maj., 16th Mar. 1941.

4. is granted the hon. rank of Lt.-Col. on ceasing to be employed, 22d Apr. 1944.

CORPS OF ROYAL ENGINEERS.

2nd Lt. W. D. C. Holmes (195038) to be Lt., 25th Nov. 1942. (Substituted for the notifn. in Gazette (Supplement) dated 20th Oct. 1942.)

Lt.-Col. J. E. Ridley (13249) on completion of tenure of service as Regtl. Lt.-Col. remains on full pay (supern.), 19th Mar. 1945.

“When I Get Out, We Will Win The War”

POSTHUMOUS V.C. FOR DURHAM BOY OF 19

Only Seven Months in Army

ROUTED GERMANS AFTER BEING UNCONSCIOUS

IT was announced last night that the Victoria Cross has been posthumously awarded to a County Durham soldier who was only 19 when the action occurred, had been in the Army only seven months, and overseas two months.

He was Fus. Dennis Donnini; Royal Scots Fusiliers, son of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Donnini, of 8, Seaside-lane, Easington Colliery.

The Citation

Donnini's battalion, supported by tanks, led the assault of the German position between the rivers Roer and Maas on 18 January.

Donnini's platoon, ordered to attack a small village, came under concentrated machine-gun and rifle fire from the houses and Donnini was hit in the head.

After a few minutes he recovered consciousness, charged down 30 yards of open road and threw a grenade into the nearest window.

The enemy fled through the gardens of four houses, closely pursued by Donnini and the survivors of his platoon. Under heavy fire Donnini and two companions gained the cover of a barn, 30 yards from the enemy trenches.

Still bleeding profusely Donnini went into the open under intense close-range fire and carried one of his companions, who had been wounded, into the barn.



FUS. DENNIS DONNINI

larly: "When I get out we will finish the war."

"He was a lovely little soldier," remarked his sister. "He was like a little drum major."

As a boy, Dennis went to the council school at Easington Colliery and was an altar boy at Easington Colliery Roman Catholic Church. He was afterwards a pupil of St. Anne's School, Wolvingham, and Corby Hill Roman Catholic School, Sunderland.

Before joining up he was employed by Durham Cables Co. at Birtley. He had his embarkation leave in November and on 13 November he left Easington.

Father an Italian

His father is an Italian who came to England 46 years ago.

“When I Get Out, We Will Win The War”

Dennis was buried in Sittard War Cemetery, Sittard, Netherlands. At just 19, he was the youngest recipient of the VC in the Second World War.

Two months after the highest honour was announced – the citation spoke of “superb gallantry and self-sacrifice” – his parents were invited to Buckingham Palace to receive it. The king, it’s said, had to give personal permission just to get Alfredo through the gates.

The monarch asked how he kept his business going when two sons were dead and a third a prisoner of war. “I don’t,” said Alfredo. “I am forced to live away from home in a camp.”

“Go home,” said King George, by which he meant Easington Colliery. Amid bitter-sweet emotions, Alfredo Donnini obeyed at once.



“When I Get Out, We Will Win The War”



Medical VCs

6. Valentine Mumbree McMaster VC



Medical VCs

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Valentine Mumbree McMaster (1834-1872) was born in Trichinopoly, India on 16th May 1834 and graduated from Edinburgh Medical School. He then enlisted with the 78th Regiment of Foot (later Seaforth Highlanders) as they took part in the Persian War of 1857. His VC recommendation came through the ballot method and was almost a last measure.

General Havelock called for recommendations for the Victoria Cross and the only regiment not to forward one was the 78th. When asked why, they stated that no one of their number had more particularly distinguished himself than another. When further pressed, they sent in the name of one of their medical officers, Assistant Surgeon Valentine McMaster.

He had supported Surgeon Joseph Jee VC with attending the wounded throughout the day, night and following morning of the 25th-26th September 1857 during the Relief of the Lucknow Residency. McMaster was gazetted for the VC on 18th June 1858, and duly received his medal from Lieutenant General Henry Somerset in Bombay later that year.

78th Regiment	... Assistant-Surgeon Valentine Mumbree McMaster Date of Act of Bravery, 25th September, 1857	For the intrepidity with which he exposed himself to the fire of the enemy, in bringing in, and attending to, the wounded, on the 25th of September, at Lucknow. (Extract from Field Force Orders of the late Major-General Havelock, dated 17th October, 1857.)
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Medical VCs

6. Valentine Mumbree McMaster VC



He went on to serve in the 1863 Umbeleya Campaign and in 1869, he and the 78th were posted to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he became involved in the city's social life. He met and fell in love with Eleanor Burmester, 15 years younger than him. They were married in June 1870 and had a son. The new family were soon on the move when the 78th was posted to Belfast, Ireland in November 1871. Tragedy struck when McMaster died on 22nd January 1872 from heart disease aged just 38. He was buried in Belfast City Cemetery where his widow erected a cross over his grave.

Medical VCs

6. Valentine Mumbree McMaster VC

Eleanor, who was expecting their second child, returned her family to Halifax to give birth to their second son. She met another surgeon, Canadian-born Campbell Mellis Douglas VC of the Royal Artillery, and married him on 10th August 1874. Uniquely she had married two surgeons and two recipients of the VC. McMaster's medals are held by the National War Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh Castle.



Photo courtesy of Thomas Stewart

Medical VCs

6. Valentine Mumbree McMaster VC



Photo courtesy of Thomas Stewart

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC



Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC

Anthony Dickson Home was born on 30th November 1826 in Dunbar, East Lothian, son of George Home, a cordwainer (shoemaker). In his early years he lived in Berwickshire and Selkirk before commencing his medical training at St. Andrews where he obtained his M.D. in 1847. He then spent a further year's study, including at Paris, before he qualified M.R.C.S. in England, in 1848. Home entered the army as an Assistant Surgeon, 3rd West India Regiment on 17 March 1848.

Soon after, he left with three of his contemporaries, for the West Indies, *'a station regarded as – barring the West Coast of Africa – the worst to which an aspirant in the Army Medical Service could be sent'*. Twenty eight days later Home arrived in Barbados. He only served with the West India Regiment for nine months and then transferred to 72nd Foot, sailing to Nova Scotia in July 1851, where he only served for a month before returning to England. His duties in England lasted until January 1853 when he proceeded to Gibraltar for eighteen months as a Staff Surgeon, followed by an appointment as a Surgeon to the 8th Dragoons, when he accompanied the regiment to the Crimea. Home returned to England in May 1856 for a year before accompanying the 90th Regiment to India.

In 1857 the 90th Regiment of Foot were stationed at Anglesea Barracks, Portsmouth but their stay was to be short lived when the regiment received orders that they would proceed to India in June. The departure was brought forward to April but the destination changed to China. The medical staff accompanying the regiment consisted of Surgeon AD Home and Assistant Surgeons W Bradshaw and CR Nelson.

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC



When the ships stopped at Cape de Verde Islands en route they were met with the news that the destination would after all be India and that they were to proceed with all speed to Calcutta, where they arrived in late July.

On their arrival at Calcutta the regiment immediately proceeded up the river Ganges by steamer encountering the mutineers at various locations. On their return down river Cholera broke out and one of those who died was Assistant Surgeon Nelson. In August the 90th was ordered to join General Havelock's force attempting to relieve Lucknow and by 1st September were at Allahabad and then Cawnpore on 15th September but not before sickness had, once again, taken its toll of the regiment.

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC

At Cawnpore they joined the 2nd Brigade, alongside the 78th and continued their advance upon Lucknow, finding themselves before it on 22nd September. The relief commenced three days later, reaching the Residency on 27th September but not before an attempt was made on the 26th September to remove the wounded out of the area around Mootee Munzil Palace and into the Residency. To assist the party they employed a local guide and dhoolies (covered stretchers) and were escorted by 150 men of the 5th Fusiliers. Accompanying the wounded was Surgeon Anthony Dickson Home, assisted by Assistant Surgeon William Bradshaw.

The attempt to remove the wounded has been described as 'calamitous' but for their part in the affair both doctors would subsequently be awarded the Victoria Cross. Home was informed by Colonel Campbell of the 90th that there would be two patches of dangerous ground the party would have to negotiate, the second one 300 yards wide, close to the end of the route. Immediately the party set off and left cover it came under fire and had to reform the dhoolies before setting off again, preceded by the 5th Fusiliers under Major Simmonds. Shortly after, whilst crossing a nullah (a brick-lined drainage ditch), enemy grape shot killed and wounded several dhooly bearers and re-wounded some of the patients being carried. It was in this confusion that the guide took a wrong turn and led the party into a square where they were subjected to a heavy fire.

Home gave his own account of the action in Records of the 90th Regiment: *'Here our men fell thickly and all the dhoolies were deserted'*. Some of the dhoolies did manage to reach safety.

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC

90th Regiment	... Surgeon Anthony Dickson Home Date of Act of Bravery, 26th September, 1857	For persevering bravery and admirable conduct in charge of the wounded men left behind the column, when the troops under the late Major-General Havelock, forced their way into the Residency of Lucknow, on the 26th September, 1857. The escort left with the wounded had, by casualties, been reduced to a few stragglers, and being entirely separated from the column, this small party with the wounded were forced into a house, in which they defended themselves till it was set on fire. They then retreated to a shed a few yards from it, and in this place continued to defend themselves for more than twenty-two hours, till relieved. At last, only six men and Mr. Home remained to fire. Of four officers who were with the party, all were badly wounded, and three are since dead. The conduct of the defence during the latter part of the time devolved therefore on Mr. Home, and to his active exertions previously to being forced into the house, and his good conduct throughout, the safety of any of the wounded, and the successful defence, is mainly to be attributed.
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William Bradshaw was sent back with Mr Hurst, an Apothecary, to the rear of the column and after managing to round up some of the dhooly bearers succeeded in getting the wounded away from the area and along the river to the Residency, Bradshaw being wounded in the process.

By now the remaining dhoolies, with their wounded still in them, were scattered about the street and square with the bearers sheltering from the fire. The mutineers now began to make their entry into the square, so, fearing for the safety of the wounded left in the dhoolies, Home rushed out into the open and with the help of some of the escort dragged the wounded into a doorway

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC

It was to this doorway that the mutineers now turned their attention. Using whatever they could find in the building and also using the bodies of dead mutineers, Home's party erected a barricade against the increasing fire. Further attempts were made to bring in the wounded from the dhoolies, in many cases resulting in wounds to the rescuers and further wounds to the rescued. When not treating the wounded Home found himself firing his revolver through a nearby window.

Eventually the mutineers were on the roof with the intention of setting it alight and burning out the party below. Those able, rushed to another building but again the mutineers followed and began burning the roof. With night now upon them the party suffered little sleep, desperate for water and constantly alert to firing going on in their vicinity. Finally, at daybreak the party were relieved and led to safety.

Anthony Dickson Home and William Bradshaw were awarded Victoria Crosses for their bravery. The notification appeared in the London Gazette dated 18 June 1858.

On 4 June 1858 he is recorded as being at home, sick and was granted leave but during this time married Jessy Elizabeth Hallett and together they would have two sons and six daughters. Queen Victoria presented the Victoria Cross to both doctors on 8 June 1859 at Buckingham Palace.

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC



Image of Home's VC medal group courtesy of Kevin Brazier

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC

As a Staff Surgeon 2nd Class, Home proceeded to China for eighteen months in December 1859 and then back to England in April 1861 for a further nine months followed by a return posting to the North American continent for just over a year. During the next twenty four years he would serve in New Zealand, India, the West Coast of Africa, Cyprus and Spain, interspersed with various spells in England during which time he rose to the rank of Deputy Surgeon General. During the expedition against the Ashanti he was Principal Medical Officer and was mentioned in the despatch of Sir Garnet Wolseley.

In March 1874 the London Gazette announced the award of the Knight Commander of the Bath, having previously been appointed a Companion of the Order in July 1865 and in 1880 he was appointed as Surgeon General, a position he held for six years. From 1881 to 1885 he was Principal Medical Officer, India. He returned from Bengal on 23 April 1885 to take up the post of Principal Medical Officer, Southern Command in England and finally retired from the Army Medical Department on 30 November 1886.

During his retirement he worked on recording his military career and this was published as 'Service Memories' in 1912. Arthur Conan Doyle worked with him a few times and stated that, "*...he seemed a most disagreeable old man...and yet when I married shortly afterwards he sent me a most charming message wishing me good fortune...*". He died at 7 Palace Gardens Terrace, London on 10th of August 1914, aged 87. He was buried in Highgate Cemetery, London.

Medical VCs

7. Anthony Dickson Home VC



Image of Home VC's grave courtesy of Kevin Brazier

Cookson VC Auction

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/edgar-christopher-cookson-vc-dso/>



On 13th March 2024, the VC and DSO of Edgar Cookson VC DSO is up for auction at Noonan's, London with an estimate of £180,000-£220,000.

Lt Commander Cookson was awarded the VC for **extricating the armed launch *Shushan* out of an Arab ambush in May 1915**, he later paid the ultimate price for his gallantry in the river gunboat *Comet* four months later, when, under a storm of point-blank fire, he leapt aboard a Turkish dhow brandishing an axe - a fellow officer later observed '**there were more bullet holes in him than they cared to count**'. Cookson was buried in Amara War Cemetery but the grave was subsequently destroyed and his name is now among those listed on the cemetery wall.

Towse VC Grave



Photos courtesy of Steve Davies

In February 2024, Military Grave Restorer Steve Davies undertook his first VC project of 2024. With funding from the Gordon Highlanders Regimental Association, and permission granted by the Vicar of St Thomas Church in Goring on Thames, Oxfordshire, the project was able to take place.



Ernest Towse VC KCVO CBE was awarded the VC for two separate acts of gallantry during the Boer War in South Africa. He was blinded in the second action on Mount Thaba. He became a Sergeant at Arms for Queen Victoria, and worked as a typist during the Great War, writing letters for the soldiers at the front. He later helped form the Empire League of Ex-Servicemen.

<https://militarygraverestorer.org.uk/>