“I Saw Stars”

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the 14th edition of Victoria Cross Online Magazine. I am delighted that the feature article this month has been written by Steve Snelling, who has authored several books on the recipients of the Victoria Cross and numerous military articles for magazines such as Britain At War. The piece is about John Rhodes VC DCM which Steve wrote for a regimental journal.

The second article this month is extremely relevant, with it being Remembrance Day, with a piece on "One Night" a new play about the Unknown Warrior by Richard Pursehouse. I have to give a lot of gratitude to Richard, whose regular pieces are a fantastic addition to the magazine.

There is also news of a VC memorial stone laid in Barnsley, Yorkshire for Ian McKay VC and new memorials in Australia for Cameron Baird VC MG and Keith Payne VC AM.

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THE GREATEST GRENADIER

https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/john-harold-rhodes-vc-dcm/

John Rhodes scaled peaks of valour in Flanders’ muddy fields but, as Steve Snelling relates, the most highly decorated non-commissioned officer in the history of the Grenadier Guards died without knowing of his signal honour.

Artillery fire stabbed the morning mist as around 500 guardsmen pushed off into the murk of no-man’s-land. Lost to sight but not to sound, their “perilous progress” towards the enemy’s trenches was marked by “a great rattle of machine-gun fire”.

To Second Lieutenant Carroll Carstairs, a 29-year-old American serving with the 3rd Grenadier Guards, it appeared as though the “full orchestra of battle” was on. “The air seems alive with invisible wires being twanged,” he wrote, “while the earth is thumped and beaten.”

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Somewhere ahead of him, the leading waves, men who had appeared as “sinister shadows… cold and wet and dulled with fear”, were ‘copping it’ badly as they edged nearer to the shell-ravaged ruins of Fontaine-Notre-Dame around 0700 on November 27, 1917.

What Carstairs described as the “zip, whiz, whistle, spin, sing and sigh” of bullets sounded like “a continuous scream” to the unit’s medical officer, Captain Harold Dearden. The slaughter was terrific. “Our poor lads went down like grass before a reaper,” he later recalled.

Hampered by the fire and broken ground stretcher bearers struggled to reach the casualties. Around half were killed or wounded, but some, at least, managed to get through.

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In the cold, drizzling rain, Carstairs stumbled across one such party as they made their way back through the mist. They were carrying a sergeant who he recognised straight away. “He was a fine big man,” noted Carstairs, “but lying deep in the stretcher and covered with a blanket, seems immeasurably to have shrunk. Only his head, immense and white, like an indomitable will appears to keep life in him.”

The shock was tangible. John Rhodes had seemed indestructible, his feats of daring the stuff of regimental legend. In the space of a little more than two years’ front-line soldiering, he had been awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal and Bar and recommended for the Victoria Cross.

Now Carstairs could only pity him. He tried to speak to him but Rhodes, though conscious, could barely utter a word. “Poor man, I am thinking, poor man!” as the bearers lurched away, “his great strength and courage… ebbing fast”.

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‘Lucky for us’

John Harold Rhodes was a man apart. Described by those who knew him as “modest, open, genuine, fearless, staunch and daring”, he was a plain-speaking Staffordshire coal-miner’s son who found his metier on the battlefields of France and Flanders.

Born in the village of Packmoor, near Tunstall, on May 17, 1891, the eldest of 10 children, he had the reputation of being something of a daredevil as a boy.

One memorable childhood escapade involved a moonlight flit with two of his brothers in tow across rooftops into a neighbouring farm where they mounted a couple of horses before careering through the village and then returning to their beds.

“It was typical of John,” his cousin, Anne Risley recalled almost a century later. “He was so high-spirited and adventurous. That’s why he joined the Army.”

His father had served with the Royal Scots Fusiliers before finding work in the coal-mines, but John, who had followed him into the pits, chose instead the Grenadier Guards.

He was 19 when he enlisted on February 16, 1911. The next three years were spent in the ranks of the 3rd Battalion, mostly in and around London, Pirbright and Aldershot, where ceremonial duties alternated with military exercises.

Transferring to the Reserve in 1914, he enjoyed the briefest of civilian interludes before the international crisis brought his work at the Chatterley-Whitfield Collieries in Tunstall to a premature end.

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The first few weeks of the conflict passed in a frenzy of activity. Mobilised into No 2 Company, 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards at Chelsea, he was in France within nine days of Britain’s declaration of war at the start of an epic journey that would take him via road and rail to a bleak industrial landscape that must have seemed like a home from home.

By August 23, following a 24-mile march under a blazing sun which left him feeling “dead beat”, he found himself in the southern outskirts of Mons, amid the slag heaps and pit heads of Belgium’s coal-mining country, where units of the British Expeditionary Force fought their first major encounter with the German army.

4th Guards Brigade, sited on the right flank near the village of Harmignies, was not engaged in the initial encounter, but their baptism of fire was not long in coming.

In a letter home to his parents, Rhodes told how his unit had been ordered to reinforce the 1st Division which was “hard pressed”. He recalled: “The guns were going it heavy at the time we advanced up towards the firing line, and [we] had got to… a bank when we were met with a deadly maxim and rifle fire.

“It was lucky for us we were underneath the bank or else I don’t think many of us would have lived to do much fighting. It was our first taste of war except [for] the sound of the guns. All we could do was to lie low, as to advance would have been suicide.

“We stuck it there three hours and then we had orders to retire…”

“I Saw Stars”

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‘Fixed bayonets’

So began the great and gruelling 13-day retreat from Mons to the Marne. It was “a horrible time” that Rhodes would never forget during which his battalion averaged 23 miles a day in fierce heat with “hardly any sleep and not too much grub”.

Two days’ “plodding” along roads swarming with refugees brought them, “foot sore”, into the town of Landrecies, where they were to be billeted for the night near a bridge over the river Sambre.

Thankful for the chance of a rest and a wash, they were treated to a barrel of beer to “wash the dust out of our throats”. What followed, however, was a rude interruption that was destined to take pride of place in the regiment’s history.

“We were just settling down to have a good blow-out when the alarm was given,” wrote Rhodes in his unvarnished record of the night’s drama. “We rushed out with fixed bayonets thinking the Germans were on us.

“[But] after standing-to for about half an hour we were told two German spies had been caught dressed in French uniforms. Of course you can guess their fate.

“We went back to back to set about the ‘feed’, didn’t we have a blow-out. We were just settling down for the night when the alarm went again in earnest this time. We had not time to get properly dressed, any order so long as we had our bayonets fixed and ammunition.”

For days Rhodes and his pals had been “grumbling and wishing they would let us turn round and have a smack at the Germans instead of running away”. Now, at last, they had their chance.

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“Well, it was a terrible time… Shells were bursting over the house and bullets were pattering against the walls. They set fire to three haystacks in front of the Coldstreams which lighted [sic] up the sky.

“The Coldstreams fought well, inflicting heavy loss on the Germans… We had a terrible time in those two houses. Wounded Coldstreams were passing us and we had no idea how things were going on, but we intended doing our bit if required.

“The shelling and firing was carried on until about 3 o’clock in the morning when we were informed the Germans had retired…”

The repulse brought only temporary relief. Wary of the enemy’s presence, the Guards left Landrecies in a hurry, “dead tired” and minus most of their kit to continue the long trek south.

Surprised again by the Germans a few days later near Villers-Cotterets, they found themselves outnumbered “10 to 1”, according to Rhodes, and only managed to escape “by a hair’s breadth” being cut off.

The days of retreating, however, were almost at an end. On September 3, Rhodes crossed the Marne and three days later the tide of battle turned with French and British troops going over to the offensive.

‘I saw stars’

Encounters with enemy cavalry rearguards was followed by stiffer resistance in wooded country. Rhodes had a “near squeak” when a man next to him was shot and killed. “It was a warm time and no mistake,” he wrote, “but we shoved on.”

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Passing abandoned and smashed artillery, they harried the retreating Germans all the way to the Aisne where they put in another attack. “Talk about a hail storm,” wrote Rhodes, “it wasn’t in it. There were bullets galore. It was marvellous how we got into position at all without more casualties…

“I blazed away. It was like Hell upon earth. My chums rolled over one after another, but we stuck it… The fighting lasted all day [and] my platoon got cut off from the rest of the Batt.”

Led by Lieutenant Prince Alexander of Battenburg, they took up position behind a wall where they clung on for two days without relief, “living on potatoes and carrots” plucked from nearby fields.

The war of rapid movement was over so far as Rhodes was concerned. Within a month, the remnants of the 2nd Grenadiers had made their acquaintance with the mud of Flanders and the immortal salient where for four weeks a decimated BEF heroically fought the German army to a standstill.

“They charged us almost every day,” wrote Rhodes, “but their shelling was the worst.” Among the many casualties was his best friend who was killed outright by a so-called ‘Jack Johnson’.

His own survival was little short of miraculous. “One day I was helping to make a dug-out and was chopping a tree down when a piece of shell cut the tree in half about a yard above my head,” he wrote. “It was a close shave, one of the many whilst in that position.”

Fate continued to smile on him as the rain turned to snow. On a cheerless Christmas Eve, just days after being given his first stripe and command of a section, he was occupying a trench knee-deep in slimy sludge near Givenchy when the Germans began bombarding them with *minenwerfers*.

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“One came and completely buried one of our Sgts,” wrote Rhodes. “After helping to dig him out, being out of wind, I had just settled down when another came and dropped in front of my trench. I was just springing when I was helped by a tree and some sand-bags.

“I saw stars and landed up to my neck in mud and water, but they had me out in no time.”

Driven out of a trench for the first time, the Grenadiers scrambled back to a support position from where they beat off the enemy and with that the lines more or less froze into a bloody stalemate that was broken only occasionally by the most resolute and resourceful of men.

‘Narrow shaves’

Typical of these was John Rhodes. During periods of relative inactivity, he was a leading figure in the battalion’s efforts to ‘dominate’ no-man’s-land. Seemingly indifferent to danger, he soon acquired a reputation as one of the unit’s most daring patrol leaders.

His forays between the opposing lines were frequent, but one in particular stood out and resulted in his first award for gallantry - the Distinguished Conduct Medal. It took place on May 18, 1915, in the vicinity of Rue du Bois, in French Flanders.

In a letter written to one of his brothers a few weeks later, he dismissed the incident in a few lines. “I suppose by now you know all about the DCM. For myself, I am tired of writing about it… I earned the medal for… going out and getting valuable information and also for getting the wounded in while being fired on.”

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There was, however, rather more to it than that.

While leading a reconnaissance patrol into no-man’s-land, he had ignored machine-gun fire to get near enough to the enemy lines to pinpoint key positions. Then, having scrambled back to his own trench, he discovered that two men from the unit were lying wounded out in the open. Despite being in full view of the enemy, he dashed out twice to rescue them and on each occasion returned unscathed while the guardsman accompanying him was wounded.

It was yet another in an ever-longer list of what he called his “narrow shaves”, through all of which he emerged defiantly undaunted and not a little incredulous.

Writing to a relative, he admitted: “It is marvellous that I am still sticking it when such a lot of our chaps have gone under. A good many had only been out here a day or so before either getting killed or wounded and some who have been back wounded have come out again only to get killed which is hard lines. There are very few of us left now who first came out with the Batt.”

For all the hardships, a spirit of dogged, even cheery, determination shines through the few of his letters that have survived. Despite the wretched conditions, the loss of so many close comrades, he seemed ever “in the pink”, ever ready to exult in spells of “champion” weather and ever willing to “have another packet at the Huns”.

However, after months of fighting that seemed to him like years, he was no illusions about the scale of the task confronting them. Writing in July 1915, he observed: “Let us hope I see the end of the war and that it won’t be long, which I am rather doubtful of.”

“I Saw Stars”

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Inevitably, a touch of fatalism occasionally crept into his correspondence. Referring to his award in the same letter home, he explained that he had only received the ribbon of the DCM and not the medal which he said was being “kept back at Buckingham Gate until the end of the war or else the end of me”.

‘Rubbing along’

For the time being, at least, the luck was all with him. No sooner had he returned from being feted a hero back home in Staffordshire, than he was back in what he called the “thick of things” and adding to his reputation for bravery above and beyond the call of duty.

On August 6, near Givenchy, the Germans exploded two mines which lifted the ground “in one great convulsion” and buried a number of men from a Grenadiers’ working party beneath a mass of debris.

Hearing that men were trapped, Rhodes and another guardsman, Timothy Barton, (18) hurried to their rescue. Despite a “sharp fire” from shells and enemy riflemen, they stuck to their task.

Among those dug out alive was the platoon commander, Lieutenant Harry Crookshank, later 1st Viscount Crookshank and a minister in Churchill’s post-war government. He had been completely buried in about four feet of earth and would inevitably have succumbed but for the selfless rescue effort.

It was a gallant endeavour made all the more remarkable by the fact that Rhodes had persisted with his share of the digging despite being wounded in the right shoulder.

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The result was a well-deserved Bar to his DCM and a spell of hospitalisation which led, in turn, to a period of convalescence and a home posting to the 5th (Reserve) Battalion as a newly promoted lance-sergeant instructor.

Sixteen months’ in England during which he missed the entire Somme offensive with all its ghastly battles of attrition and gained a wife was followed by a return to action in January 1917 with the 3rd Battalion, Grenadier Guards in France.

By all accounts, his time away had done nothing to shake his confidence nor his faith in the Allies’ ability to finally defeat the might of the German army.

Writing home to his brother Jabez two months after returning to the frontline, he was in optimistic mood. “I am rubbing along alright and am in the best of health… considering the weather. It was terribly cold when I first came out but it is much warmer now… On the whole there is not much to grouse about considering the circumstances.

“We must put up with all hardships and get this over, the sooner the better, and I believe that in a month or two’s time we shall tighten old Fritz up a bit and the outlook of the war will be a great deal different.

“We have been doing well of late… and the Germans must look out when the weather cheers up.”

"I Saw Stars"

THE STAFFORDSHIRE SE

TWO LOCAL V.C.'s.

Longton Boy's "Reckless" Bravery.

THRILLING VENDETTA STORY.

Packmoor Guardsman's Great Gallantry.

Fourth Decoration for Mons Hero.

Two V.C.'s from the North Staffordshire district were officially notified in a list of twenty this (Tuesday) morning—L.-Sergt. John Harold Rhodes, Grenadier Guards, Tunstall, who had previously been awarded the D.C.M. and a bar to the D.C.M. and the Croix de Guerre, and Cpl. Ernest Albert Egerton, Notts and Derby Regt., of Longton. These are the first local soldiers to win this the highest military award

“I Saw Stars”

Sea of mud

Unfortunately, the weather in 1917 showed little sign of cheering up. After the bitter winter, the British army’s Spring push around Arras was launched in April snow showers while the great offensive in Flanders was fought out in a sea of mud following one of the wettest summers on record.

By the autumn large parts of the battlefield east of Ypres resembled a swamp. A web of wooden duckboard trails snaked across a pitted wilderness studded with concrete pill-boxes and farmhouses converted into miniature fortresses on which the fluid German defence rested.

Almost 10 weeks of relentless fighting had carried the British line barely three to four miles at an horrendous cost in lives, but the success of ‘bite and hold’ tactics with limited attacks behind creeping barrages persuaded Field Marshal Haig to persist with a campaign that many considered futile.

John Rhodes’ opinion of the conditions endured as he and his fellow guardsman prepared for the next stage of the push towards the higher ground around Passchendaele can only be imagined.

He appears to have left no record of the most significant action of his career, or at least none that has survived, and details for the fighting on October 9, 1917 are sketchy and sometimes contradictory. What is not in doubt, however, is the degree of valour displayed by a man whose reservoir of courage appeared almost limitless.

For five days prior to the attack it had rained almost without break. According to the Official Historian, “hardly a tree, hedge, wall or building could be seen” amid acres of slime devoid of any landmarks or natural cover save for mud-filled shell-holes.

“I Saw Stars”

Sheer audacity

Despite treacherous conditions the initial advance, behind a carefully-orchestrated bombardment, went like clockwork. The Broembeek was crossed “without difficulty” and the enemy lines breached. By 0730, when the 3rd Grenadiers started its advance, the day’s first two objectives had been secured.

Moving through the consolidating units, the battalion faced a daunting passage over open ground raked by enemy fire. Between them and their final objective in the southern fringes of Houthulst Forest lay a number of pill-boxes, squat and menacing, barring their way.

Together, they represented a formidable obstacle and, according to the unit historian, “there seemed every prospect of desperate fighting”. (20)

And so it might have proven but for the individual enterprise and outstanding courage of one man: John Rhodes.

Where a neighbouring unit employed more conventional tactics to out-flank and eventually subdue the block-house in front of them, the 26-year-old Grenadier from the Potteries adopted a more direct approach.

Running ahead of the Lewis gun section he was leading, Rhodes, who had already “accounted for several enemy”, made straight for the strong-point confronting his battalion, a hundred yards short of their objective.

His solo charge took him unscathed through a maelstrom of fire from enemy machine-guns and his own supporting barrage. Nearing the pill-box, he spotted three men emerging from a side entrance and, without hesitation, he headed for the same doorway where he “effected an entrance”.

“I Saw Stars”

By all accounts, no shots were fired, no bombs thrown. Instead, it would seem, his shocking presence and sheer audacity was sufficient to induce an instant surrender from a garrison no doubt convinced he was the vanguard of a much larger force.

Accounts vary as to the number of men taken prisoner by the lone guardsman. His unit historian put the figure at eight, his subsequent Victoria Cross citation gave nine and another eyewitness claimed to have counted 10 men, including an artillery observation officer from whom “valuable documents were taken”.

What was beyond any doubt was that a position that seemed, in the estimation of the Grenadiers’ historian, nigh “impregnable” had fallen to a single non-commissioned officer in spectacular fashion, thus almost certainly sparing the lives of countless comrades.

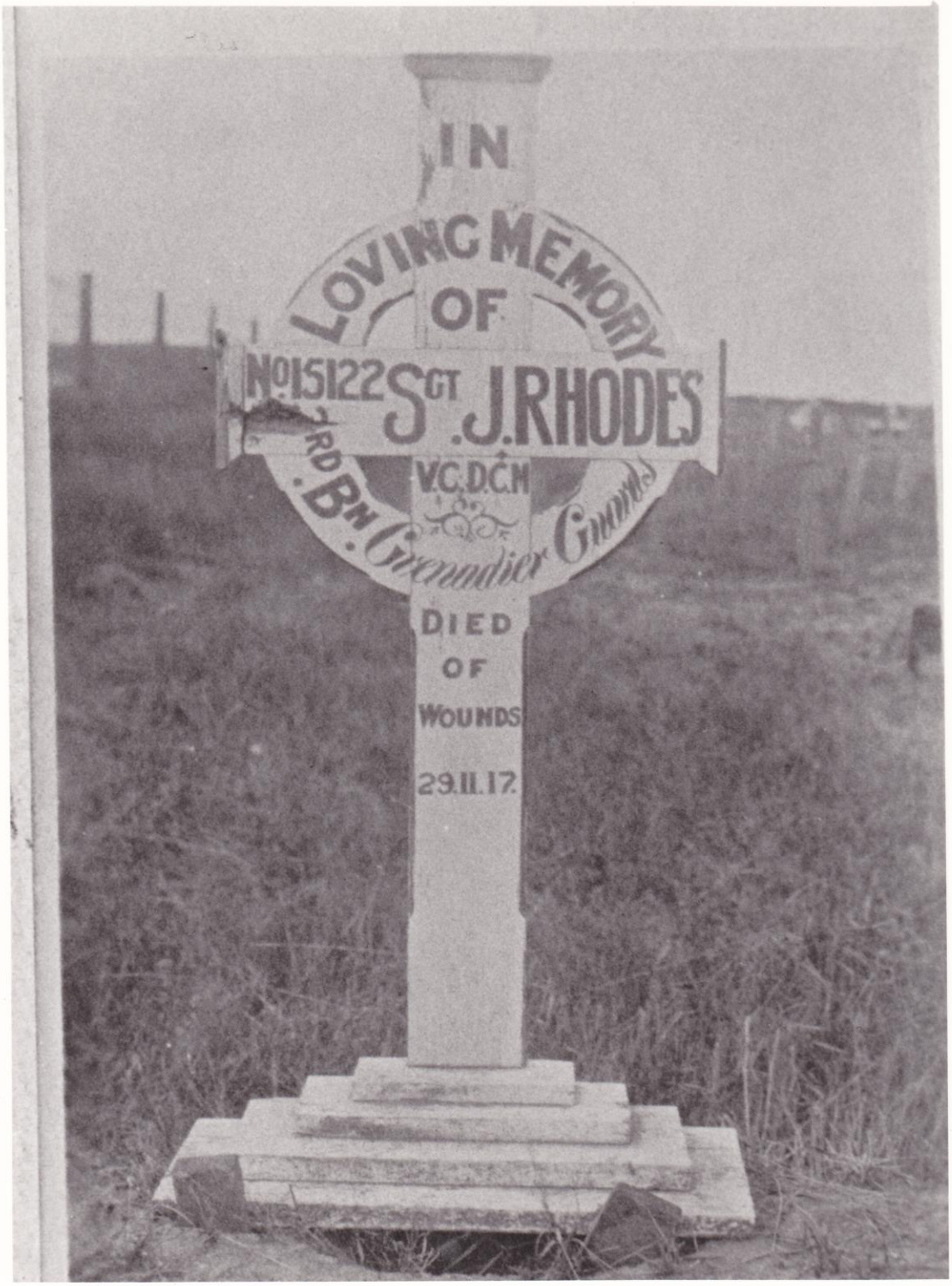
‘Greatest honour’

Rhodes came through the rest of the day’s fighting untouched and shortly afterwards scribbled a letter home to his wife, enclosing a few souvenirs of his most astonishing feat of arms that included a photograph of the German officer he had captured wearing an Iron Cross.

In that same note he mentioned that he had been recommended for a high distinction. No more was said about it until a few weeks later. Then, on November 26, the day that his richly-merited Victoria Cross was officially announced, Lizzie Rhodes received another letter from her husband, saying he was still not certain if the award would be “definitely” granted.

The following morning, as newspapers in his home county rejoiced at his honour and plans were laid for a homecoming befitting the region’s hero, John Rhodes followed the barrage for the last time towards the ruins of Fontaine-Notre-Dame.

“I Saw Stars”


IN
LOVING MEMORY
OF
No 15122 Sgt J. RHODES
V.C. D.C.M
3rd Bn Grenadier Guards
DIED
OF
WOUNDS
29.11.17.

“I Saw Stars”


15122 SERJEANT
J. H. RHODES
V. C., D.C.M. AND BAR
GRENADIER GUARDS
27TH NOVEMBER 1917 AGE 26
FOR VALOUR

“I Saw Stars”

He was still none the wiser about his VC when his luck finally ran out and bullets smashed his thigh. Barely alive when he reached 48 Casualty Clearing Station, he succumbed just as he was being lifted onto a bed.

Not long afterwards, his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Thorne, arrived with confirmation of his award, but, as he wrote Lizzie, “it was too late”.

The most highly decorated Grenadier guardsman of the First World War, or of any other conflict before or since, was buried nearby, “on the side of a hill facing the sun”.

Passing his grave a few days later, the unit’s chaplain, Captain the Reverend Stephen Phillimore, was moved to write a touching letter to a widow left to bring up alone the son her gallant husband had never seen.

“It is one of the cruellest things of this war that just at the moment of great things the best are taken away,” he wrote. “Your husband had won the greatest honour any soldier could have and had won it over and over again; yet he was always the same, quiet in his manner, never boastful, always doing his duty, a pattern to soldiers and a pattern to us all.”

“I Saw Stars”


LANCE SERGEANT JOHN HAROLD RHODES
LEST WE FORGET
J H RHODES VC

“One Night”

A new play, ‘One Night’, written by the BAFTA and Emmy award-winning playwright and director Christopher Swann had its world premiere, in Birmingham’s Jewellery Quarter, across three nights between Thursday 26 and Saturday 28 October 2023 in the beautiful, atmospheric 18th Century St Paul’s Church, in St Paul's Square.

St Paul’s Church as a venue was a perfect choice, the acoustics creating an intense atmosphere that immersed the audience seated in the high-backed wooden pews in the emotive issues as they gradually unfolded. The play culminates with two intriguing, powerful twists, both cleverly executed by the cast, all of whom performed their roles very admirably (including the vicar, David Tomlinson as the Dean of Westminster Abbey).

“One Night”

The play is set in a military chapel in Northern France in 1920. It explores the Great War, the impact it had on those who fought, died and survived the boredom and the horrors of the trenches, the impact on those who returned and the effect on the relatives of those who served.

The story of the writing of the play ‘One Night’ started with a conversation between Christopher Swann and a friend who was researching the events that lead to the choice of the Unknown Warrior, laid at rest in Westminster Abbey in November 1920.

As he developed his ideas Christopher started to question, explore and try to understand the choices that lay before the two officers, which guided his thoughts and ideas about chance, about the throw of a dice and the potential peril of making the wrong decision.

This led Christopher to consider the differences between those who died and those who survived, plus the temporal nature of war and being sent to fight. The similarities of then and now are also focussed on in the play. The war in Ukraine, for example, which started as he was editing the play, demonstrated how similar was the anguish and pain as that experienced in the Great War; this further influenced the dialogue and flow of the play’s narrative.

In August 1920 Army Chaplain the Reverend David Railton MC proposed in a letter to the Dean of Westminster Abbey that an unidentified British soldier from a battlefield in France be buried with due ceremony in the Abbey - *“amongst the kings”* as he commented.

“One Night”

Railton’s concept was initially resisted, but the British Government and crucially King George V thought otherwise, understanding that the idea could enable the nation to focus its grief and sense of loss on one day, on one body, that one soldier randomly selected to represent all those that had died – those whose names were recorded, and those only ‘Known Unto God’, the epitaph chosen for many of the thousands of unidentified bodies buried in immaculately maintained Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries, and also those who ‘have no known grave’ - their names engraved on memorials across Europe as well as war memorials in villages, towns and cities throughout Britain.

The King pledged he “*would be the chief mourner to an unknown warrior*” and was at the vanguard of the procession to Westminster Abbey. He placed his wreath on top of the coffin carried on an artillery gun carriage, and a Guard of Honour of over one hundred Victoria Cross recipients lined the entrance to Westminster Abbey.

“One Night”

Prime Minister Lloyd George and his Cabinet joined forces with the King and surprisingly sanctioned the concept within three weeks and the second anniversary of the Armistice - November 1920 - that ended the Great War, became the opportunity for a nation collectively to mourn.

The ceremony was not to be an abstract memorial: thousands of unidentified war dead were to be immortalised and embodied in the coffin of a single soldier. The British public supported the concept: hundreds of thousands queued to file passed the cordoned off area in Westminster Abbey, many believing ‘their son’ might have been selected, many wanting simply to pay their respects.

In early November 1920 six ‘Known Unto God’ bodies from cemeteries near various Western Front battlefields - The Aisne, the Somme, Arras and Ypres - were randomly selected, placed on a waggon and a temporary Union Flag respectfully draped over them. After the random selection of the remains of six soldiers, their remains were transported to Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise near the French city of Arras. The bodies were carried on stretchers into the chapel, respectfully placed into simple wooden coffins, and again draped with Union Flags on the night of 7 November 1920.

“One Night”

The six coffins awaited the final decision - which one was to be selected for the journey to Westminster Abbey? This burden fell to two officers (one from the North Staffordshire Regiment), in order to ensure that the identity of the body could never be known – no regimental buttons, or indication of rank such as stripes on sleeves or ‘pips’ on shoulder epaulettes.

The two officers entered the chapel, tasked with selecting one coffin. One account states the two officers were so moved by the process and what confronted them that they sat silently throughout the night, that one night when the intensity and poignancy of the moment has been interpreted in the play ‘One Night’. Although the play is fiction, it is inspired by the events on that November night.

The play focusses on the selection of that one coffin, the body inside representing all those who paid the ultimate price and also those who returned – some physically wounded, others with the mental scars of their experiences. The play reflects on the night that the Unknown Warrior’s coffin was chosen so that today we can remember them all.

Christopher’s decision to make each character in the play nameless is not accidental. Each character is only known by rank, role or place in society. Their sex, age or look is irrelevant to the story in that it is a story of all people, of ‘everyman’, and how they face adversities in life no matter what their backgrounds are. It is for them and our children that the play tells this story. It is for them we all need to remember them.

The play ‘One Night’ is a story of loss, joy, love and companionship and the sacrifices made during the Great War. It is in the same breath – timeless.

Further information can be found at www. onenightin1920.co.uk

“One Night”

Ian McKay VC Stone

https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/ian-john-mckay-vc/

On Tuesday 7th November 2023, outside of Barnsley Town Hall in South Yorkshire, a VC memorial stone was placed in honour of Ian John McKay, one of the two posthumous recipients of the VC during the Falklands conflict.

Ian John McKay (1953-1982) was born on 7th May 1953 in Wortley, near Barnsley, Yorkshire. He was the son of Ken and Freda McKay. He was the eldest of three sons, with both of his two younger brothers, Graham and Neal, both being born with cystic fibrosis, and not expected to survive childhood. As adults, they both had heart and lung transplants which prolonged their lives, but sadly, Neal died in 1989, aged 32, and Graham died in 1995, aged 39. His parents didn't want Ian to join the Army after he left school, and he made his first tour of Northern Ireland at the age of 17.

Ian McKay VC Stone

In 1976, he married Marica, who already had a son, Don, from a previous relationship. Ian and Marica had a daughter, Melanie. By the time of the Falklands War in May 1982, he was an instructor at Aldershot with 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment. Ian arrived in the Falklands, and soon showed in his letters home, that he was not a fan of the islands.

On 8th June 1982, he wrote “Some clown has put one of our artillery batteries just behind our position and as the Argentinian guns try to range in on them, they sometimes drop one around our positions, so life isn’t dull all the time.” But he couldn’t sustain the light sarcasm and continued: “I have never known a more bleak, windswept and wet place. We spend our life with wet feet. You cannot walk 50 paces anywhere without walking into a bog.”

Later, in his last letter home, just prior to his death, he wrote “to be quite honest, once we have given them a hammering… the Argentinians can have the place. It really is fit for nothing.”

During the night of 11th/12th June 1982, 3rd Battalion Parachute Regiment mounted a silent night attack on an enemy battalion position on Mount Longdon, an important objective in the battle for Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands. Sergeant McKay was Platoon Sergeant of 4 Platoon, B Company, which, after the initial objective had been secured, was ordered to clear the Northern side of the long East/West ridge feature, held by the enemy in depth, with strong, mutually-supporting positions. By now the enemy were fully alert, and resisting fiercely. As 4 Platoon’s advance continued it came under increasingly heavy fire from a number of well-sited enemy machine gun positions on the ridge, and received casualties.

Ian McKay VC Stone

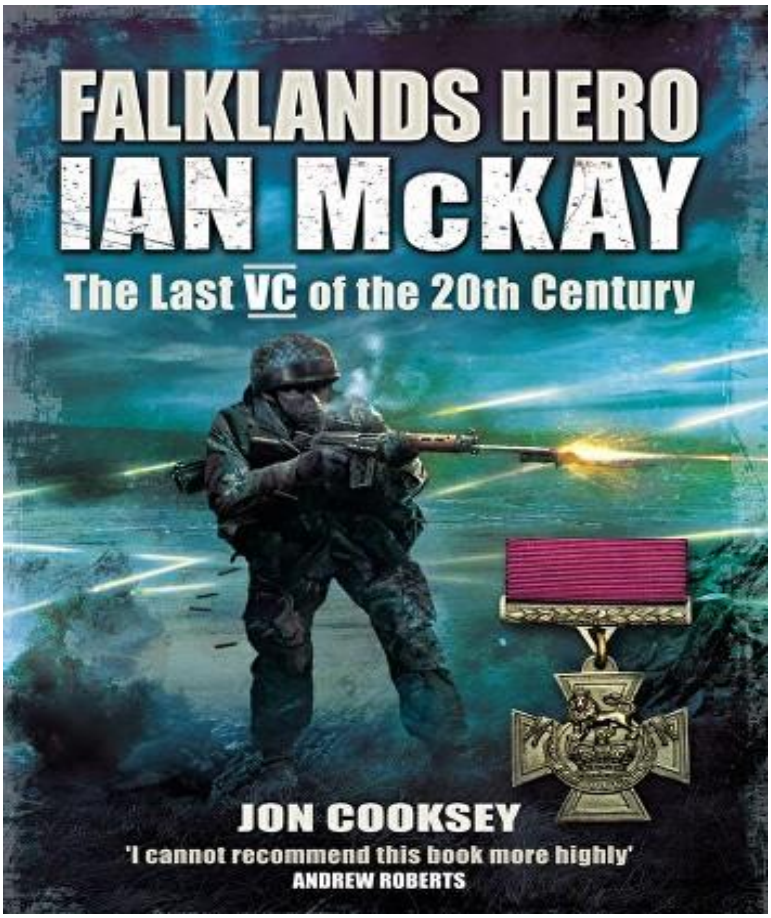
Realising that no further advance was possible the Platoon Commander ordered the Platoon to move from its exposed position to seek shelter among the rocks of the ridge itself. Here it met up with part of 5 Platoon. The enemy fire was still both heavy and accurate, and the position of the platoons was becoming increasingly hazardous. Taking Sergeant McKay, a Corporal and a few others, and covered by supporting machine gun fire, the Platoon Commander moved forward to reconnoitre the enemy positions but was hit by a bullet in the leg, and command devolved upon Sergeant McKay.

It was clear that instant action was needed if the advance was not to falter and increasing casualties to ensue. Sergeant McKay decided to convert his reconnaissance into attack in order to eliminate enemy positions. He was in no doubt of the enemy's strength and deployment as he undertook his attack. He issued orders, and taking three men with him, broke cover and charged the enemy position. The assault was met with a hail of fire. The Corporal was seriously wounded, a Private killed and another wounded.

Despite these losses Sergeant McKay, with complete disregard of his own safety, continued to charge the position alone. On reaching it he despatched it with grenades, thereby relieving the position of beleaguered 4 and 5 Platoons, who were now able to redeploy with relative safety. Sergeant McKay, however, was killed at the moment of victory, his body falling into the bunker.

Ian's body was buried at Aldershot Military Cemetery along with 15 comrades. The last two men to see him alive helped to carry his coffin – Corporal Ian Bailey, who was shot minutes before McKay was killed, and Colour Sergeant Brian Faulkner, who said of him: "Mac was the bravest of the brave."

Ian McKay VC Stone



Ian McKay VC Stone

Cameron Baird VC Drive

https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/cameron-stewart-baird-vc-mg/

In January 2023, following a proposal from Councillor Justin Graves, the Burnie City Council in Tasmania voted unanimously to recognise Cameron Stewart Baird VC MG by naming a road in his honour.

The Council issued a statement at the time stating “Corporal Cameron Baird was Burnie born and raised. He made the ultimate sacrifice for his mates and for his country. The Burnie community is very supportive in appropriately recognizing Cameron, his family, and his legacy. Therefore, Burnie City Council has decided that we will proceed with officially naming the internal road at Burnie Park, of its own accord.

As this road has extremely low traffic movement and no letter box that may create possible confusion, the Council will proceed to install an official memorial sign, welcoming users to Corporal Cameron Baird VC MG Drive.”

The ceremony was held on Remembrance Day and was attended by Cameron’s father, Doug Baird OAM.

Keith Payne VC AM Rest Area

The Remembrance Driveway Council (then "Committee") initiated phase one of the Victoria Cross Rest Area Project in 1995 with the aim of dedicating Rest Areas to the memory of the 12 posthumously awarded World War II and Vietnam War recipients.

This project was widened following the dedication of Federal Government funds in 1997, to encompass all the deceased Victoria Cross recipients from these conflicts. The Council later determined that Rest Areas in honour of Victoria Cross recipients could be delivered while the recipients were living. Twenty-three sites have been established to date, and a site has been picked to honour Keith Payne VC AM, although work cannot begin until the site has been redeveloped.

In the 65th Anniversary year (2019) of the Remembrance Driveway, the Remembrance Driveway Council ran a two-stage design competition for the development of a memorial to honour the four Victoria Cross recipients from the Afghanistan conflict, to be erected in Valour Park, Watson ACT.

On Monday, November 13th, 2023, the rest area picked to honour Keith Payne VC AM was unveiled in the presence of the great man himself. The event held at Pheasants Nest in New South Wales was attended by Keith and his wife Florence, plus the Governor General of Australia, David Hurley and members of the Keith Payne VC Veterans Benefit Group including Rick Meehan and Fred Campbell.

Keith Payne VC AM Rest Area

Keith Payne VC AM Rest Area

All images on this article provided by Rick Meehan.

https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/keith-payne-vc-am/

https://kpvcvbg.org.au/