

LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH" DRUMMER SPENCER BENT VC

Drummer Spencer "Joe" Bent arrived in France on 22 August 1914, the first day of armed skirmishes between Britain and Germany. He was 23 years old and had not enjoyed an easy start in life, but his strength of character and temperament were soon to be on display.

DRUMMER SPENCER JOHN BENT VC



INITIATIVE

THE MANY Victoria Crosses and George Crosses in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London are displayed under one of seven different qualities of bravery. Dr. Bent's Victoria Cross is part of the collection, and, Lord Ashcroft feels, falls within the category of initiative: "Difficult situations, which place lives under threat, require quick decisions and clear solutions. Often those who act are not in charge, but they take control. Confident, aware of what needs to be done, they are convinced they can pull it off. Someone has to act."

BENT WAS born on 18 March 1891, in Stowmarket, Suffolk. By the age of ten, he was an orphan: his father was killed during the Boer War and his mother had also died. Bent was largely brought up by his uncle and aunt, who lived near Ipswich.

He was just 14 when he joined the Army in 1905 as a drummer in the 1st Battalion, the East Lancashire Regiment. When he boxed at lightweight in Army championships, he was christened "Joe", a corruption of "Chow" Bent, a well-known professional boxer of the time.

After the outbreak of the First World War, Bent accompanied his regiment to northern France and saw action at the Battle of Le Cateau. However, it was for his gallantry in the first Battle of Ypres that Bent was awarded his Victoria Cross. His platoon was holding one of the front-line trenches near Le Gheer, Belgium, after a ferocious day's fighting the previous day.

On the night of 1/2 November, an exhausted Bent was trying to get some sleep but he awoke to find his comrades abandoning their positions. There was no officer in the trench to give the order to withdraw, nor even a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) because the platoon's sergeant was visiting an advance post. Yet, someone had passed word down the line that the battalion had been ordered to retire.

Bent started following the others, but then decided he could not bear to leave his treasured French trumpet so he made his way back for it. When Bent reached the trench, he spotted a soldier, raised his rifle and demanded that the man, whom he assumed to be a German, identify himself. It turned out to be the

platoon's recently returned sergeant, who told him that no orders to retire had been given.

Bent immediately ran after some of his comrades to call them back and encountered an officer who helped him round up the rest of the platoon. Early next morning, the German infantry advanced towards the trench, clearly believing that it had been abandoned.

When they reached to within 400 yards, the British platoon's machine-gun and rifles opened fire, causing the advancing infantrymen to run for cover. However, before long the German artillery launched a heavy, continuous bombardment, and the officer, platoon sergeant and a number of the men were killed or injured. Bent therefore took command and repelled several more infantry attacks until he was relieved later in the day.

This was just one of several courageous actions by Dr. Bent in the autumn of 1914. On 22 October, for example, he had carried ammunition to a patrol that had been cut off by the Germans and, two days later, he brought food and ammunition to a front-line trench under heavy fire.

On 3 November, he repeatedly risked his life by venturing into no-man's land to rescue several wounded men. One of these was 25 to 30 yards from the British trench and, when Bent attempted to lift him, the two men came under a hail of enemy bullets. So, in order to get him to safety, Bent hooked his feet under the private's armpits and dragged the injured man as he edged backwards.

Just days later, Bent himself was seriously injured, sustaining a gunshot wound to his leg. By then, he also had



TOP RIGHT: The medals of Dr. Bent VC, MM. The Russian Cross of St. George can be seen on the far right. The full list of decorations are Victoria Cross; Military Medal; 1914 Star, with clasp; British War and Victory Medals; Defence Medal; Coronation 1937; Coronation 1953; Army L.S. & G.C.; Russian Cross of St. George, 3rd class (LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION) BOTH BELOW: A pair of drawings which depict one of the actions for which Dr. Bent was awarded the Victoria Cross. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)



injuries to both arms and hands and a head wound. He was sent back to England, where he received several months of medical care.

Bent only learned he had been awarded the VC when he read about it in a local paper after his decoration was announced in *The London Gazette* on 9 December 1914. His citation identified four separate acts of bravery. Bent also received the considerable sum of £50 from an Ipswich resident who had offered it to the first local man to receive the VC.

Bent was the first man from his regiment to be awarded the VC in the First World War, receiving his decoration from George V at Buckingham Palace on 13 January 1915. At around the same time, Bent was promoted to corporal.

He returned to France in the summer of 1916 and rejoined his old battalion on the Somme, remaining there until November when he again returned to the UK to convalesce from rheumatic fever. After recovering, he returned to

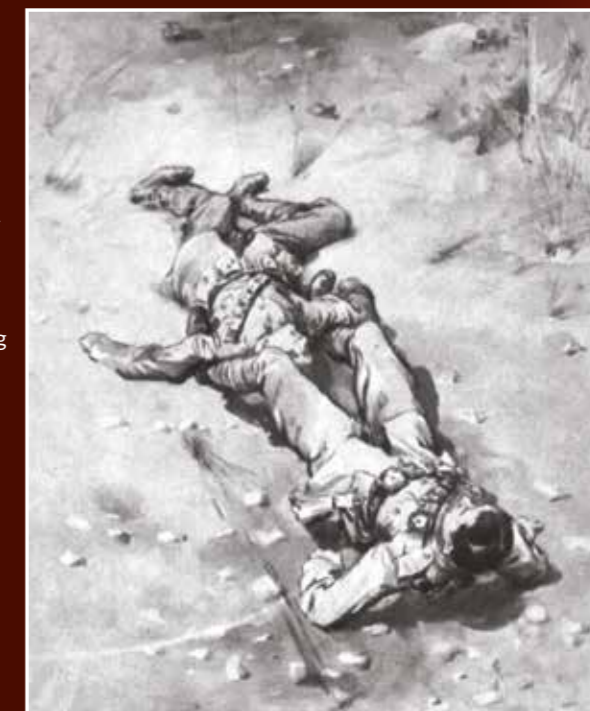
France and took part in the assault on Messines Ridge.

After being promoted to company sergeant major, Bent fought at the third Battle of Ypres and then rejoined the 1st Battalion in time for the German Spring Offensive and the subsequent battles later in 1918, being awarded the Military Medal on top of his VC.

Following the end of hostilities, Bent returned home in May 1919. He remained in the Army until 1926, leaving with the rank of regimental sergeant major after 21 years' service.

Bent, a married father of three, went on to work as a school caretaker, continuing part-time work until he was 85 years old. He died in his sleep in Hackney, London, on 3 May 1977, aged 86.

I have huge respect for Bent's initiative in a crisis and his repeated courage, and so I was delighted when I was able to purchase his gallantry and service medals at auction in 2000. ☺



VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. The story of Bent's life appears in his book *Victoria Cross Heroes*. For more information, please visit:

www.victoriacrossheroes.com
Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at Imperial War Museums, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

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