

# LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH" Private Sidney Frank Godley VC

**T**HE SON of a painter and decorator, Sidney Frank Godley (always known as Frank) was born in East Grinstead, Sussex, on 14 August 1889. However, he was largely brought up by an aunt in Willesden, Middlesex, after his mother died when he was six. He was a talented sportsman: a good cross-country runner, footballer and cricketer.

After working in an ironmonger's shop and as a plumber, Godley joined the 4th Battalion, The Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment), in December 1909, aged 20. At the time, his recruiting

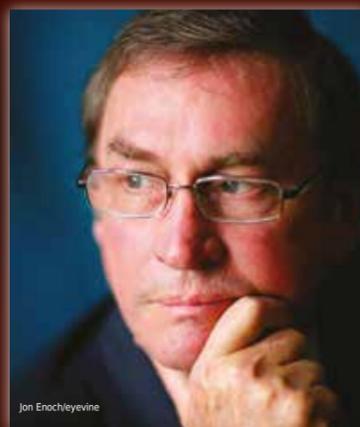
**MAIN PICTURE:** A contemporary First World War artist's depiction of the action for which Private Sidney Godley and Lieutenant Maurice Dease were subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross. (ALL IMAGES HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

officer added an "e" to his family name of "Godly". Godley, who had fair hair and a thick moustache, embarked for France and Belgium in August 1914 when his battalion was one of the first to go to war.

Godley and his comrades arrived at Mons on 22 August. The next day, during heavy fighting, the Germans seized the initiative. Initially, Lieutenant Maurice Dease, in charge of a single company of Royal Fusiliers defending Nimy Bridge, had control of a machine-gun.

Early in the fighting, Dease was wounded in the knee at about 09.00 hours but he refused to leave the battlefield. After keeping up a fierce resistance for more than two hours, and being hit at least four more times, Dease eventually had to stop firing (he fell unconscious and later died from his wounds).

It was at this point that Godley, who had been helping Dease, took over the machine-gun. When he was then asked to stay on alone while his comrades retreated, it effectively meant almost certain capture by the Germans – dead or alive.



Jon Enoch/Eyevine

Godley did not waver despite also being wounded: for two more hours, he sprayed the enemy with relentless machine-gun fire while his fellow Royal Fusiliers withdrew. Eventually, having run out of ammunition, he destroyed the gun. By then he was wounded but managed to crawl to the nearby road where he was helped to hospital by two Belgian civilians. By now he had no fewer than 27 separate wounds.



**ABOVE:** This bridge at Nimy is a modern replacement for the one on which Lieutenant Maurice Dease and Private Sidney Godley made their stand on 23 August 1914.

The Germans later took over the hospital and Godley was taken prisoner. He refused to answer questions but was still well-treated by the Germans, being sent to Berlin for skin grafts, while his injured back alone required 150 stitches. When he was fit enough, he was transferred to Doberitz Prisoner of War camp.

Godley's VC – along with a posthumous VC for Dease – was announced in *The London Gazette* on 25 November 1914, when his brief citation stated: "For coolness and gallantry in fighting his machine gun under a hot fire for two hours after he had been wounded at Mons on 23rd August." Initially, Godley's family had thought that his VC was, like Dease's, a posthumous award – they were not informed by the Germans that he was alive until April 1916.

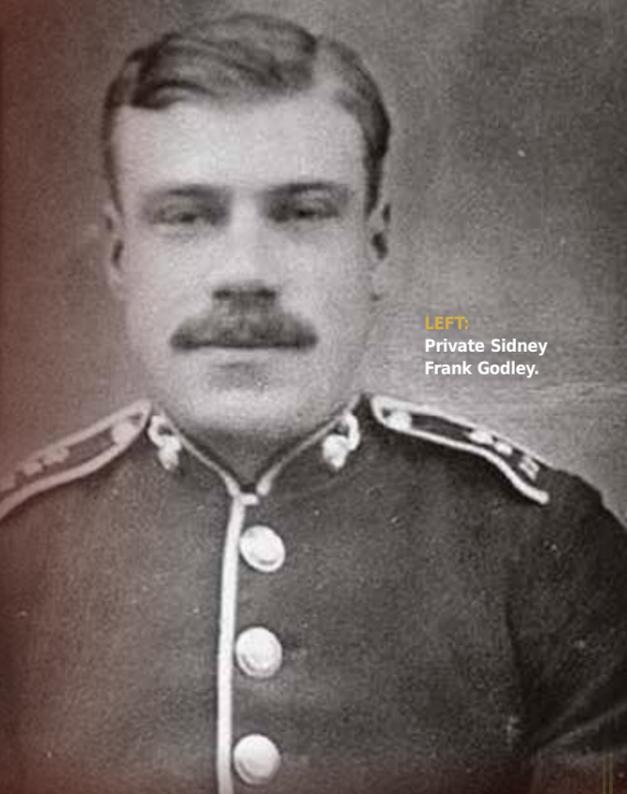
While Godley was a PoW at Doberitz, however, a senior German officer informed him that he had been awarded the VC. At the end of the First World War, Godley, having been a PoW for almost its entirety, gained his freedom when the camp guards deserted and he and others made their way back to Britain.

Godley was presented with his VC by King George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 15 February 1919. Less than a week later he was

given a civic reception at Lewisham, south London (where he lived), 50 guineas and a copy of the Lewisham Roll of Honour.

There are several memorials in his honour and, in 1938, he was presented with a special gold medal struck by the people of Mons. In 1954, as a prominent member of the Old Contemptibles Association, he gave a BBC radio interview about his experiences at Mons to mark the 40th anniversary of the battle. The "Old Contemptibles" was the affectionate name later given to members of the British Expeditionary Force who saw the early fighting during the First World War (the Kaiser allegedly made a caustic reference to Field Marshal Sir John French's "contemptible little army").

Godley later became a school caretaker and retired in 1951 after 30 years' service. For much of his adult life, he supported various Armed Forces' charities. He died in Epping, Essex, on 29 June 1957, aged 67.



**LEFT:** Private Sidney Frank Godley.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** This personal memorial to Lieutenant Maurice Dease on the railway bridge.

**BELOW LEFT:** Lieutenant Maurice Dease. Dease is recorded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as being "one of the first British officer battle casualties of the war and the first posthumous recipient of the VC of the war".

I remain in awe of Godley's courage at Mons when he displayed great self-sacrifice to save his men. However, he was a great survivor, narrowly escaping from a seemingly hopeless situation with his life, albeit with 27 separate wounds to show for his courage. Once Godley had recovered from his wounds, he had to survive almost the entire war as a PoW.

I first learnt about the details of Godfrey and Dease's remarkable bravery when I was researching my book, *Victoria Cross Heroes*, first published in 2006 to mark the 150th anniversary of the creation of the VC. His medal group is not part of my VC collection but his story did feature in a Channel 4 television series that I presented, also called *Victoria Cross Heroes*. ☺

## QUALITIES OF BRAVERY

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 aspects or qualities of bravery. These are: Aggression, Boldness, Initiative, Leadership, Sacrifice, Skill, Endurance.

Though Godley's is not part of the collection, Lord Ashcroft feels that it would fall within the category of Sacrifice. He says, "In what is apparently the simplest quality of bravery, Sacrifice epitomises selfless responsibility. Noble, strong, dependable, life is offered up to protect, save or comfort others. It is not always lost, but it is always freely given."

Aggression, Boldness, Initiative, Leadership, **Sacrifice**, Skill, Endurance.

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## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. The story of Godley's life appears in his book *Victoria Cross Heroes*. For more information, please visit: [www.victoriacrossheroes.com](http://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](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes). For details about his VC collection, visit: [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com)  
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