



LORD ASHCROFT'S  
"HERO OF  
THE MONTH"

# LIEUTENANT WILBUR DARTNELL VC

## SACRIFICE

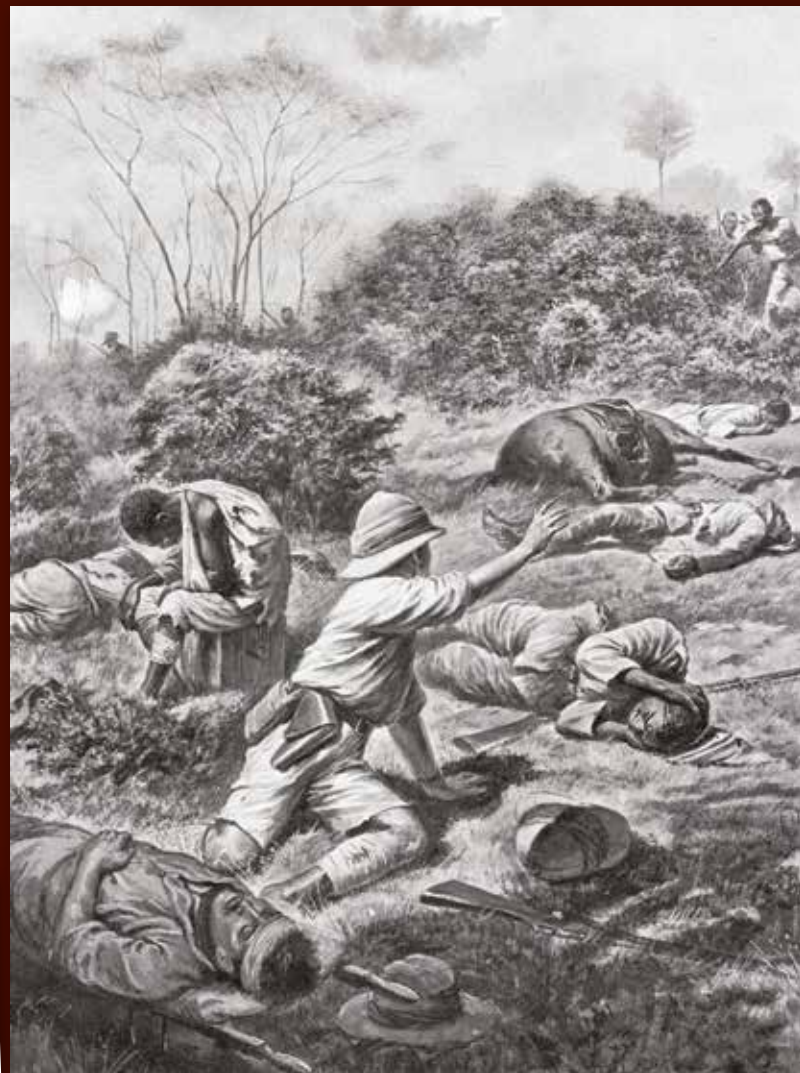
AGGRESSION • BOLDNESS  
LEADERSHIP • SACRIFICE  
SKILL • ENDURANCE

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. Whilst Lieutenant Wilbur Dartnell's award is not part of the collection, Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of sacrifice:

"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."

FAR RIGHT:  
A contemporary  
artist's  
illustration  
of Dartnell's  
Victoria Cross  
action. (HISTORIC  
MILITARY PRESS)

**W**ILLIAM TAYLOR Dartnell – his name at birth – was born on 6 April 1885 in Collingwood, Melbourne, Australia. He was the son of Henry Dartnell, a fruiterer, and his wife, Rose. After going to school in Melbourne, he worked as an actor before Dartnell enlisted into the 1st Victorian Bushmen, then the 5th Victorian Mounted Rifles, aged just 15.



He served during the Boer War until March 1902 when he left the military. However, he later served during the Natal Rebellion of 1906 in South Africa and, on his return to Australia, he married Elizabeth Smyth in Melbourne on 15 April 1907. The couple went on to have a daughter. It is understood that Dartnell ran his own business between 1906 and 1912 before leaving once again for South Africa, where he settled in East London, having left his family in Australia.

It was while in South Africa and working as a writer that he changed his name to Wilbur Taylor Dartnell.

After the outbreak of the Great War, Dartnell was determined that he and other Australians living locally should take part in the fighting. He therefore chaired a meeting to this effect before contacting the War Office in London to offer the group's services and seek passage to Britain. At some point, Dartnell became engaged to Mabel Evans, who lived in East London: though there is no evidence he and



his first wife ever divorced. He clearly knew Mabel Evans before he left for England because in his will, drawn up on 23 September 1914, he left his estate to her.

On 23 September 1914, too, the Australians left for the UK and, on 12 February 1915, Dartnell enlisted with the Legion of Frontiersmen: the very day that the service battalion was formed as the 25th Royal Fusiliers (Service) Battalion (City of London Regiment). Dartnell was immediately commissioned and, from his base at Southampton and having described himself as a good rider, he was responsible for the draft of artillery horses to Belgium for the front line.

On 10 April 1915, the 25th Royal Fusiliers, including Dartnell, left Plymouth for Africa. During the late 19th century most of East Africa was divided between Britain (Kenya) and Germany (Tanganyika) but the outbreak of war meant both sides were keen to expand their boundaries and seize more land.

On arrival, the Royal Fusiliers were tasked with defending the section of the railway near Mombasa that led to Uganda. It was not long before Dartnell distinguished himself on the battlefield: during the battle at Bukoba he took

part in a successful raid, leading from the front. In fact, he entered the enemy fort and dragged down the German Imperial Flag from the roof and replaced it with a Union Jack. For this action, he was Mentioned in Despatches, recommended for a DSO (that he never received) and was promoted to temporary lieutenant at the end of July.

In early September 1915, Dartnell was part of a small force located near Makatu in East Africa at a point close to the enemy. A section of men from the Royal Fusiliers, along with fifty rifles, had joined up with a section of the Mounted Infantry Company. On 3 September, it was reported that the enemy laid a mine on the Mombasa-Nairobi railway. A party of British troops of well over sixty soldiers, supported by fifty Baluchi troops, was dispatched at 06.30 hours to intercept the enemy as they returned from their bombing mission.

At 10.15 hours, the enemy ambushed the advanced posts and fierce fighting took place at close quarters. The German force was more than 200-strong and it soon overwhelmed the British force and the German-controlled local Askaris closed in on the defeated soldiers. Captain Woodruffe gave orders for a withdrawal and for the wounded to be taken away as soon as possible. Dartnell, who in the fighting had been

injured in the leg below the knee, had initially been carried to safety. However, knowing that the Askaris were likely to hack the wounded to pieces, he ordered his men to leave him behind in the forlorn hope that he could save lives.

Dartnell was only twenty-five yards from the enemy when he was last seen alive: he fought to the end but was overwhelmed and killed. Furthermore, Dartnell's worst fears had been confirmed as the Askaris had also stripped and mutilated their victims. He had sacrificed his own life, aged 30, and he was buried, along with his seven colleagues, at the Makutu Burial Cemetery.

Dartnell's Victoria Cross was announced on 23 December 1915 when his citation concluded: "He gave his own life in a gallant attempt to save others." Dartnell was one of only four men to be awarded the VC in the East African Campaign.

It was Dartnell's widow, Elizabeth, by now living in Victoria, Australia – rather than his "fiancée", Mabel Evans, from East London, South Africa – who received his VC from His Excellency Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, Governor General of Australia, on 7 October 1916. However, as stated in Dartnell's will, his modest estate passed to Mabel Evans. After the war, Dartnell and his comrades were reburied at a Commonwealth War Grave Cemetery at Voi, some 100 miles inland from Mombasa. A first-rate account of Dartnell's life appears in Gerald Gliddon's book: "VCs of the First World War: The Sideshow".

As a one-time actor, Dartnell is one of several men commemorated on a plaque in the foyer of the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, London. His medal group, including his VC, was purchased by a medal collector in 1984 and presented to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. ☉

FAR LEFT:  
The Cross of  
Sacrifice in  
Voi Cemetery.  
Voi became a  
hospital centre  
early in 1916.  
In the period  
August 1915 to  
December 1917,  
100 burials  
were made in  
the cemetery  
and after the  
Armistice,  
a further  
thirty-seven  
graves were  
brought in from  
Bura Military  
Cemetery  
(fourteen graves  
of the 2nd Loyal  
North Lancers,  
29 September  
1915), Maktau  
Military  
Cemetery  
(seventeen  
graves, largely  
3 September  
1915) and  
Tsavo Military  
Cemetery  
(six graves).

(COURTESY OF THE  
COMMONWEALTH  
WAR GRAVES  
COMMISSION)

BOTTOM LEFT:  
Men from  
the 25th  
(Frontiersmen)  
Service Battalion  
Royal Fusiliers  
Royal London  
Regiment)  
pictured taking a  
rest in the bush  
near Maktau  
Camp. (COURTESY  
OF KEVIN PATIENCE)

RIGHT:  
A studio  
portrait of  
Temporary  
Lieutenant  
Wilbur T.  
Dartnell taken  
in 1915. Note  
that the Victoria  
Cross has been  
painted on.  
(COURTESY OF  
THE AUSTRALIAN  
WAR MEMORIAL;  
A01585)



## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

► Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His five books on gallantry include *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 Museum, 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) For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com). Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

