

Jemadar Lala



LORD ASHCROFT'S
"HERO OF
THE MONTH"

BOLDNESS

AGGRESSION • INITIATIVE
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 Jemadar Lala's award is not part of the collection, Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of boldness:

"At certain times people take a calculated risk. With audacity, dash and daring, much can be achieved. In simple terms, who dares wins. Boldness combines force with creative thinking. It is impetuous and often completed before anyone knows what is going on."

ABOVE RIGHT: Indian troops pictured soon after their arrival in France. The ships carrying the first men from the Indian Army arrived at the French port of Marseilles on the morning of Saturday, 26 September 1914.

(ALL IMAGES HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

RIGHT: A depiction of Sepoy Lala during his Victoria Cross action at El Orah, Mesopotamia, 21 January 1916.

LALA (his only name) was born on 20 April 1876 in the village of Parol in the district of Hamirpur, near Jullundur, in north-west India. His father, called Dyinga, was a landowner. Despite receiving no schooling, Lala could read and write Hindi. He joined the Indian Army on 21 February 1901, aged twenty-four.

Lala was involved in the First World War from shortly after the conflict broke out in August 1914. He was in the first batch of Indians that went to France and, later, he spent three months guarding the Suez Canal. He was serving as a Sepoy in Hanna, Mesopotamia (now Iraq), in the New Year of 1916. Hanna was close to the River Tigris and was well defended by Turks who were entrenched north of the river. The aim of the advancing Allied force was to try to relieve General Charles Townshend's force at Kut-al-Amara.

On 21 January, Lieutenant General Sir Fenton Aylmer VC attacked the Turks but soon it became apparent that the preliminary bombardment had done little damage to the enemy's barbed wire defence. As a result, the attackers were driven back in

the marshy ground and with heavy casualties. Freezing temperatures and a bitter wind meant that many of the wounded died of exposure.

Lala, who served with the 41st Dogras, 35th Brigade, 7th Meerut Division, of the Indian Army, had been involved in the thick of the fighting and was supremely courageous throughout. His VC was announced on 13 May 1916, by which point he had been promoted to Lance Naik and had recently celebrated his

fortieth birthday. His citation stated: 'Finding a British officer of another regiment lying close to the enemy, he dragged him into a temporary shelter, which he himself had made, and in which he had already bandaged four wounded men.'

'After bandaging his [the officer's] wounds he heard calls from the Adjutant of his own regiment who was lying in the open severely wounded. The enemy were not more than one hundred yards distant, and



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 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. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft



it seemed certain death to go out in that direction, but Lance Naik Lala insisted on going out to his Adjutant, and offered to crawl back with him on his back at once. When this was not permitted, he stripped off his own clothing to keep the wounded officer warmer, and stayed with him till just before dark, when he returned to the shelter.

'After dark he carried the first wounded officer back to the main trenches, and then, returning with a stretcher, carried back his Adjutant.

'He set a magnificent example of courage and devotion to his officers.'

In his book A Soldier's Memories in Peace and War, Major-General Sir George Younghusband gave a detailed account of Lala's bravery in which he suggested the full extent of his courage had been played down in his VC citation:

'At this point Sepoy (now Lance-Naik) Lala came across a Major in his regiment, 150 yds from the enemy, lying completely exposed in the open, and trying to bandage a grievous wound. Lala dragged him to a very slight depression only a few inches deep [a trench that Lala had dug for the rescue attempt] and there bound up the Major's wounds. Whilst doing so he heard other cries for help, and sallying forth dragged four more of his comrades into the meagre shelter, and bound up their wounds.

'Meanwhile it had come on to rain hard, and a pitiless icy wind sprang up. Then Lala heard another voice calling for help about fifty yards to the front, and only one hundred yards from the Turkish trenches. He recognized the voice and said to the Major: "That is my Adjutant, Sahib,

calling. I must go out to help him."

"No, Lala, it is quite useless," said the Major. "You will certainly be shot dead and therefore be of no use."

"Then seeing that Lala was still preparing to go, he added: "I order you not to go. Lie down."

'Lala lay still for a bit, and then the voice from the front again called for help.

'Up jumped Lala, and calling out "I'll be back in a minute," dashed out to his Adjutant to save him.'

Lala, who was thirty-nine at the time of his VC action, brought the officer back and escaped injury but the adjutant later died from his injuries. Hanna, the focal point of the failed attack, was finally captured by the British forces on 5 April 1916.

At some point during the war, Lala suffered from trench foot and had to be treated at Brighton Hospital, Sussex, before returning to his regiment. It is believed that Lala received his VC while in India, having returned to his homeland with his regiment in 1917.

Lala remained in the Indian Army after the war and was eventually promoted to Jemadar. He was discharged from the military on 24 April 1924 on medical grounds. He

died, from polio, in his home village of Parol on 23 March 1927, aged fifty. After being cremated, his ashes were scattered in Parol.

Interestingly, when Lala died he left two widows. The first was given his Army pension and allowance until she died, two years after her husband, in 1929. His second wife, Gur Devi, had a pension claim from 1932 that was pending until 1988 when it was rejected on the grounds that she was his second wife and only the first wife was entitled to a widow's pension. However, on appeal, the High Court ruled in 1993, sixty-one years after the start of the legal action, that Gur Devi, by now ninety-five, had been married prior to the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and so her marriage was perfectly legal. The court awarded her full arrears on her pensions, plus interest.

Lala's name is commemorated on the Memorial Gates, Hyde Park Corner, London, and a school is named after him in Parol.

The whereabouts of Lala's VC is not known. At some point, his service and gallantry medals became separated. Some of his medals, but not his VC, were offered for auction in the summer of 2013. ☉

TOP LEFT: Located beside the Commonwealth Memorial Gates on Constitution Hill is a small memorial pavilion on which are commemorated the Victoria Cross and George Cross holders from the named regions - including that of Jemadar Lala VC.

TOP RIGHT: As well as Jemadar Lala VC's name - seen here - there are a further 83 individuals listed on the ceiling of the small domed pavilion. There are 33 First World War VC recipients and 12 GC and 39 VC recipients from the Second World War.

LEFT: At some point during the war, Lala suffered from trench foot and had to be treated in hospital in Brighton, Sussex, before returning to his regiment. These Indian soldiers are convalescing in a ward at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton.

