



LORD ASHCROFT'S
"HERO OF
THE MONTH"

Acting Captain Allastair Malcolm McReady-Diarmid

VC

SKILL

AGGRESSION · BOLDNESS
INITIATIVE · LEADERSHIP
SACRIFICE · 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 Acting Captain Allastair Malcolm Cluny McReady-Diarmid VC's award is not part of the collection, Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of skill:

"Wisdom, sound judgement and technical knowledge are the hallmarks of Skill. It is about using resources to greatest effect usually under intense pressure. For many involved in bomb disposal, while a single movement might start the clock ticking, the puzzle still has to be solved, the game won. Perseverance is everything."



TOP RIGHT
A working party from a battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment cleaning up a section of the Canal du Nord near Moeuvres, 28 November 1917. It was in this area that the Germans launched their counter-attack two days later.

RIGHT
A Mark IV tank pictured abandoned on the Cambrai battlefield after the fighting in 1917. This picture provides an illustration of the kind of terrain over which McReady-Diarmid and his men fought. McReady-Diarmid's award of the VC was the only one gazetted in March 1918. (COURTESY OF THE TANK MUSEUM)

ALLASTAIR MALCOLM Cluny McReady-Diarmid (as he was known at the time of his death) was born with the name of Arthur Malcolm McReady-Drew on 21 March 1888. One of four sons born to Herbert Drew, a civil servant, and his wife Fanny (née McReady), he was born in New Southgate, London.

The young Arthur (as he was then known) was educated at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar Preparatory School in Barnet, north London, before his parents moved to Jersey in 1903. On the island, he was educated at Victoria College for a year before his parents

returned to live in London. With the family home in Acton, west London, he was educated at Ealing Grammar School, a private school.

After the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, McCready-Drew, by then aged 26, attended London University's Officer Training Corps. Commissioned as a second lieutenant on 10 March 1915, McReady-Drew initially served with the 4th Battalion, The Middlesex Regiment (Duke of Cambridge's Own).

By September of that year, he had changed his name by deed poll at the request of his colonel, apparently (and

rather bizarrely) because too many men in the regiment were called "Drew". For some reason, he changed, and added to, his first names and became "Allastair Malcolm Cluny McReady-Diarmid".

After being wounded in action on the Western Front while serving on attachment to the 17th (Service) Battalion, Middlesex Regiment (1st Football), he was invalided home and spent four months in hospital. It was while recuperating in Dursley, Gloucestershire, that McReady-Diarmid met Hilda Dainton, a local tinsmith's daughter who was working as a nurse.

The couple married at St James' Parish Church, Dursley, on 10 September 1915. This, however, caused a major rift with McReady-Diarmid's parents, who apparently considered that he had married beneath him.

In October 1915, after the couple had honeymooned, he returned to active service, being transferred to the 14th Battalion. McReady-Diarmid was promoted to lieutenant in September 1917 and in October 1917, he was promoted to acting captain and allowed home for leave.

While at home, he met – for the first time – his daughter, Alison Hilda, who had been born in May of that year.



After returning to the 17th Battalion on the Western Front, McReady-Diarmid showed such courage in battle over two days that he was awarded the VC.

On 30 November 1917, the Germans launched a major counterattack against the Allied forces, breaking through the British line south of the Canal de St Quentin. At this point, the 17th Battalion was just north of the line, near the Canal du Nord just east of Moeuvres. During both 30 November and 1 December, McReady-Diarmid, of 'D' Company, led numerous counter-attacks.

The citation for his VC takes up the story: "When the enemy penetrated some distance into our position and the situation was extremely critical, Captain McReady-Diarmid at once led his company forward through a heavy barrage. He immediately engaged the enemy, with such success that he drove them back at least 300 yards, causing numerous casualties and capturing 27 prisoners.

"The following day the enemy again attacked and drove back another company which had lost all its officers. This gallant officer at once called for volunteers and attacked. He drove them back again for 300 yards, with

heavy casualties. Throughout this attack Captain McReady-Diarmid led the way himself, and it was absolutely and entirely due to his marvelous throwing of bombs that the ground was regained.

"His absolute disregard for danger, his cheerfulness and coolness at a most trying time inspired all who saw him. "This most gallant officer was eventually killed by a bomb when the enemy had been driven right back to their original starting point."

Killed at Moeuvres, McReady-Diarmid was aged 29. The posthumous award of the VC was announced on 15 March 1918, this being presented to his widow by King George V at an investiture at Windsor Castle on 20 April 1918.

Incredibly, it seems that McReady-Diarmid, alone as the sole bomb-thrower, had accounted for 94 of the enemy: 67 dead and 27 wounded. The official report into the action said that it was "a feat which can hardly, if ever, have been equaled in the past". On the second day of his VC action, he had rallied his men who were "tired and shaken".

McReady-Diarmid's body was never recovered or identified. During the military operation, which ran from

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES II

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II* was published in hardback in 2016 and in paperback on 9 November. For more information, please visit: www.victoriacrossheroes2.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



26 November to 3 December 1917, the 17th Battalion lost seven officers and 180 other ranks as casualties (dead and wounded), but the bodies of 150 enemy soldiers were found dead in their trenches.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who described the fighting at Cambrai, wrote: "There was no more wonderful individual record in the battle than that of Captain McReady-Diarmid, of the 17th Middlesex, who fought like a d'Artagnan of romance, and is said to have killed some eighty of the enemy in two days of fighting before he himself at last met that fate from which he had never shrunk."

McReady-Diarmid's widow and daughter moved to St-Leonards-on-Sea in East Sussex after the war. On 26 June 1920, they both attended the VC garden party at Buckingham Palace, where they were introduced to the King.

In 1973, Hilda, then aged 83, presented her late husband's medal group to the National Army Museum in central London, where it remains to this day. Their daughter, Alison, had died seven years earlier, in 1966, aged just 48. ☉

ABOVE
A German 15cm naval gun captured on 29 November 1917, during the Battle of Cambrai.

LEFT
Today, Acting Captain Allastair Malcolm Cluny McReady-Diarmid is named on the War Memorial in Dursley, Gloucestershire, one of 56 individuals listed on the two brass panels mounted each side of the gateway. Unveiled in 1922 and located at the top of Long Street by St James Church, the memorial is a Grade II listed structure. (COURTESY OF PHILIP PANKHURST; WWW.GEOGRAPH.ORG.UK)



ABOVE A close-up of the Memorial Gate at Dursley. McReady-Diarmid's name is at the bottom of the left-hand panel. There is also a memorial in his honour at Victoria College, Jersey. McReady-Diarmid is one of seven VC recipients commemorated on the Cambrai Memorial which is located on an elevated terrace in Louverval Military Cemetery, Louverval, France. (COURTESY OF ALF BEARD; WWW.GEOGRAPH.ORG.UK)