

Major-General Sir Christopher
Charles Teesdale VC KCMG CB



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



LEFT 'The Defence of Kars', a lithograph showing Fenwick Williams and Lt Christopher Teesdale by William Simpson. (BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY/HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

Christopher Charles Teesdale will forever be recorded in the history books for two specific reasons: he received the only VC for the siege of Kars – the last major action of the Crimean War – and was the first South African-born recipient of the VC.

Given the ferocity of the siege at Kars on 29 September 1855, and the courage that Teesdale – then aged 22 – displayed while at the centre of the fighting, it was quite remarkable he was not killed in action. In fact, he survived the conflict, enjoyed an illustrious service career and lived to see his 60th birthday.

Teesdale was born in Grahamstown, in the Cape Colony of South Africa, on 1 June 1833. He was the third son of Lieutenant-General Henry Teesdale, of the Royal Horse Artillery, who was posted to South Africa, with his wife Rose (*née* Dobrée), prior to their son's birth.

Christopher was just two years old when he returned to England with his family. For the rest of his childhood, he was raised in England and Guernsey, where his mother's family lived. In 1848, Teesdale was accepted as a gentleman cadet into the Royal Artillery and commissioned into the regiment as a second lieutenant on Waterloo Day, 18 June 1851, shortly after his 18th birthday.

CRIMEAN WAR

On 22 April 1853, he was promoted to lieutenant and served with the British Forces in the Crimean War. British and French forces had made their way to the Crimea with the objective of destroying the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the port of Sebastopol. Their other aim was to prevent a Russian naval advance on Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), while the land route through the Caucasus mountains and Asia Minor was protected by the large Turkish

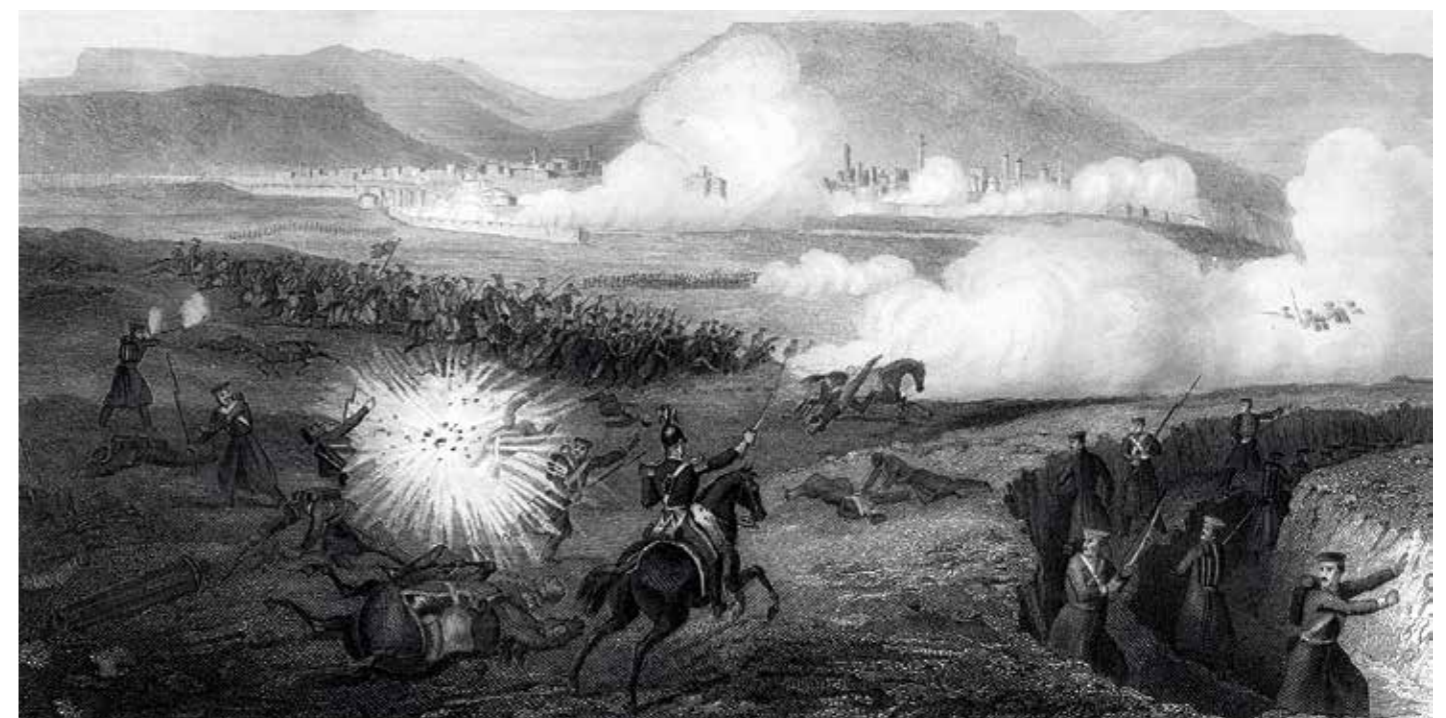
BELOW 'Repulse of the Russians', an 1857 British engraving. (TOPFOTO)

army, guarding against a Russian invasion from Tiflis (now Tbilisi). The Russians had moved 35,000 troops into the area in early 1854, hoping to open up a second front against a weak and disorganised Turkish Army.

On 3 and 6 August, the Russians twice routed the Turks on the battlefield. Smarting from two heavy defeats, the Turks fell back on the town of Kars, southwest of Tiflis. Realising the seriousness of the situation, the British decided in September 1854 to send a British Commissioner, accompanied by a small staff, to join the Turkish force. The man tasked with this key role was Colonel Sir Fenwick Williams of the Royal Artillery, who was accompanied by an aide-de-camp, Lt Christopher Teesdale, and Dr Humphry Sandwith, who had been appointed Inspector General of Hospitals in Asia Minor. The intention was that Williams would liaise between the Ottoman Porte in Constantinople and Lord Raglan's headquarters in the Crimea.

The three-strong party, headed by Williams, arrived in Kars in late 1854. Although a barren, harsh location, the town was strategically important. If the Russians could capture it, they could march on into the Ottoman Empire and significantly boost their chances of winning the Crimean War.

While Williams and Sandwith spent the winter travelling through Asia Minor, Teesdale was left as the sole British representative in Kars. ▶





The number of Russians killed was later put at 5,000. The Turkish losses were also increased to 362 dead and 631 wounded. The townspeople of Kars suffered an additional 101 dead and 202 wounded.

In a letter home, written the day after the battle, Teesdale said: "I dare say when this reaches you that you will have heard of the desperate action we had here yesterday; I wish you to know as soon as possible that, by God's mercy, I came out of it unhurt."

VICTORIA CROSS

Teesdale own contribution to the defence of the town had been immense, as the citation to his VC eventually recognised. It stated

"The battle lasted, without a moment's intermission, for nearly seven hours, when the enemy was driven off in the greatest disorder, with the loss of 2,500 dead, and nearly double that number of wounded"

In April 1855, Williams and Sandwith returned to Kars, where they were joined by three more Englishmen, including two army officers. Williams and Teesdale, who had been given the temporary ranks of brigadier-general and major respectively, and the rest of the British party attempted to strengthen the town's defences against the inevitable Russian siege which began in June.

INTO COMBAT

At the end of that month, the Russians moved between 35,000 and 40,000 men into the area. They were under the command of General Nikolay Mouravieff who, as a young subaltern, had taken part in the capture of the town in 1828. During July and August 1855, there were skirmishes between the two sides, but the Russians seemed set on starving the enemy into submission.

News of the fall of Sebastopol reached Kars on 17 September, by which point the town was suffering; cavalry horses were dying and the population was on half rations. When Mouravieff learned of plans to send a relief force to Kars, he decided on an all-out attack on 29 September.

However, he underestimated the gallant fighting spirit of the defenders. At the end of a brutal day of fighting, General Williams

wrote a despatch that summed up the extent of the resistance: "I have the honour to inform your Lordship that General Mouravieff, with the bulk of his army, at day-dawn this morning, attacked our entrenched position on the heights above Kars, and on the opposite side of the river.

"The battle lasted, without a moment's intermission, for nearly seven hours, when the enemy was driven off in the greatest disorder, with the loss of 2,500 dead, and nearly double that number of wounded, who were, for the most part, carried off by the retreating enemy. Upwards of 4,000 muskets were left on the field... Our loss was about 700 killed and wounded."

that his award was: "For gallant conduct, in having, while acting as Aide-de-Camp to Major-General Sir William Fenwick Williams, Bt, KCB, at Kars, volunteered to take command of the force engaged in the defence of the most advanced part of the works – the key of the position – against the attack of the Russian Army when, by throwing himself into the midst of the enemy, who had penetrated into the above redoubt, he encouraged the garrison to make an attack, so vigorous, as to drive out the Russians therefrom, and prevent its capture; also for having, during the hottest part of the action, when the enemy's fire had driven the Turkish Artillerymen from their guns,

rallied the latter, and by his intrepid example induced them to return to their post; and further, after having led the final charge which completed the victory of the day, for having, at the greatest personal risk, saved from the fury of the Turks, a considerable number of the disabled among the enemy, who were lying wounded outside the works – an action witnessed, and acknowledged gratefully before the Russian Staff, by General Mouravieff."

In the weeks following the battle, it became apparent to both sides there was little likelihood of an Allied relief force being sent to Kars. However, having suffered such heavy losses in one battle, Mouravieff was in no hurry to do so again and instead refocused his efforts on maintaining the siege, and starving the defenders into submission.

Teesdale described the desperate situation vividly in another letter home: "The horrors of the concluding part of the siege are almost too terrible to recall – men too proud to beg, locked their doors and lay down to die in their houses. The misery within the town increased by the day, and the vigilance of the Russians doubled. A stock of wood, eked out to the last, had vanished and the cold at night became so bitter that numbers of men were found every morning to be frozen to death in their tents. Horses and mules had long ceased to be of any service except for food. Towards the middle of November snow began to fall, and so intense did the cold now become that to sleep under canvas became nearly impossible."

HONOURABLE SURRENDER

Following a Council of War on 24 November, and with no prospect of Kars

Victoria Cross Heroes Volume 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 is now available in paperback. For more information, visit www.victoriacrossheroes2.com

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum London. For more information, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes and details of his VC collection may be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft



being relieved, the decision to surrender was taken. Teesdale later wrote: "I was sent from the council with the flag of truce to the Russian camp."

The formal surrender took place at an old Genoese church about three miles from Kars. The officers and regular troops of the garrison, around 8,000 in all, were all made prisoners of war and the irregulars, numbering some 6,000, were freed. The British officers, including Teesdale, were all taken into custody at the Russian town of Tiflis.

When hostilities in the Crimea ended and the treaty of peace was signed on the 30 March 1856, the four British officers were released. Teesdale arrived back in England on 11 June of that year, reverting to his substantive rank of lieutenant, Royal Artillery. He was created a Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB) the previous month in recognition of his

distinguished services against the enemy in Kars.

Teesdale was also made an Officer of the French Légion d'honneur and ultimately received the VC, the sole example awarded in recognition of valour at Kars in an honour announced on 25 September 1857. He was presented with his VC by Queen Victoria on 21 November 1857 at Windsor Castle, becoming the first South African-born recipient of the award. He also received the Turkish campaign medal for the Defence of Kars – a unique occurrence of the VC being paired with a (non-mainstream) foreign campaign medal.

The brave officer was promoted to captain, and thereafter brevet major in January 1858, before being appointed equerry to the Prince of Wales that November. He was elevated to brevet lieutenant-colonel in December 1868, substantive major in July 1872 and lieutenant-colonel in September 1876. Appointed a brevet colonel and an aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria in October of the following year, further promotion to substantive colonel followed in October 1882 and then to his ultimate rank of major-general in April 1887. In July of that year, he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG) in celebration of Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee and his final appointment was as Her Majesty's Master of Ceremonies, a position he held from May 1890.

Christopher Teesdale retired from the Army in the spring of 1892 in order to become a Justice of the Peace. He died at home in South Bersted, near Bognor, Sussex, on 1 November 1893, five months after his 60th birthday and the day after suffering a second stroke. Teesdale was buried in the local churchyard and his name was later added to the memorial at the Royal Artillery Chapel in Woolwich, London.

I purchased his medal group at a Spink auction in London in 2011 and I feel privileged to be the custodian of this wonderful man's gallantry and service medals. ●



ABOVE 'Major General Williams and his staff leaving Kars', by Thomas Jones Barker. (TOPFOTO)

RIGHT Sir Christopher Teesdale's medal group. (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

OVERLEAF A Russian artwork, 'The Taking of Kars'. (TOPFOTO)