

Captain Richard
Wallace Annand VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



"I don't suppose he knows the meaning of fear"

For years after the Second World War, Richard Annand was known affectionately as the 'wheelbarrow VC'. This was because during his gallant action – the army's first Victoria Cross of the 1939-1945 war – he had somehow, despite being badly wounded, managed to locate a wheelbarrow in order to transport an injured comrade to safety.

Richard Wallace Annand was born in Westoe, South Shields, County Durham, on 5 November 1914. He was the son of Lieutenant Commander Wallace Annand, who served with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) during the Great War, and his wife Elizabeth (née Chapman). Richard was just seven months old when his father was killed at Gallipoli and an uncle became his guardian.

Annand, who was known to his school friends as 'Dickie', was educated at Pocklington School, East Yorkshire. After leaving school, he worked for the National Provincial Bank from 1933-1937, first in its South Shields branch and later in Rugby, Warwickshire, and London. His move to the capital saw him attend three nights of drill on HMS *President* stationed on the River Thames, for he intended to follow his father into naval service.

In 1933, Annand fulfilled his desire when he was appointed as a midshipman into the Tyne and London Divisions, RNVR. He was promoted to substantive lieutenant in 1936 and in the same year attended a navigation course in Portsmouth, Hampshire, and a gunnery course on Whale Island, Portsmouth. In 1937, Annand applied for a commission in the Royal Navy as a seaman officer, but was refused on the grounds that, at 22, he was too old. However, he was still young enough for an army commission and, in January 1938 (by then 23), Annand was gazetted as a second lieutenant into the Durham Light Infantry

(DLI), thereby ending his career as a banker.

After one month's army training in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, he was attached to the regiment's 2nd Battalion based at Woking, Surrey. On 26 September 1939, Annand joined the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France. Then in October of that year, he moved to Bercy, Lille, on the Belgian frontier during the so-called 'Phoney War'.

INTO BATTLE

The German invasion of Belgium began on 10 May 1940, with the attack on Liege, after Hitler's men were refused passage through the country. As the assaults on the Low Countries progressed, the River Dyle in Belgium formed an Allied

LEFT Captain Richard Annand's VC medal group.
(AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

BELOW British troops pass refugees on the road to Louvain.

defensive line, east of Brussels. It was on one night in May that Annand, then aged 25, distinguished himself in resisting a fierce German attack.

The citation for his VC, published on 23 August 1940, detailed his action: "For most conspicuous gallantry on 15-16 May 1940, when the platoon under his command was on the south side of the River Dyle, astride a blown bridge. During the night a strong attack was beaten off, but about 11 am the enemy again launched a violent attack and pushed forward a bridging party into the sunken bottom of the river. Second Lieutenant Annand attacked this party, but when ammunition ran out he went forward himself over open ground, with total disregard for enemy mortar and machine gun fire. Reaching the top of the bridge, he drove out the party below, inflicting over 20 casualties with hand grenades. Having been wounded he re-joined his platoon, had his wound dressed, and then carried on in command.

"During the evening another attack was launched and again Second Lieutenant Annand went forward with hand grenades and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. When the order to withdraw was received, he withdrew his platoon, but learning on the way back that his batman was wounded and had been left behind, he returned at once to the former position and brought him back in a wheelbarrow, before losing consciousness as the result of wounds." ►





ever know. It was a miracle really. I say this honestly, not because I know the man and we're great friends.

"He ran across this bridge with his grenades, dodging here and there, ducking and skipping down, moving around, he got to the edge of this bridge and he just unloaded his grenades and came back. He caused devastation in that area."

HIGH PRAISE

In his book VCs of the Second World War, John Frayn Turner was full of praise for Annand's determination to continue fighting and carry out more brave deeds after receiving his first wound. He wrote: "Groping his way back to his former position, Annand discovered the [wounded] batman and managed to find a wheelbarrow as well. Without this, he could never have got the man back. He tumbled the wounded batman into the wheelbarrow and wheeled him towards the new rear line."

The man Annand rescued, his batman Private Joseph Hunter, was later captured by the enemy and died from his wounds in a Dutch hospital. Having been hit during his VC action, Annand was evacuated

TRUE VALOUR

During the initial battle, and after receiving his first injury, Annand had returned for more ammunition. In a letter from Sgt Terry O'Neil, platoon sergeant to Annand, published in *The Journal and North Mail*, County Durham's newspaper, he described Annand's bravery in fuller detail: "On the night of 15 May Mr Annand came to me at platoon headquarters and asked for a box of grenades as he could hear Jerry trying to repair the bridge. Off he went and he must sure have given them a lovely time because it wasn't a great while before he was back for more. Just like giving an elephant strawberries."

"The previous night while the heavy stuff of both sides were sending over their mutual regards he realised that he had not received word from our right forward section which held a pillbox about 250 yards to our right front, so he went out to see how they were fixed. He had [been] gone about two hours and we had come to the conclusion that they had got him, when something which I found hard to recognise came crawling in. It was just Jake [Annand] - that is the name by which we knew him. He looked as though he had been having an argument with a wild cat. His clothes were torn to shreds and he was cut and bruised all over."

"How he got there and back only he knows because he had the fire of our own

troops to contend with as well as Jerry's. I don't suppose he knows the meaning of fear. He never asked a man to do anything he could not do himself. He wouldn't talk about it. He wasn't that kind."

Sergeant Major Martin McLane, of the 2nd Battalion, DLI, also praised Annand's bravery: "How that man never got hit with all the shooting going on, I don't



ABOVE Captain Annand (R) with Flight Lieutenant John Cruickshank VC in 2002. (PA ARCHIVE)

RIGHT British troops cross into Belgium at Herseaux.

OPPOSITE Captain Annand (L) with Sergeant Fenwick Davison, both of the Durham Light Infantry. (PA ARCHIVE)

back to the UK for hospital treatment to his injuries that included the loss of some hearing. It was a memorable journey: for two days, he bumped his way through France on board a Belgian hospital train without food or water. When he arrived at the hospital in Calais, it had to be evacuated: Annand was put aboard the first of two hospital ships, only to learn later that the second was bombed and sunk.

Long after the war ended, Annand gave a recorded interview to the Imperial War Museum, in which he described his injuries: "They saw I was wounded with blood all over and I was ordered by the adjutant into a vehicle to be taken to hospital. I was in hospital in Brussels and then put on a train, which took me to a hospital near Le Touquet. I remember writing home to my guardian uncle saying that we'd had a go at the Boche and that the Boche had had a go at me and I was in a hospital miles behind the lines - as I thought. But the Germans entered that place the next day and the hospital was evacuated, and I was taken on a hospital ship to Southampton."

"I was in hospital for about a month after that and then re-joined the battalion, which by that time was re-forming at Bridlington on the [Yorkshire] coast. I re-joined having no idea about the VC until August. It took some time, you see. I think that they had to get witnesses and so forth."

In 1940, in recognition of his VC, he was given the honorary freedom of the County Borough of South Shields. On rejoining the 2nd Battalion of the DLI Annand lost the rest of his hearing during rifle training, as a consequence of which he served the remainder of the war in the UK. His tasks included training commanders in Scotland and working in the War Office.



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

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"Once a brave man, always a brave man. On 26 February 1979, when aged 64, Annand saved his wife's life by diving into the bitterly cold River Tyne in the dark after she had fallen off a ship's gangplank"

Annand's investiture by King George VI took place at Buckingham Palace on 4 September 1940. Air raid warning sirens had been sounded shortly before the ceremony and the investiture so that it was held inside the Palace instead of the quadrangle, as originally intended. On 4 November 1940, Annand married Shirley Osborne at St George's Church, Hanover Square, London.

LATER LIFE

In 1948, Annand was invalided out of the army as a captain having declined the opportunity to be transferred from the DLI. For the next three decades, Annand devoted himself to the welfare

of the disabled, including those people who were deaf or hard of hearing. From 1948-1970, he was personnel officer for the Finchale Abbey Training Centre for the Disabled near Durham. His other roles included being president of the Durham County Branch of the Normandy Veterans, president of the Durham County Association for Disabled; deputy lieutenant of Durham and president of the Durham and Cleveland branch of the Royal British Legion. He was also president of the North East League of the Hard of Hearing and a founder member of the British Association of the Hard of Hearing.

Once a brave man, always a brave man. On 26 February 1979, when aged 64, Annand saved his wife's life by diving into the bitterly cold River Tyne in the dark after she had fallen off a ship's gangplank. The couple, who did not have children, celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary on 9 November 2000.

Annand died at the University Hospital of North Durham on Christmas Eve, 2004, having celebrated his 90th birthday less than two months earlier. His funeral was held at St Cuthbert's Church, Durham, on 5 January 2005 and he was then cremated. At a memorial service in Annand's honour at Durham Cathedral on 7 February 2005, more than 1,000 people came to pay their respects to his wartime heroism and his work in helping disabled people.

There is a plaque in his memory, which details his bravery, at the bridge over the River Dyle in Belgium. Furthermore, there is a memorial stone in his honour in the grounds of the DLI Museum, Durham, and a portrait of him at the office of the DLI Old Comrades' Association. ●