

## VCs from Midlothian



**Sapper Adam Archibald, Royal Engineers**, was born on 14 January 1879 at Leith. He was the son of Rennie Archibald, a Plasterer, and Christina Archibald, of 24 Shaws Street, Edinburgh. He lived at 53 Balfour Street with his wife and four children, and before he joined the Army in 1916 he had been Outside Foreman with Stewart's Granolithic Co Ltd of Duff Street. In his younger days he had been a keen footballer and had had a trial with St Bernard's FC. He was also a bowler and at the time of his enlistment he had been President of the Eastfield Bowling Club. Another of his hobbies was gardening and he had won prizes at local flower shows. He was a freemason belonging to the Elgin and Bruce Lodge at Limekilns in Fife.

He enlisted with the 7th Durham Light Infantry before transferring to the 218th Field Company, Royal Engineers during the second battle of the Sambre. At the age of 39, he was awarded the Victoria Cross for action while his unit was attempting to bridge the Sambre–Oise Canal.

*His citation said: On 4 November 1918 near Ors, France, Sapper Archibald was with a party building a floating bridge across the canal. He was foremost in the work under a very heavy artillery barrage and machine-gun fire. The latter was directed at him from a few yards distance while he was working on the cork floats. Nevertheless he persevered in his task and his example and efforts were such that the bridge which was essential to the success of the operations was very quickly completed. Immediately afterwards Sapper Archibald collapsed from gas poisoning.*

After his discharge he returned to his job with Stuart's Granolithic Works in Edinburgh, eventually rising to a position as manager of their Duff Street works. He passed away at his home in Leith at the age of 76. He was cremated at Warriston. His name is on the memorial there. His medals are on display with those of Major Waters at the Royal Engineers Museum, Gillingham, Kent.



**Lieutenant Colonel Walter Lorrain Brodie**, VC, MC, Highland Light Infantry, born at Edinburgh on 28 July 1884, was the second son of John Wilson Brodie, a Chartered Accountant and Stockbroker, and Grace Mary Brodie, of 23 Belgrave Crescent, Edinburgh.

Educated at Edinburgh Academy and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, he was gazetted Second Lieutenant, The Highland Light Infantry on 2 March 1904, promoted Lieutenant on 19 June, 1908, Captain on 10 September 1914, and Brevet-Major and Lieutenant Colonel in 1918.

He served with the Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders from August 1914, was killed in action on 23 August 1918, and is buried at Blenvillers-au-Bois.

The General Commanding the Division wrote, "Brodie's death was a blow to us all; a better Commanding Officer I never wanted, and his battalion has been doing magnificent work in the recent operations".

The Brigadier-General wrote, "Although he had been only a few months with the brigade which I command, I had ample opportunities for knowing him well and appreciating his fine soldierly qualities. We feel the loss of him greatly in the brigade as a friend as well as a fine officer. He was gallantly leading his men when killed in the action which was subsequently a complete success." A Colonel of the Highland Light Infantry wrote, "No man ever had a more loyal, capable or gallant Staff Officer or a better or more cheery companion. Only a few days ago I had a letter from him, telling me in what a splendid condition the 2nd Battalion was, and I had heard so from other sources, and also what a success he was in command, as I knew he would be. He must have gone far had he lived", and an ex-Commanding Officer of the 2nd Highland Light Infantry, "He was, I knew from personal experience, a splendid officer and a gallant one. In gaining the VC he has done the Highland Light Infantry the highest honour possible, and his loss to them is quite irreparable, and I know how very much he will be missed by all who served with him". A Major also wrote, "He was a very great example to all of us, and that example will live forever".

Lieutenant Colonel Brodie was twice mentioned in Despatches (*London Gazettes*, 12 December 1914, and 17 February 1915) by Sir John (later Lord) French, for gallant and distinguished service in the field. He was also awarded the Victoria Cross (*London Gazette*, 12 December 1914), for conspicuous bravery near Becelaere on 11 November 1914, "In clearing the enemy out of a portion of the British trenches which they had succeeded in occupying. Heading the charge, he bayoneted several

of the enemy, and thereby relieved a dangerous situation. As a result of Lieutenant Colonel Brodie's promptitude 80 of the enemy were killed and 51 taken prisoners. He was awarded the Military Cross (*London Gazette*, 1 January 1917), for bravery in the field.

He was a keen sportsman, a good shot, and, when opportunity offered, a keen follower to hounds.

His siblings were Patrick, Grizzel and Mary.



**Lieutenant William Arthur McCrae Bruce, Indian Army**, was born on 15 June 1890 at Edinburgh. He was the only son of Colonel Andrew Murison McCrae Bruce, and Margaret McCrae Bruce, of La Fontaine, St Clement, Jersey

William entered Victoria College, Jersey, in September 1904. In 1908 he attended Sandhurst where he was a King's India Cadet. Following his passing out in 1909 he travelled to India where he had to serve for twelve months in a British regiment before taking up his Indian Army commission. He was attached to the Northumberland Fusiliers while he learnt Urdu and was educated in the customs and traditions of India.

In 1911 he was posted to the 59th Scinde Rifles where he served on the North West Frontier.

When war broke out in 1914 he was on leave in Jersey. His regiment was ordered to France and he rejoined them in Cairo en route for the Western Front. The Victoria Cross was not awarded until nearly five years after Bruce was killed in action, as it was not until returning PoWs had been interrogated that the full facts of his action came to light.

The *Jersey Evening Post* of Wednesday 23 December 1914 reported, "Killed in Action. We regret to announce that news has been received of the death in action near La Bassee on 20 December of Lieutenant W A McCrae Bruce of the Indian Army. The deceased was the only son of Colonel & Mrs McCrae Bruce of Roche d'Or, Samares, to whom we offer our sincere condolences".

The *Jersey Evening Post* of Thursday 24 May 1917 reported, "Memorial to Lieutenant W A McCrae Bruce. A handsome brass memorial has now been placed on the south wall of the chancel of St Clements Church. This bears the badge of the 59th Schinde Rifles Frontier Force and the motto 'Ready, Aye Ready'. The inscription is as follows 'To the glory of God and in proud and loving memory of William Arthur McCrae Bruce, Lieutenant 59th Schinde Rifles Frontier Force. Only

son of Colonel Andrew McCrae Bruce CBE & Margaret his wife, who, when leading a bombing party of his regiment was killed in a German trench at Givenchy, near La Bassée, France on 19 December 1914 aged 24 years. Also to the honoured memory of those brave men of his regiment who refusing to leave him were killed with him".

London Gazette, 4 September 1919 citation reads: *For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty. On the 19th December, 1914, near Givenchy, during a night attack, Lt. Bruce was in command of a small party which captured one of the enemy's trenches. In spite of being severely wounded in the neck, he walked up and down the trench, encouraging his men to hold on against several counter-attacks for some hours until killed. The fire from rifles and bombs was very heavy all day, and it was due to the skilful disposition made, and the example and encouragement shown by Lt. Bruce that his men were able to hold out until dusk, when the trench was finally captured by the enemy.*

His Victoria Cross was bought by Victoria College, Jersey, the school in which he was educated. The school, in his honour, named one of the original four school houses after him. The others are Sartorius, Braithwaite and Dunlop, all (with the exception of Braithwaite, who was mentioned in dispatches) being old boys and recipients of the VC. Recently an additional house, Diarmid, was created to honour a previously unknown VC recipient. The relevant citations are recited each year on Remembrance Day.



**Major William Henry Johnston, Royal Engineers**, was born on 21 December 1879 at Leith. He was the second son of William Johnston, Royal Artillery Riding Master, and Mary Johnston, 2 Madeira Place, Leith.

He was commissioned on 23 March 1899 and saw foreign service in Gibraltar from 1900 to 1905 in the Intelligence Department. Promoted Lieutenant on 19 November 1901, on his return to Britain he was attached to the Survey Department until 1908, then gazetted as a General Staff Officer 3rd Grade for service in China, attaining Captain on 23 March 1908.

From 11 July 1908 to 26 October 1911 he served in North China engaged in intelligence work, visiting 11 of the 18 provinces. He was transferred to South China Command.

On his return to Britain he served in the Geographical Section of the War Office until 1913, when he entered the Staff College, Camberley.

At the outbreak of the war he joined the 59th Field Company of the Royal Engineers in the British Expeditionary Force serving throughout the winter of 1914-15. He saw action at the retreat from Mons and the battles of Aisne, the Marne, Neuve Chapelle and the first and second battles of Ypres. He was killed by a sniper on 8 June 1915 near Zwarteleen in the Ypres Salient, just four days after being appointed Brigade Major of 15 Brigade. His VC citation in the *London Gazette* on 25 November 1914 said: *At Missy on 14 September, under a heavy fire all day until 7 p.m. worked with his own hands two rafts, bringing back wounded and returning with ammunition, thus enabling advanced Brigade to maintain its position across the river.*



**Major Allan Ebenezer Ker**, Gordon Highlanders attached 61st Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, was born on 5 March 1883 at Leith. He was the first son of Robert Darling Ker, WS, a Solicitor, and Joanna Ker, of 4 Wardie Road, Leith.

On the 21st. March 1918, near St. Quentin in France, the enemy had penetrated the British lines, and the flank of the 61st. was exposed. Lieutenant Ker had one Vickers gun, but managed to hold up the attack and to inflict many casualties. He then sent word back to his Battalion Headquarters that he was going to remain at his post, along with a Sergeant and several men who had been badly wounded, and fight on until a counter-attack could be launched to rescue them. Just as the Vickers gun was finally destroyed, his party were attacked from behind with bombs, machine guns and bayonets, but Lieutenant Ker and his men managed to repulse these attacks with their revolvers. Although exhausted from want of food and gas poisoning, as well as from fighting and attending to the wounded, Lieutenant Ker only surrendered when all his ammunition was spent and the position overrun - he had managed to hold 500 of the enemy off for three hours. The wounded were collected into a small shelter, and it was decided to defend them to the last and to hold the enemy for as long as possible.

In one of many hand-to-hand encounters, a German rifle and bayonet were secured, along with some ammunition, and these were used with good effect.

His citation concluded: *Although Lieutenant Ker was very exhausted from want of food and gas poisoning, and from the supreme exertions he had made during ten hours of the most severe bombardment, fighting and attending to the wounded, he refused to surrender until all his ammunition was exhausted and his position was rushed by a large number of the enemy. His behaviour throughout the day was absolutely cool and fearless, and by his determination he was materially instrumental in holding up for three hours more than five hundred of the enemy.*

He later achieved the rank of Major. Anthony Powell later used him as the inspiration for the character of Colonel Finn in his novels *The Soldier's Art* (1966) and *The Military Philosophers* (1968). His VC is on display in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum, London.

Lieutenant Ker was, later, promoted to the rank of Major, and he died in Hampstead, North London, where he is buried.



**Lieutenant David Stuart McGregor**, 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots attached 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Machine Gun Corps was born on 16 October 1895 at Edinburgh. He was the second son of David McGregor, a Tailor and Clothier, and Annie McGregor, of "Ferragon", Craigs Road, Corstorphine, then 125 Warrender Park Road, Edinburgh. He was educated at George Heriot's School from 1908 to 1911. Before enlisting he was employed at the Stockbridge branch of the Commercial Bank of Scotland.

He initially served as a Gunner in the 1<sup>st</sup> Lowland Brigade, Royal Field Artillery. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant on 10 October 1915 and went on to serve as a Lieutenant in the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots being attached to the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, entering Egypt as a theatre of war on 18 May 1916.

He was killed in action on 22 October 1918, aged 23, and was buried in Stasegem Communal Cemetery, Harelbeke, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium, Grave A.1. He was awarded the British War Medal, Victory Medal and the Victoria Cross. He is remembered on a family gravestone in Corstorphine Hill Cemetery.

An extract from *The London Gazette* dated 13 December, 1918, records the following: *"For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty near Hoogmolen on 22nd of October, 1918, when in command of a section of machine guns attached to the right flank platoon of the assaulting battalion. Immediately the troops advanced*

*they were subjected to intense enfilade machine-gun fire from Hill 66 on the right flank. Lt. McGregor fearlessly went forward and located the enemy guns, and realised that it was impossible to get his guns carried forward either by pack or by hand without great delay, as the ground was absolutely bare and fire swept. Ordering his men to follow by a more covered route, he mounted the limber and galloped forward under intense fire for about 600 yards to cover. The driver, horses and limber were all hit, but Lt. McGregor succeeded in getting the guns into action, effectively engaging the enemy, subduing their fire, and enabling the advance to be resumed. With the utmost gallantry he continued to expose himself in order to direct and control the fire of his guns, until, about an hour later, he was killed. His great gallantry and supreme devotion to duty were the admiration of all ranks."*

Surviving siblings were James, Marjorie and Ronald. In the 1901 Census, the household also included a Domestic Servant.



**Corporal James McPhie, Royal Engineers**, was born on 18 December 1894 at Edinburgh. He was the second son of David McPhie, a Butcher, and Mary McPhie, of 11 Wilkie Place, Leith.

James McPhie joined the Territorial Force in 1912.

On 14 October 1918, during the final Allied advance in France, McPhie was with a party of sappers maintaining a temporary cork bridge over the Canal de la Sensée near Aubencheul au Bac. At dawn, an infantry patrol which was crossing the canal started to bunch under German fire, causing the frail bridge to break up. McPhie and another man jumped into the water, holding the cork floats and timbers of the bridge together until the patrol was able to scramble across.

Realising that the safety of the patrol depended upon the bridge being repaired, James swam back and immediately set about collecting the necessary material. Undeterred by heavy fire, and rallying his men with the inspiring words "It is death or glory which must be done for the sake of our patrol on the other side", he led the way back onto the bridge to begin the vital work. He was severely wounded almost at once, falling partly into the water, and died after receiving several more wounds, but his inspiring example ensured that contact was kept with the patrol on the far bank at a critical period.

James is buried in the Naves Communal Cemetery Extension, near Cambrai, close to where he fell in action.

His medal citation in the *London Gazette* on 31 January 1919, reads, No. 422047 Cpl. James McPhie, late 416th (Edinburgh) Fld.-Coy., R.E., T.F. (Edinburgh). For most conspicuous bravery on the 14th October, 1918, when with a party of sappers maintaining a cork float bridge across the Canal de la Sensee near Aubencheul au Bac. The further end of the bridge was under close machine-gun fire and within reach of hand grenades. When Infantry, just before dawn, were crossing it, closing up resulted and the bridge began to sink and break. Accompanied by a sapper, he jumped into the water and endeavoured to hold the cork and timbers together, but this they failed to do. Cpl. McPhie then swam back, and, having reported the broken bridge, immediately started to collect material for repair. It was now daylight. Fully aware that the bridge was under close fire and that the far bank was almost entirely in the hands of the enemy, with, the inspiring words "It is death or glory work which must be done for the sake of our patrol on the other side," he led the way, axe in hand, on to the bridge and was at once severely wounded, falling partly into the water, and died after receiving several further wounds. It was due to the magnificent example set by Cpl. McPhie that touch was maintained with the patrol on the enemy bank at a most critical period.

The King presented the VC to his parents at an investiture held at Buckingham Palace on 3 April 1919. His Victoria Cross is displayed at the Imperial War Museum, London,



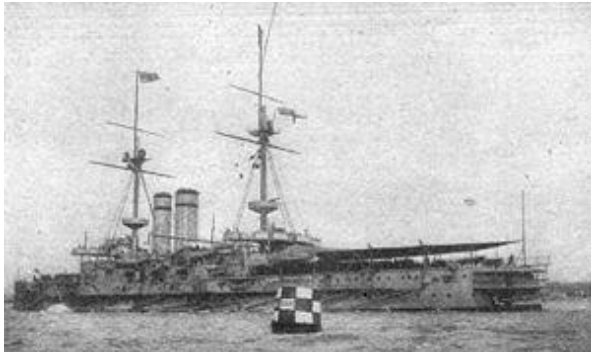
*A memorial plaque on a park bench in Princes Street Gardens Edinburgh dedicated to Corporal McPhie and men of his unit who fell 1914-1918*





**Commander Henry Peel Ritchie, Royal Navy**, was born on 29 January 1876 at Edinburgh. He was the elder son of Robert Peel Ritchie, MD, FRCP (Ed), LRCS (Ed), a Physician, and Mary Ritchie, of 1 Melville Crescent, Edinburgh.

Henry was educated at George Watson's Boys' College and Blair Lodge before he enrolled on the training ship HMS *Britannia* at the age of fourteen, in 1890. Rapidly rising in the navy due to keen intelligence and impressive strength, he was promoted to Lieutenant six years later, and served for the next 15 years as a junior staff officer at Sheerness Gunnery School. In 1900 Ritchie became the armed forces lightweight boxing champion, and was the runner up in the same contest the following year. Whilst stationed at Sheerness, he met and married Christiana Lilian Jardine, with whom he would have two daughters.



In March 1911, he was posted as Senior Lieutenant to the battleship HMS *Goliath*. Promoted to Commander later that year, he managed the ship's gunnery exercises and procedures while *Goliath* was part of the Channel Fleet stationed in British waters. One of his junior officers said, "Ritchie had the reputation of being very strict, but I always found him most fair".

At the outbreak of World War 1, *Goliath* was ordered to the Indian Ocean to lead a blockade of the German colony of German East Africa, and specifically its main port at Dar-es-Salaam. It was feared by the Admiralty that the German navy would use its colonial ports to support commerce raiding cruisers such as the SMS *Emden* or the SMS *Konigsberg*, both of which were known to be operating in the Indian Ocean at that time. This concern was amplified because the *Konigsberg*, blockaded in the delta of the Rufiji River, had operated from Dar-es-Salaam in the early months of the war and had sunk the British cruiser HMS *Pegasus* on a raid from the port. Remaining in Dar-es-Salaam's large natural harbour were the German cargo ships SS *Konig* and SS *Feldmarschall*, the hospital ship SS *Tabora* and several smaller coastal vessels – all of which could conceivably be used to resupply the trapped cruiser should they leave port.

Despite a declaration from the German Governor, Heinrich Schnee, that neither the harbour nor its ships would be used for military purposes, the decision was taken by British Admiral Herbert King-Hall that the shipping in the port must nevertheless be neutralised. The Germans had pre-emptively scuttled a blockship in the port's entrance channel, with the intention of preventing *Goliath* and the other heavy British warships from entering the harbour to shell the undefended city. With close-range bombardment impossible, the British assembled assault teams with volunteers from the small blockading flotilla. Their mission was to augment the existing blockage by immobilising or sinking those cargo ships trapped in the port, thus denying its use to the Germans as well. Command of the assault was given to Commander Ritchie as the second most senior officer present, and he commandeered two small auxiliary gunboats, *Dupleix* and *Helmuth*, to carry his raiding parties.

The day prior to the raid the decision was taken that, in order to allow the Germans time to evacuate the target ships and minimise casualties, they would be warned of the British intentions. In a brief parley the German defenders requested that the British conduct their operations under a white flag, which request was denied. Ritchie was informed that he could begin his assault on the following morning of 28 November 1914.

Due to a breakdown aboard the *Dupleix* before it reached the harbour, Ritchie had to begin his assault with only the *Helmuth* and a handful of small boats and launches from the blockading ships. There were no signs of life on the target ships as Ritchie's flotilla moved uncontested into the port, and the shoreline was described by officers in the raiding party as "utterly deserted" and "cool and inviting". Shortly after 10:00 the raiders laid explosive charges on the abandoned *Konig* and *Feldmarschall*. However they were then challenged by the port's commanding officer, who questioned their right to be in the anchorage and demanded to be permitted to observe their actions in order that he could make a report. In a meeting aboard the *Helmuth* it was explained to him that British orders were to disable German assets in the harbour and that, being at war, his permission was unnecessary.

After some discussion he was persuaded to disembark so that the *Helmuth* could continue operations. Leaving demolition parties aboard the cargo vessels, Ritchie then took the *Helmuth* further downriver to check for other shipping, but the small ship grounded on a sandbar. Assuming the route was blocked, he returned to the two cargo ships on one of the expedition's small launches. It was at this stage, whilst conducting a final inspection, that he made the discovery of a large number of empty ammunition cases and discarded bullets in the holds of the cargo ships. Deducing that the German crew had armed themselves before they left their vessels, he suspected preparations were underway to ambush his force when it attempted to leave the harbour.

Despite this discovery Ritchie resolved to continue as ordered. He took the precaution of sending *Helmuth* to the harbour entrance to cover the withdrawal, and gathered together several small boats moored in the harbour. These he secured around his launch, providing added buoyancy in case it received fatal damage in the engagement he was sure would ensue. With preparations complete, one of Ritchie's boats (from the cruiser HMS *Fox*) moved to the harbour entrance. There it was met with a hail of fire from the shore, where the hidden German crews and town garrison

had lain in wait. The *Helmuth* was also attacked, but despite sustaining severe damage both craft were able to limp to safety, carrying several wounded. From outside the harbour *Fox* and *Goliath* responded with a heavy barrage, demolishing several streets in the town, including the Governor's Palace. Ritchie, aboard the only remaining British boat in the harbour, attempted to pick up one of his officers who had earlier gone aboard the German hospital ship *SS Tabora* to conduct a medical inspection. This effort was unsuccessful, and on leaving the harbour Ritchie's launch came under sustained fire from machine guns, rifles and light artillery.

With most of his crew wounded, Ritchie refused to relinquish his place at the helm until he had steered his boat to safety. He was discovered "simply smothered in blood and barely conscious" by *Goliath's* crew when they went to his aid in the battleship's pinnace. Ritchie was rushed to the sick bay, where it was ascertained that he had been hit in eight separate places. The raid had cost the British one dead, fourteen seriously wounded and twelve captured after they were left behind in the confusion. The raiders had in turn immobilised three large merchant vessels and destroyed several shore installations, as well as taking thirty five prisoners.

Two days later, with the wounded hospitalised in Zanzibar, *Goliath* and *Fox* returned to Dar-es-Salaam and reduced most of the seafront to rubble, setting fire to several other districts of the town as well. This reprisal served only to turn the hitherto neutral local populace against the British. Feelings ran high in both camps following the raid, with the British claiming that white flags flying from several shore installations should have prevented any German attack, and the Germans insisting that the British had attempted to capture their merchant vessels' crews despite promises not to do so. It does appear that both sides had entered the operation with the intention of breaching the predetermined agreements.

Ten men were honoured for their role in the operation, seven receiving Distinguished Service Medals, two the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal and one, the grievously wounded Ritchie, the Victoria Cross. Ritchie had not initially been recommended for this award; the recommendation being submitted at a later date by an unidentified figure in the Admiralty. The Admiralty's change of heart was possibly a morale boosting measure, although Ritchie's courage during the action was never called into question. The shrapnel and bullet wounds he sustained in the raid were extensive, including injuries to his forehead, left thumb, left arm (twice), right arm, right hip and a badly broken right leg after being hit by two large calibre machine gun bullets.

Ritchie spent six weeks in hospital in Zanzibar before he was considered well enough to be transported home. He recovered during the spring of 1915 at Plymouth Hospital, with his family present. Although judged fit in late February, Ritchie was assigned light duties and was not returned to *Goliath*; a disappointment which proved fortunate for him when she was sunk off the Dardanelles in May 1915 by the Turkish destroyer *Muavenet* with the loss of five hundred lives. His Victoria Cross was presented by King George V at Buckingham Palace in April 1915. Promoted acting Captain, he retired in 1917 having been deemed unfit for further service as a legacy of the wounds he had received.

Following his retirement Ritchie settled with his family back in his home city of Edinburgh, and lived a quiet and uneventful retirement. He was not involved in any

official capacity during the Second World War, and died at his home in 1958. Ritchie was cremated at Warriston. There are no memorials or headstones dedicated to him today, and his Victoria Cross is not on public display.

Ritchie received the first VC awarded to naval personnel during the First World War.

The Victoria Cross citation in the *London Gazette* on 10 April 1915, reads, *For most conspicuous bravery on the 28th November 1914 when in command of the searching and demolition operations at Dar-es-Salaam East Africa Though severely wounded several times his fortitude and resolution enabled him to continue to do his duty inspiring all by his example until at his eighth wound he became unconscious The interval between his first and last severe wound was between twenty and twenty five minutes*



**Private George Wilson, Highland Light Infantry**, was born on 29 April 1886 at Edinburgh. He was the son of James Wilson, a Merchant Seaman, and Mary Wilson, of 1 Wilkie's Court, Edinburgh.

Private George Wilson had been called back from the Reserve on the outbreak of war.

He was described as a 'cocky fighting man; devoid of fear, modesty, and other such feeble inhibitions'. The day after being called up he stopped a runaway horse with great courage and agility. 'Man!' said an admiring old lady, 'ye should hae the VC!' 'Jist bide till I get back frae the front!' replied Wilson, slapping his chest, 'an' I'll hae it right here!'

On 14 September 1914, during the main Battle of the Aisne, the King's Royal Rifle Corps was reinforced by the 2nd Worcestershire Regiment and 2nd Highland Light Infantry to stem the advance of the Germans until the Royal Artillery began to operate.

Later in the day, these three battalions were able to advance up the eastern slopes of the Beaulne Spur, where they managed to hold on. During this period of fighting, a remarkable deed of heroism took place. At Verneuil the 2nd HLI came into action for the first time since Mons, and had been involved for only an hour when Private George Wilson spied a couple of Germans and informed his officer. The officer was incredulous and took up his glasses to take a closer look but he was immediately

shot dead. Wilson quickly avenged his killing by taking aim and shooting the two Germans.

He then advanced about a hundred yards and saw eight more Germans. He charged them at once making noises as though he was accompanied by a strong group. The Germans immediately surrendered and in doing so gave up two prisoners from the Middlesex Regiment. It was then when he was going forward that he came across the scores of wounded and dead who had previously been part of the attacking force who had been caught by German machine-gun fire.

George Wilson was so incensed by the terrible massacre that he virtually went berserk and together with a volunteer from the KRRC set out to destroy the German machine-gun position. After only a hundred yards Wilson's colleague was shot dead by the machine-gun. Wilson took steady aim and killed the machine gunner, and then wiped out the whole of the enemy position, eventually getting to within ten yards of the gun.

At this point the German officer in charge of the Maxim emptied his revolver in the direction of Wilson, but missed and Wilson immediately bayoneted him. But even then Wilson was not satisfied, turning the machine-gun round he fired 750 rounds at the enemy. Throughout this time he was a victim of heavy shellfire which eventually forced him back to his own lines where he promptly fainted.

When he came round he discovered that no one had thought of retrieving the Maxim so he set off again to bring back the gun. It took two more trips to carry back the remaining two and a half cases of ammunition as well. He still had one more task to carry out and this was to fetch the body of his colleague from the KRRC who had been shot seventeen times.

George Wilson's action must rank as one of the most effective and courageous in the early months of the First World War. His Victoria Cross was gazetted on the 5th December 1914, but Wilson had already received it from King George V who had visited the HLI on the 3rd December 1914.

Wilson's Victoria Cross is displayed at the Museum of The Royal Highland Fusiliers, Glasgow. He died of tuberculosis at Craighleith Hospital on 22 April 1926 aged only 39, and is buried in Piershill Cemetery in Edinburgh.

A ceremony organised by the Royal Highland Fusiliers took place on 21 August 2003 in Piershill Cemetery, Edinburgh, to place a memorial stone over his previously unmarked grave.

(Two further memorial stones were placed on either side of Wilson's, commemorating Lieutenant John Grieve, 2nd Dragoon Guards, who won his Victoria Cross at Balaclava during the Crimean War, and Private James Davis, 42nd Regiment (The Black Watch) who was awarded the VC during the Indian Mutiny. These two turfstones were to be taken to their respective cemeteries at a later date - Inveresk Old Cemetery, Lothian, and North Merchiston Cemetery, Edinburgh)

The VC citation in the *London Gazette* on 5 December 1914, read, *Verneuill, France, 14 September 1914, Private George Wilson, 2nd Bn, The Highland Light Infantry. Private Wilson went with a rifleman to try to locate a machine-gun which was holding up the advance of the 2nd Battalion, Highland Light Infantry. When the rifleman was killed, Private Wilson went on alone and, when he reached his target shot six of the enemy, bayoneted the officer and then captured the gun.*

Sources: Wikipedia; Imperial War Museum; Ancestry; Commonwealth War Graves Commission; Soldiers Died in the Great War Database.