

Archive Information Sheet

Sergeant Alfred Knight Victoria Cross

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History

Sergeant Knight was a post office employee who worked as a Clerical Assistant in the North Midland Engineering District. He also fought as a Post Office Rifle and was the only member of the regiment to be awarded the Victoria Cross (VC).

Born at Ladywood in Birmingham on 24 August 1888, Knight was the son of Joseph and Annie Knight. Educated at St. Phillips Grammar school, Edgbaston he married Mabel Saunderson in May 1915.

Post Office Rifles

When the Post Office Engineering Department moved to Nottingham in 1912, Knight transferred and was working in Carrington Street when war broke out. He enlisted in the 2/8 London Regiment of the Post Office Rifles on 26 October 1914 but it was not until January 1917 that the unit moved to France. The first major action that this battalion saw was in the Second Battle of Bullecourt in May 1917. Knight distinguished himself in this battle by bringing in wounded men under heavy fire and for this he was promoted to Sergeant.

Sergeant Knight was later awarded the Victoria Cross for 'most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty during the operation against the enemy positions' at the Battle for Wurst Farm Ridge, Alberta Section, Ypres, 20 September 1917 (*London Gazette* 8 November 1917, see also *Post Office Circular*, Tuesday 20 November 1917 for whole quotation). Knight charged the enemy position and captured it single-handedly, showing no regard for his personal safety.

Years after the war, Knight, in relation to the operations on 20 September near Hubner Farm was quoted as saying; 'I was thinking what could happen



Sgt. Knight with the Mayor of Birmingham at a civic reception, 17 November 1917

the next day- curious about the emotions of a condemned man the night before he takes the last walk'. A report of B Company's assault also describes how 'In two instances a sergeant rushed through our barrage and bayoneted the gunners who were causing casualties with their fire. Sergeant [Knight] rushed through our barrage to a post of 12 of the enemy, shot one, bayoneted two and scattered the rest, capturing the MG, all unaided' (*VCS of the First World War*, P126).

Later Knight realised that the men of D Company were having trouble subduing Hubner farm, so he

intervened with a few of his men and enabled D company to mount a decisive charge. Years later, Knight recalled being fascinated 'by the pattern made all the way round me in the mud by the German bullets'. He referred to his survival as a 'miracle' and added 'All my kit was shot away almost as soon as we were in it. Everything went, in fact. Bullets rattled on my steel helmet - there were several significant dents and one hole in it I found later - and part of a book was shot away in my pocket. A photograph-case and a cigarette-case probably saved my life from one bullet, which must have passed just under my arm-pit - quite close enough to be comfortable!' (P172).

Medals and Honours

Knight was decorated with the Victoria Cross at Buckingham Palace by King George V on January 3, 1918 and was the only Post Office Rifleman to achieve this honour. The announcement of his VC turned him into a minor celebrity and when he returned to Nottingham in December 1917, he became a magnet for journalists. He was accorded civic receptions both in his native and adopted cities.

At Nottingham, civic leaders presented him with an ornate silver tea service and a £100 War Bond while postal workers clubbed together to buy him an inscribed marble clock. The people of Birmingham gave him an illuminated address and another clock. Knight jokingly dismissed press accounts of his VC action which, he claimed, made him out to be 'a man from whom the bullets bounced'. The press were much taken by his sense of humour; one Birmingham newspaper dubbed him 'the Jolly VC'.

Knight soldiered on until after the Armistice and was commissioned as Second Lieutenant in The Sherwood Foresters on 17 March 1919. After being demobilised, Knight returned to his Post Office career and in 1920, he was transferred to the Ministry of Labour and from 1931-1937 he was Manager of the Employment Exchange at York.

Later he served in the Trade Board Section at Leeds and when he retired in 1951, he was Senior Wages Inspector in the Midlands section of the Ministry of Labour. In the year of his retirement, Knight was

appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (civil) for his services on 7 June 1951.

Knight died in Birmingham on 4 December 1960 at Home, at the age of 72. He is buried in Oscott Catholic Cemetery, New Oscott, Birmingham.

Other medals that Sergeant Knight was awarded for his services were the British War Medal, the Victory Medal and 1937 and 1953 coronation medals which the BPMA acquired from Spinks Auction House on 12/6/1992. Terence Cuneo also celebrated the heroism of Knight in 1979 by producing a painting of him winning his Victoria Cross which is hung at Inglis Barracks, Mill Hill.

Sources:

Gliddon, G. 'VCs of The First World War'

Messenger, C. 'Terriers in the Trenches'

PO Magazine, 1962 (P269)

National Postal Museum Review of 1997/98, P26-7

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