

# ADAM WAKENSHAW VC

**In March 1943, Dorothy Wakenshaw stood outside the gates of Buckingham Palace with her young son Thomas. She was there to receive the Victoria Cross on behalf of her late husband. He had been killed in battle in Egypt winning the Victoria Cross - he was the last soldier of The Durham Light Infantry to gain this supreme award.**

Adam Wakenshaw was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1914, the youngest of six children. His father was a labourer and the family struggled constantly against poverty and hardship. When he was 14, Adam left school to work as a miner. Four years later, he married Dorothy and by 1939 they had three children. He joined the army at the beginning of WW2 as a private with 9th Battalion DLI.

In June 1942 at Mersa Matruh on the Egyptian coast 9 DLI was part of a force trying to stop the German advance. Before dawn on 27 June, 9 DLI lay in wait behind boulders and low stone walls. In front of them were 9 DLI's 2-pounder anti-tank guns. Each of the four guns had its own crew. One of those included Private Adam Wakenshaw.

The German infantry attacked just after 5 o'clock, supported by tanks and artillery. As they advanced, a tracked vehicle towing a gun came within range of Adam's anti-tank gun. His gun opened fire and hit the vehicle but another German gun returned fire and all the soldiers manning the anti-tank guns, including Adam, were killed or wounded.

With the DLI's anti-tank guns silenced, German soldiers moved towards their damaged vehicle and gun in an attempt to bring it back into action. Adam saw this as he lay wounded near his gun and knew he must try to stop them. So, though his left arm had been blown off, he crawled back to his gun and with the help of Eric Mohn, the gun aimer, who had also been badly wounded, Adam loaded the shells with one arm and five more rounds were fired. They set the German vehicle on fire and damaged the gun but a further burst of enemy shell fire nearby killed Eric Mohn and threw Adam from his gun once more.

Unbelievably, though terribly wounded, he once again dragged himself over the rocky ground and back to his place by the gun. As he was placing one more round in the breach and preparing to fire, a direct hit killed him and silenced his gun for ever.

After that, there was nothing to prevent the German attack and within a few hours the Durhams were surrounded. On that day, 9 DLI lost 20 men killed and 300 taken prisoner.

That evening, after the Germans had withdrawn, other Durham soldiers searched the abandoned battlefield. Next to the wreckage of his gun, the body of Adam Wakenshaw was found and buried. He was 28 years old.

On 11 September 1942, the London Gazette announced the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross to Private Wakenshaw for his "conspicuous gallantry" and "self sacrifice and courageous devotion to duty".

In 1943, the body of Adam Wakenshaw VC was re-buried in the El Alamein War Cemetery in Egypt, with full military honours.

His anti-tank gun was eventually sent home to stand outside the Regiment's Depot at Brancepeth Castle. Today you can see it here in the museum along with the 'last round' that Adam never got to fire. His Victoria Cross - the last awarded to a soldier of The Durham Light Infantry - is also on display here in the medal room.



Adam Wakenshaw VC's grave, El Alamein War Cemetery, Egypt, 1943

# ROLAND BRADFORD VC

**In December 1917, the men of the 9th Battalion DLI left the horrors of the trenches. That night they sang "Abide with Me", their battalion hymn. This tradition had been started a few months earlier after the Battle of Arras by the battalion's Commanding Officer, Roland Bradford.**

**"I want you to sing the hymn the band will now play, every night at retreat, whether you are in the trenches or in billets." he had told them. Roland was now dead but his men continued unflinching to carry out his order.**

**"What's this? A bloody Sunday School!" sneered a soldier newly arrived in the battalion. This insult was too much for one veteran soldier. He punched the sneering soldier to the ground and told him "That hymn was taught to us by a better bloody soldier than you will ever be."**

Roland Bradford was indeed an outstanding soldier. When he died on 30 November 1917, aged only 25 years old, he was the youngest brigadier-general in the British Army. He was born in 1892 at Witton Park, near Bishop Auckland, the youngest and most remarkable of four brothers - Thomas, George and James - who came to be known as "The Fighting Bradfords".

When WW1 began, Roland was a 22 year old second lieutenant serving with the 2nd Battalion DLI. His strong personality, enthusiasm and courage had already caught the eye of his superior officers and by the end of 1914, he was one of only four original 2 DLI officers to have escaped death or wounding. In February 1915, Lieutenant Bradford was awarded the newly-created Military Cross and was soon sent as adjutant and temporary captain to the 7th Battalion DLI to learn exactly how a battalion worked.

In early May 1916, he was made temporary major and appointed as second in command to the 9th Battalion DLI. He took full command in August, though his permanent rank was still only lieutenant. He was only 24 years old but during the next 16 months, Roland Bradford turned 9 DLI into one of the finest fighting units in the British Army.

On 15 September 1916 he was wounded as he led 9 DLI into battle on the Somme for the first time. Then at Eaucourt l'Abbaye on 1 October, he led not only his own battalion but also the 6th Battalion DLI (whose own commanding officer had been wounded) into an attack under heavy fire and throughout the advance he ignored all dangers in order to lead and encourage his men on.

In November 1916, Lieutenant (Temporary Lieutenant Colonel) Roland Bradford was awarded the Victoria Cross though he was too busy to go home as he had a battalion to run! He was finally presented with his Victoria Cross by King George V in June 1917.

In early November 1917, Roland was given command of the 186th Brigade and, reluctantly, he left his 9 DLI. Sadly, his career of Brigadier-General Bradford VC MC only lasted 20 days, as he was killed by a German shell near his Headquarters in Bourlon Wood.

After the war, Mrs Amy Bradford - mother of "The Fighting Bradfords" - used to attend the Armistice Day service at the war memorial in Folkestone, Kent. Like so many grieving mothers she wore the medals of her children killed in the First World War. She had lost three of her four sons (only Thomas survived), but, like no other mother, she also wore two Victoria Crosses. These belonged to Roland and his brother George, who had joined the Royal Navy and was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for his bravery during the raid at Zeebrugge in April 1918.

Today the medals of two of "The Fighting Bradfords" - Roland and James - can be seen here in the museum.



Roland, Thomas, George and James Bradford in 1914

# JOSEPH NICHOLLS

**The road from Albert to Bapaume cuts across the Somme battlefield. Next to the road, near the village of Warlencourt, is a small hill, a prehistoric burial mound. This is the Butte de Warlencourt. On 5 November 1916, three battalions of Durham soldiers fought and died to capture this mound. Among them was Private Joseph Nicholls.**

Joseph was born on 9 March 1899 in South Shields, where his father, Henry, was a fruiterer or greengrocer. Later the family moved to Crawcrook near Ryton and it was from there that Joseph volunteered to join the Army, probably in late 1915, when he was just 16 years old.

After training, 8-6774 Private Joseph Nicholls joined the 8th Battalion DLI on the Western Front and became part of "B" Company's Bombing Section. Sadly little is known of his time in the Army, though some of the postcards he sent home to his mother and his 5 sisters have survived, with their brief messages of love and affection.

The attack on the Butte de Warlencourt was a failure. There was heavy rain and gale force winds the night before the attack and the trenches and shell craters were filled with thick mud and water. When the attack began just after 9 o'clock on 5 November 1916, the cold, wet soldiers struggled to climb out of their trenches and any man who fell wounded risked drowning in the mud. The attack went on all day in spite of the terrible conditions and some soldiers managed to advance under the heavy machine gun and shell fire and captured the Butte. All were driven back that night however, with appalling casualties. The three Durham battalions suffered over 130 men killed, with 400 wounded and 300 missing, most lost in the mud of the battlefield. One of the missing was Joseph Nicholls.

In late 1916, Elizabeth Nicholls was officially told that her son was missing in action. She believed however that her son was still alive and desperately sought any news of him.

In July 1917 she wrote to the International Red Cross in Geneva, hoping that her son was a prisoner of war in Germany. In October 1917, she received a reply. The Red Cross had made enquiries in Germany and had interviewed Private Albert Barker DLI in a POW Camp; a copy of the interview was enclosed. This copy no longer survives but it is clear that Private Barker said that Joseph Nicholls had in fact been killed in action. The letter from the Red Cross ended "We deeply regret it should be our duty to convey such sad news to you."

Elizabeth Nicholls had believed that her son was missing for almost 12 months but she now had to accept the brutal truth that he was dead.

Joseph Nicholls was just 17 years old when he died during the failed attack on the Butte de Warlencourt. His body was never found. Today his name is on the Memorial to the Missing at Thiepval; just one of the 70,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who died on the Somme and who have no known grave.



Joseph Nicholls' mother, Elizabeth, who believed for so long that her son was still alive.

