

EDWARD JOHN MOTT

It is not easy to say exactly what happened to Edward John Mott during the First World War.

This is partly because - like so many survivors of that appalling conflict - he rarely spoke about his experiences. Indeed his eldest son was a teenager before he became aware that “dad” had won the Victoria Cross.

And partly it is because one of the things the British Army is very good at is understatement. The exploits of Edward Mott during the First World War are described in a few bald bare sentences that only hint at the loyalty, bravery, courage under fire that is truly astonishing. Perhaps that is why the army goes in for understatement - because in truth no words can adequately describe what this son of Drayton did between 1914 and 1918.

We are indebted to Edward’s grandson, Andrew, for painstakingly piecing together his life - and the first thing we can say with certainty is that Edward was very well named. There’s a handy website called the internet surname database and if you type in the surname “Mott” it says

it originates from the pre 7th century Old English word "mote", meaning a moat, a wide channel constructed to act as a defensive fortification

As we shall see, Edward was the living embodiment of a defensive fortification. He was a moat of a man.

In 1910 at the age of 17 he joined the Border Regiment and he was in Burma when war was declared in 1914. The regiment sailed home and arriving back in England in January 1915. Two months later he and his comrades set sail for a destination that is now known by one fateful word. Gallipoli.

The aim was to land on the beaches, overwhelm the Turkish forces and open up a second front. The landings began on April 25th and soldiers coming off the boats found themselves trapped on beaches facing snipers and machine gun fire from the cliffs above. Meanwhile the British Navy fired hundreds of shells at the cliffs - each fifteen inch shell containing 13000 bullets. Medical facilities were overwhelmed, there was extreme heat, there was dysentery and one soldier wrote that the area

“looked like a midden and smelt like an open cemetery.”

Corporal Mott was one of the soldiers who landed on April 25th.and despite facing snipers and machine gun fire he and his fellows managed to push the enemy back. Then on April 28th they were ordered to make another push and it was for this action Edward was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal - the DCM. The citation reads

No. 9887 Sergeant Edward Mott, 1st Battalion Border Regiment. On 28th April, 1915, during operations South of Krithia for gallant conduct in leading his company to successive fire positions, and again for conspicuous bravery and good service in attacking over difficult country.'

In fact, as I mentioned, Edward was a corporal at the time of the action. It was only afterwards he was promoted to Sergeant. So here - remarkably - was a corporal leading his company. Indeed it was Edward who - under heavy fire - carried the Regiment's wounded commanding officer to safety, an action for which he was mentioned in dispatches.

Then at some point Edward himself was wounded and shipped back to hospital in England.

Fortunately he made a full recovery. Less fortunately he was then shipped straight back to Gallipoli where this time he was shot in the face.

Let's reflect on this for a moment. He is 22 and in a few short months he has witnessed carnage on the beaches at Gallipoli, he has carried his commanding officer to safety, he has been shot, he has been nursed back to health, he has discovered that his commanding officer died, he has been sent back to the very place where these horrors had occurred, he has been shot again, this time having a bullet removed from his head. And it is still only 1915. And he still hasn't performed the heroics that earned him his Victoria Cross. Make no mistake, we are talking about a truly extraordinary man.

It is not entirely clear where Edward spent the first few months of 1916 but we know absolutely where he was on June 30th. He was suffering from shell shock in the worst place on earth: The Somme.

It may seem odd to describe a shell-shocked soldier who was at Gallipoli AND the Somme as “lucky” but Edward was lucky. For some reason he was in the second battalion of the Border regiment, and that and his shell shock meant that he did not go over the top on July the first. This was Day One of the battle of the Somme, the single day when over 19 thousand members of the British forces were killed and a further 38 thousand were injured. As Andrew Mott has said “If my grandfather had gone over the top on July the first, 1916 it is very unlikely I would be here today”

On his recovery Edward returned to the Somme, living in trenches sometimes knee deep in water, sometimes in temperatures of minus 9 degrees centigrade. He was gassed at least once.

Then on January 27th 1917 a surprise attack was ordered and at dawn it began. The enemy was indeed surprised - maybe they were busy celebrating Kaiser Bill’s birthday - but on the left flank a German machine gunner was quick to respond and he slowed down the British advance. At least he did until Edward John Mott made the decision that earned him the highest Military Honour it is possible to receive.

As the citation reads it was awarded to

No 9887 Sergeant Edward John Mott Border regiment for most conspicuous gallantry and initiative when in an attack the company to which he belonged was held up at a strong point by machine gun fire.

Although severely wounded in the eye Sergeant Mott made a dash for the gun and after a fierce struggle seized the gunman and took him prisoner capturing the gun.

It is due to the dash and initiative of this non-commissioned officer that the left flank succeeded.

One phrase there is worth repeating: “although severely wounded in the eye’. What sort of man who has just been seriously wounded in the face AGAIN and whose eyesight must have been limited rushes at a machine gun? And how did he overpower the enemy? Although Edward rarely spoke about the events that day he did once tell Howard, his grandson and Andrew’s cousin, that he had no bullets for his gun so he attacked the enemy gunner with the only thing he could find – an entrenching tool.

Because of his wounds that was effectively the end of Edward's war but the rest of his life was not without incident. He married in 1918 and in an effort to repopulate the planet after World War One he and Evelyn had 8 children.

At some point his medals were stolen and he was issued with replacements. The replacement is at the regimental museum in Cumbria along with the machine gun he captured. And the original Victoria Cross, presented to him by George the Fifth, was eventually recovered and is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

In 1926 he got a job at the Milton Hill RAF Depot. Fourteen years later in 1940 he was serving on Guard Duty and this being wartime again he was ordered to ask all officers to identify themselves as they entered the depot. One young officer refused to identify himself and took exception to Edward telling him to put his cigarette out. The officer complained and a few days later - shockingly - Edward was dismissed. I know we are joined by representatives of the army today so all I will say is this - I blame the RAF. It was their depot.

At the time the local paper made a lot of the event and distressingly revealed that this hero of the First World War not only lost his job but also the home that came with it. But from what Andrew has discovered Edward Mott was a very wily, clever campaigner indeed and he was still living in the same house 8 years later.

Throughout his life Edward attended numerous ceremonies and was presented to several monarchs. He was part of the Guard of Honour at the burial of the Unknown Soldier and he attended the celebrations in 1956 to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the creation of the Victoria Cross.

And yet, as I said at the beginning, he rarely spoke about his awards to his family. In fact one is left with the feeling that there were two Edward John Motts with two slightly different names.

He was known as Jack to his family, the granddad who was a bit reserved and liked to spend his time on his own in the shed at the bottom of the garden.

But he was known as Ted to his comrades, to those fellow recipients of the Victoria Cross and those fellow survivors who understood as no-one else could possibly understand what really happened between 1914 and 1918.

He died fifty years ago in 1967 at the age of 74 and we will never know what impact those wartime experiences had on him. But we know this - he put his life in the most considerable danger to protect his fellow soldiers and to protect the people of this country. And therefore it is our duty to protect this memorial so that future generations can appreciate the selfless gallantry of this truly remarkable man.