

VC COMMEMORATIVE PAVING STONE UNVEILING

Lt Colonel Richard Annesley West VC, DSO & Bar, MC

Sunday 2nd September 2018 at 11:00am

Cheltenham War Memorial



GARETH DAVIES, AN OVERVIEW OF WHAT HAPPENED IN 1918 AND HOW THE ACTIONS THAT R. A. WEST TOOK PART IN FITTED INTO THE WIDER FIGHT

“I am a Tankie through and through. And Richard Annesley West was a tankie and he is of great importance to the Royal Tank Regiment, the successors to the Tank Corps. I think the presence of our Colonel Commandant, Major General John Patterson, a contingent from the serving Regiment, our Regimental Secretary, the RTR Associations, and retired members of the Regiment demonstrate his importance to us. But he was first and foremost a North Irish Horseman. And the importance of him to them is also clearly evident today. We have their Honorary Colonel, Colonel Danny Kinnahan, and a contingent of serving and retired Horsemen who have made it all the way over from Northern Ireland to be here on this important day. Richard West is also important to the Yeomanry and we have a number of

representatives of Yeomanry regiments here today. Thank-you-to-all those serving and former members of the Horse, the Yeomanry, the Royal Tank Regiment, the RBL, and others for joining us today.

“As I have made clear I am a tankie and I want to just say a few words about tanks - because as I am oft heard saying, a day without a tank is a day wasted.

“I think it is likely that he first saw tanks in April 1917 at Arras. He saw them again in August 1917 during the 3rd Battles of Ypres. And I think it is very likely that he saw the 6th Battalion in action on 22 August 1917. Perhaps that action is what convinced him to volunteer to serve with the Tank Corps.



“By June 1918 he was serving as a Company Commander in the 6th Battalion when they converted from Heavy Tanks to the new lighter and faster Whippet tank. The Whippet was a Cavalry Tank and I am quite sure that Richard West was the right man to be in command of a company of 16 Whippets.

“On 8 August over 600 tanks of differing variants went in to action at Amiens. His Battalion were in action again over the next couple of days before pausing to refit. By the time they were back in the thick of it on 21 Aug he had become the Commanding Officer, replacing Colonel Wood, a Lancer, who had been killed by a shell the day before. He was still in command on 2 September 1918 when tanks from 6th, 7th, 9th, 11th, 12th and 14th Battalions were in action 35 men from the Tank Corps died 100 years ago today and 14 of them are, like Richard West, buried in Mory Abbey Cemetery. Between them they gained 4 Military Crosses, 4 Distinguished Conduct Medals and 5 Military Medals. But we are here specifically to honour Richard Annesley West. And to do that in a way that will be much better than anything I could do I am going to hand over to his Great Great Grandson Callum.”



CALLUM HARRISON (Great Great Grandson) *AN OVERVIEW R. A. WEST'S ACTIONS AND CITATION*

“In August 1914, Richard West sailed from Belfast to Le Havre with C Squadron of the North Irish Horse. He was mentioned in dispatches in 1915 and won the DSO at the Battle of Arras in 1917.

“In January 1918 he was transferred to the Tank Corps - although he remained on horseback throughout. In August he

was wounded commanding a company of light Whippet tanks. For his "magnificent leadership and personal bravery" that day he was awarded the Military Cross.

"Later that month, he was once again in the thick of fighting when his commanding officer was killed. Assuming command, Richard West advanced at the head of his troops, first on horseback, then on foot after his favourite horse, Black Sheep, was shot under him. He was awarded a bar to his DSO.

"On 2nd September he rode out again at the head of his battalion - only to find an enemy counter-attack developing. His actions then, coming on top of those when he first took command, earned him the Victoria Cross. The citation reads as follows:

"Realising that there was a danger of the battalion giving way, he at once rode out in front of them under extremely heavy machine-gun and rifle fire and rallied the men. Although the enemy were close upon him, he took charge of the situation and detailed NCOs to replace officer casualties. He then rode up and down in front of them in the face of certain death, encouraging the men and calling to them: "Stick it men; show them fight!" He fell riddled with machine-gun bullets. The magnificent bravery of this very gallant officer at the critical moment inspired the infantry to redoubled efforts and the hostile attack was defeated."



"Richard Annesley West was the only North Irish horseman to have been awarded a Victoria Cross, and possibly the last man to win the award on horseback. Two months after his death, his widow gave birth to a daughter, Anne, who in turn gave birth to Simon and Kitty, who are here today."

POSTSCRIPT

You might wonder why R. A. West was born in Cheltenham. Well, sources at the event informed me that the quality of healthcare in Ireland left much to be desired in the 19th century and it was the practice of those ladies who could afford it to return to England for the latter part of their confinement. Many, it seems, came to Cheltenham.

Cllr Paul McCloskey
Charlton Kings
(present at the unveiling ceremony)
2nd September 2018)

EXTRACTS FROM THE LONDON GAZETTE

[London Gazette, 1 January 1918], Created a Companion to the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), Major Richard Annesley West, North Irish Horse

His squadron was sent forward to reinforce the right flank of the Brigade under very heavy shell and machine-gun fire. By his excellent example, rapid grasp of the situation and skilful disposition of his squadron, he did much to avert an impending counter-attack. He had shown great ability in command since Ju1y 1915.

[London Gazette, 7 November 1918], For the award of the Military Cross, Major Richard Annesley West VC, DSO, 6th Bn, Tank Corps

During the advance on 8th August 1918 at Guillencourt, in command of a company of Light Tanks, he displayed magnificent leadership and personal bravery. He was able to point out many targets to his Tanks that they would not otherwise have seen During the day he had two horses shot under him, while he and his order]y between them killed five of the enemy and took seven prisoners. On the 10th he rendered great services to the Cavalry by personally reconnoitring the ground in front of Le Quesnoy, and later in the day, under very heavy machine-gun fire, rallied and organized the crews of the Tanks that had been ditched, withdrawing them after dark.

[London Gazette, 7 November 1918], For the award of a Bar to the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), Major Richard Annesley West VC, DSO, MC, 6th Bn, Tank Corps

In consequence of this action being fought in a thick mist, this officer decided to accompany the attack to assist in maintaining direction and cohesion. This he did mounted, until his horse was shot under him, then on foot until the final objective was reached. During the advance, in addition to directing his Tanks,

he rallied and led forward small bodies of Infantry lost in the mist, showing throughout a fine example of leadership and total disregard of personal safety, and materially contributed to the success of the operations. Major West was in command of the battalion most of the time, his Commanding Officer having been killed ear]y in the action The consistent gallantry displayed by this officer throughout the operations since 8th August has been remarkable.

For the award of the Victoria Cross:

[London Gazette, 30 October 1918], Courcelles & Vaulx Vraucourt, France, 21 August & 2 September 1918, Captain (Acting Lieutenant Colonel) Richard Annesley West DSO, MC, North Irish Horse (Cavalry SR), att'd 6th Bn, Tank Corps.

For most conspicuous bravery, leadership and self-sacrifice (Courcelles & Vaulx Vraucourt, France) During an attack, the infantry having lost their bearings in the dense fog, this officer at once collected and reorganised any men he could find and led them to their objective in face of heavy machine-gun fire.

Throughout the whole action he displayed the most utter disregard of danger, and the capture of the objective was in a great part due to his initiative and gallantry.

On a subsequent occasion it was intended that a battalion of light Tanks under the command of this officer should exploit the initial infantry and heavy Tank attack. He therefore went forward in order to keep in touch with the progress of the battle, and arrived at the front line when the enemy were in process of delivering a local counter-attack.

The infantry battalion had suffered heavy officer casualties, and its flanks were exposed. Realising that there was a danger of the battalion giving way, he at once rode out in front of them under extremely heavy machine-gun and rifle fire and rallied the men. In spite of the fact that the enemy were close upon him he took charge of the situation and detailed non-commissioned officers to replace officer casualties. He then rode up and down in front of them in face of certain death, encouraging the men and calling to them, "Stick it men; show them fight; and for God's sake put up a good fight." He fell riddled by machine-gun bullets.

The magnificent bravery of this very gallant officer at the critical moment inspired the infantry to redoubled efforts, and the hostile attack was defeated.