

CHRISTOPHER COX VC

In the long history of our nation, from time to time apparently ordinary people have achieved quite extraordinary things. Christopher Cox was such a person.

When he was born on Christmas Day 1889, down the road in Waterside, no one could have predicted that now, well over one hundred years later, we would be here in the parish church commemorating his outstanding bravery. There was nothing auspicious about his birth or background to suggest he was destined to be honoured with the highest award for gallantry.

Christopher was very much a local man. As a boy, he attended the old village school just behind the church. His father had died just after he was born, and without the wages that in those days only a man could earn his family lived quite a frugal existence. Once he was old enough, Christopher went to work on one of the farms in the village. After marrying in October 1912 he moved – temporarily – just up the road to Chipperfield where his first child was born in July 1913.

The following year, the assassination of a member of the Austrian imperial family set in train the events that led to the outbreak of the Great War which quickly drew in the United Kingdom on the side of its ally, France. Many of the men who served in the War were called up. But Christopher Cox volunteered – at an early stage, just after the outbreak of war, in response to Lord Kitchener's appeal. He became one of the first soldiers to serve in the 7th Battalion of the Bedfordshire Regiment when it was formed in September 1914. His military training took him far away from his familiar Hertfordshire country, first to Aldershot, then to Surrey, and – via Colchester – to training for trench warfare on Salisbury Plain. In 1915, the 7th Battalion embarked for France and so Christopher left England for the first time.

It was once he was over in France that Christopher volunteered for special duty as a stretcher bearer. This work was no soft option – quite the contrary. First, a stretcher bearer was responsible for dealing with all the sick and wounded in the trenches. More vitally – and much more terrifying – stretcher bearers would go over the top and into battle with their fellow infantrymen in order to assist the wounded on the battlefield and, where possible, to evacuate them. But stretcher bearers did not even have a rifle to defend themselves: only their basic medical supplies for the treatment of other men.

After experiencing the extreme unpleasantness of trench life – which we can barely imagine – Christopher saw his first action on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916. With the other men, he went over the top to face enemy fire. As is well-known, the bloodshed and loss of life was great and Christopher had a immense amount to do in tending the wounded and dying. While carrying out his duties, he was shot in the leg by a German sniper which meant his being sent away from the frontline for a couple of months for hospital treatment. But in September he was back again with his Battalion and took part in the battle of Thiepval where he was hugely in demand. From the 7th Battalion of the Bedfordshires, 60 men were killed or missing and over 160 were wounded.

Christopher, in the light of his experiences in 1916, knew only too well the horror of the battlefield. He had seen at the closest possible quarters wounded and dying men, and had been wounded himself. And then he had received the devastating news that his own brother, James, had died of wounds. He knew the immense risks of exposure to machine gun fire and the pain and misery that being wounded in action could bring. It is all the more remarkable, then, that in March 1917, during the advance to Bihucourt, Christopher risked all in order to save his fellow soldiers.

In order to advance to Bihucourt, the British forces had to overcome German resistance in the villages of Achiet le Petit and Achiet le

Grand. This meant advancing against German positions and the onslaught of exceptionally heavy fire of all types: heavy shells, machine gun fire and snipers. Men from the 7th Bedfordshires fell in numbers before the Germans were finally forced to abandon their positions and retreat. And in the face of constant fire Christopher Cox not only did his duty: he exceeded it beyond measure. Reports from officers and NCOs show that he carried wounded men from the field on his back under constant machine gun fire. On occasion, machine gun rounds hit the men he was carrying, but this did not stop him. Nor did his being individually targeted by German snipers as he went to the aid of his fellows. And heedless of ongoing shellfire, he went from shell hole to shell hole to find the wounded and give them aid. Even when shrapnel became imbedded in his leg he did not stop.

It was for this outstanding – exemplary – courage, putting the life and safety of his fellow men far above his own, that he was recommended for the highest award. His Victoria Cross was announced in the London Gazette on 11 May 1917. In the usual manner of such announcements, the language is spare and the account unembellished, but the citation puts the extraordinary nature of what Christopher Cox did beyond all doubt:

Pte Christopher Cox, Bedf. R.

For most conspicuous bravery and continuous devotion to duty when acting as a stretcher bearer.

During the attack of his battalion the front wave was shocked by the severity of the enemy artillery and machine gun fire, and the whole line had to take cover in shell holes to avoid annihilation.

Pt. Cox, utterly regardless of personal safety, went out over fire-swept ground, and single-handed rescued four men.

Having collected the wounded of his own battalion, he then assisted to bring in the wounded of an adjoining battalion. On the two subsequent days he carried out similar rescue work with the same disregard of his own safety.

He has on all occasions displayed the same high example of unselfishness and valour.

Christopher Cox, a man from an apparently ordinary background and way of life, achieved something quite extraordinary. And it is right therefore that today – ninety years later – we come here to his own parish church to remember him and to give thanks to God for his selflessness, his great courage and his concern and action for his fellow men.

Alex McGregor, September 2007.