

Biog 3 William Angus, VC

Morag Cross 21 December 2013

***3.1

'Corporal [William] Angus, VC, of the 8th Highland Light Infantry, [was] the first Scottish Territorial soldier to win the coveted Cross' during the First World War. Although he was one of three men (T Caldwell, and D Cameron, WWII, being the others), from Carluke in Lanarkshire to achieve the supreme award for gallantry, he also had strong ties with Glasgow. Before the war, he had worn the strip of the city's famous Celtic Football Club. [Source: *The Scotsman*, 6 Sept 1915, p5].

***3.2

William Angus (1888-1959) was one of nine children born into a Carluke coal miner's family, and was himself following that trade in the 1911 census. He was a semi-professional football player before the war interrupted his career. As a player with Carluke Rovers in 1911, he was signed by Glasgow's Celtic Football Club for the seasons 1912-13, and 1913-14, playing for their second team, for instance in a benefit match against a Dunbartonshire 'select XI' at Dalumuir in May 1912. 'For two years he was signed on by Glasgow Celtic; later he assisted Vale of Leven Club in the Dunbartonshire Cup Games, and when he enlisted ... he was captain of Wishaw Thistle'. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 21 June 1915, p11; Census 1911, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *William Angus VC*, Jim McNulty, Online Resource, at www.forvalour.com; 'Angus, William (1912-1914) VC' at <http://celticgraves.com>; 'Angus, Willie', at www.thecelticwiki.com; 'A Day of Remembrance', at www.celticfc.net].

***3.3

On 9 September 1914, Angus enlisted at Lanark with the 8th Battalion, The Highland Light Infantry, a **Territorial Force (voluntary part-time) battalion** with a drill hall in Carluke. He completed his training in Dunoon, and his HLI company was attached to the 8th Battalion, The Royal Scots, which ensured that he saw action almost immediately. He landed in France in February 1915, and was briefly hospitalised in Wimereux and Rouen by a gunshot wound to his right leg in May, before rejoining his unit. [Sources: Army Forms E501, B103, W3040, Military History Sheet, William Angus, *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, July 1913, p145; Jan 1914, pp30-1; July-Oct 1915, pp102-3; 'The Royal Scots' and 'The Highland Light Infantry', at *The Long Long Trail*, at www.1914-1918.net; *William Angus VC*, by Jim McNulty, Online Resource, at www.forvalour.com; *Glasgow Herald*, 11 Nov 1915, p13].

***3.4

The first intimation the *Glasgow Herald* carried about William Angus's extraordinary actions, was a typically terse 'Biographical Note' on 19 June 1915, concerning an officer wounded in action. 'Lt James Martin, 8th Royal Scots, attached to the 8th HLI, has been seriously wounded in a mine explosion ... [He] is a son of Mr T W Martin, timber merchant, Carluke'. (The battalions should be reversed; Lt Martin was actually in the 8th HLI). [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 19 June 1915, p14].

Angus's great nephew, James McNulty wrote: 'On 12th June 1915, 'D' Company, 8th Royal Scots were in a front line trench [near] Givenchy La Bassé ... the German front line [70 yards away] held ...

strategic ... 'Point 14'. The British had pushed back the German front line on both sides ... but the embankment afforded ... an elevated view ... and had proved insurmountable'. [Source: *William Angus VC*, by Jim McNulty, Online Resource, at www.forvalour.com].

***3.4

The numerous contemporary accounts of what happened next are sufficiently vivid and immediate to tell the incredible story in detail.

A non-commissioned officer (NCO, corporal or sergeant) of the 8th HLI, an eyewitness: '[We] had to attack a portion of the German trenches before dawn ... the bomb-throwers, led by Lt Martin, led the way, followed by 'A' company. The trench was captured but it was found to be mined, so we were ordered to re-occupy our trenches. Our men had scarcely left the German parapet when it went up in the air ... Lieutenant Martin was missing. As it became clearer we saw him lying about 15 yards from the German trenches ... stunned by the explosion. During the next hour or so, all trench and bayonet periscopes were on. Suddenly he was seen to move in our direction. But the Germans had also been watching and opened fire on him, and we ... on them. We thought he was done for, but again he moved, this time in the opposite direction. Then the Germans made a dash for him, but were repulsed by rifle and machine gun fire.' [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 1 July 1915, p8; *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, July-Oct 1915, pp102-3].

The *Glasgow Herald's* earliest detailed account is probably this: 'When day broke [Lt Martin] was observed lying about six yards from the parapet of the German trench. L/Cpl William Angus ... volunteered to go out to try to bring in his officer. The Commanding Officer at first refused to allow him as it seemed a matter of certain death'. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 21 June 1915, p11].

The Scotsman : 'Lt Martin was ... wounded, and feebly moving with his hands the masses of earth which had been thrown on him by the explosion and which had partially covered him.' [*The Scotsman*, 6 Sept 1915, p5].

***3.5

An eyewitness, 'MGO' : 'The Germans heard [Martin's] moans ... for the ugly neck of a periscope with its ghoulish eye reached over their trench and leered at the poor wounded soldier below. Slowly and horribly it turned and swayed ... at us too, and then back to him. Hell itself can produce nothing to match the dreadfulness of that horrid periscope ... smashed by a well-aimed British bullet. In agony, poor Mr Martin appealed to the enemy for a drink of water ... they threw at him an unlighted bomb... in the cruel glare of a cloudless June sky ... to a man 'D' Coy volunteered to rush the German trench ... One was chosen [Angus] '. [Source: *The Scotsman*, 19 June 1915, p9].

The NCO witness: 'What was to be done? The trenches were only 35 yards apart. Angus volunteered to go to the rescue, and his application proved irresistible ... The maxims [machine guns] were put to work and ... delivered murderous fire on the enemy's trench. Then out went Angus ... he got there all right, but the way back was more difficult'. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 1 July 1915, p8; *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, July-Oct 1915, pp102-3].

The London Gazette VC citation: 'L/Cpl Angus had no chance whatsoever in escaping the enemy's fire'. Lt Col W Gemmill, DSO, the officer commanding the 8th Royal Scots, and who himself was killed

in 1918, wrote to Angus's father: 'It seemed so hopeless ... with a rope 50 yards long ... your son crept out. Owing to the clever way he crept ... he got to Martin without being seen ... [Martin] staggered to his feet and, directed by [Angus] made a dash for our line ... [Angus] had at least a dozen bombs thrown at him ... he fell once, but thank God, he managed to get back ... also'. [Source: *London Gazette*, 29 June 1915, p6269; *The Scotsman*, 19 June 1915, p9; *William Angus VC*, by Jim McNulty, Online Resource, at www.forvalour.com; '8th Bn Royal Scots ... Haddington', *Scottish War Memorials Project*, at <http://warmemscot.s4.bizhat.com>].

***3.6

'MGO', the eloquent and poetic eyewitness: 'At 2 o'clock in the afternoon, 'Atkins' [as Angus was disguised in the original, anonymous account] leapt out over our parapet ... Clinging to the ground ... he crawled forward ... in full view of both sides ... Quickly but coolly [he reached Martin] Now or never it must be ... hand in hand ... the strong man guiding the weak ... more bombs and up rises a pillar of smoke ... hiding the whole ... into our view there stagger two poor wounded figures, stumbling, running .. Down they go, then up again ...' [Source: *The Scotsman*, 19 June 1915, p9].

Eyewitness, CSM Smith, 8th HLI: 'It is a miracle [Angus] ever came back, and he went out for one of the best officers who ever wore uniform. I can tell you the company were in a bad state until Mr Martin was got back ... He was so well liked ... a load had been lifted off [our] mind[s] when the word was passed along that he'd been got back alive. But this is a thing one cannot write about, as the pencil fails to express it'. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 16 July 1915, p7].

***3.7

Martin sustained serious wounds, at least forty in number, summarised as 'grenade wound left orbit, leg & arm severe, bomb wounds head, shoulders, foot ... left side of body, right leg, thigh and foot. Eye excised 8 July, HS [Hospital Ship] St David'. While recuperating, and now blind in one eye, Queen Mary sent 'the gift of a garment ... accompanied by a card', and Lt Martin visited him in the military hospital at Chatham. 'His friend and deliverer ... both were overcome with emotion ... neither could utter a word'. [Sources: Army form B103 and Military History Sheet, William Angus, *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *Glasgow Herald*, 23 June 1915, p7].

***3.8

At the tumultuous homecoming ceremony organised by the grateful town of Carluke on 4 September, 1915, Lt Martin thanked his rescuer: 'It was an act of bravery second to none in the annals of the British Army'. Others used similar epithets: 'One of the most brilliant deeds of courage that the world has ever yet seen', ('MGO', the eyewitness), and 'A most gallant Carluke man ... [who] being carefully warned that you were going to certain destruction, rescued ... another most gallant Carluke man' (Lord Newlands, Chairman of the Lanarkshire Territorial Force Association). [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 5 July 1915, p12; 6 Sept 1915, p11; *The Scotsman*, 19 June 1915, p9; 6 Sept 1915, p5].

***3.9

William Angus received numerous testimonials and other marks of high esteem from his fellow citizens, including from William Maley, Secretary of Celtic FC, 'No club ever had a more willing or conscientious player, and one who always showed ... that fine spirit ... we look forward to personally congratulating him'. Indeed, Angus was honoured by the club as a guest at a match in September, 1915. [*Glasgow Herald*, 23 July 1915, p7; 6 Sept 1915, p11; 'Victoria Cross Hero', *Sunday Post*, 26 Sept 1915, and 'Celtic's congratulations to Willie Angus', *The Celtic Wiki*, Online Resource, at www.thecelticwiki.com].

***3.10 and 3.11

In an anti-climactic postscript, with his friend and fellow VC recipient, Thomas Caldwell, Angus emigrated to Australia, intending to stay, in 1927. Journalists interviewed both men passing through London to join their ship: 'Two Scottish VCs emigrate: Australia as a land for heroes. Not doing well enough at Carluke'. Angus explained: 'We believe there are more possibilities for a man rearing a young family in Australia ... I have five children ... I am going out without them to look for a good job. In Carluke I had a business ... as a goods carrier ... but it was not doing well enough'.

***3.12

Although Caldwell remained in Australia, Angus went to Mackay, Queensland, but later returned to Britain. Two of his sons were prisoners of war in Germany, and a third was killed, during the Second World War. [Sources: *Dundee Courier*, 16 Nov 1927, p9; *Aberdeen Journal*, 16 Nov 1927, p2; *Evening Telegraph*, 15 Nov 1927, p5; *Sunday Post*, 27 Feb 1944, p3; 'William Angus VC', Discussion threads, posted 26 April 2009, at *The Great War Forum*, <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com>].

***3.13