

VC Biog 8 Walter Ritchie VC, The Seaforth Highlanders

Morag Cross 9 Feb 2014

*****VC8.1a and VC8.1b; must use VC8.1b as it is the whole point of the story**

For actions on the notoriously bloody first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July, 1916, the *Glasgow Herald* reported: 'Drummer Walter Ritchie, Seaforth Highlanders, has brought fresh honour to his native city of Glasgow by winning the Victoria Cross ... in addition [he] has also won the French Military Cross [Croix de Guerre]'. *The Scotsman* added: 'There is every possibility that the 'Charge' sounded so valorously on the crest of an enemy parapet ... rung out from a German bugle [which] he vowed he would take ... with him everywhere'. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 11 Sept 1916, p6; *The Scotsman*, 11 Sept 1916, p8].

*****VC8.2a and VC8.2b use one or both as required**

Ritchie was born in Hopehill Road, Maryhill, in 1892, one of six children of Helen and Walter Ritchie senior, an ornamental iron-fitter and blacksmith. Ritchie, a member of the local Boy's Brigade, was, like his father, apprenticed to a blacksmith while in his teens. [Sources: Statutory Register of Births, 1911 Census at www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk; 1881, 1891 Census at www.ancestry.co.uk; Personal Information courtesy of The Highlanders' Museum (Queens Own Highlanders Collection), Fort George, Ardersier, at www.thehighlandersmuseum.com].

*****VC8.3a and VC8.3b use both**

He joined the part-time 8th (Territorial) Battalion of The Scottish Rifles as a boy drummer, and 'like many another plucky youngster, 'forgot' his real age', (sixteen years old) when he enlisted in the regular army in August 1908. His parents tried to make him leave The Seaforth Highlanders, but he 'was adamant, "I want to be a soldier."' [Sources: *The Scotsman*, 11 Sept 1916, p8; Personal Information courtesy of The Highlanders' Museum (Queens Own Highlanders Collection), Fort George, Ardersier, at www.thehighlandersmuseum.com].

***** VC8.4a, VC8.4b and VC8.4c**

Ritchie was posted with the 2nd Battalion, The Seaforth Highlanders to Shorncliffe, Kent, and Fort George near Inverness, and at the outbreak of war in 1914, went to France with the Expeditionary Force. The 2nd Battalion saw action at the Battles of the Marne, Aisne, Messines and Armentières, where Ritchie received the head wound that hospitalised him in October. The battalion also observed the famous British-German Christmas truce of 1914, and endured the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. [Sources: Personal Information courtesy of The Highlanders' Museum (Queens Own Highlanders Collection), Fort George, Ardersier, at www.thehighlandersmuseum.com; *Glasgow Herald*, 27 Nov 1916, p6; 'Unit History: The Seaforth Highlanders', *Forces War Records*, at www.forces-war-records.co.uk].

***** VC8.5**

On 1 July 1916, the Seaforths were 'part of a renewed advance against German-held positions north of Beaumont Hamel', but by midday, shortages of munitions forced a disorganised British retreat to a stronghold called 'The Quadrilateral'. Ritchie had been wounded in the knee, but an interviewer

put it, 'he raced through the Germans' deadly [machinegun] fusillade and, mounting the enemy parapet, sounded the charge on his drum [incorrect; he used a bugle] ... exposed [to firing] from all sides'. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 27 Nov 1916, p6; Gerald Gliddon (ed), 2005, *VCs Handbook: The Western Front 1914-1918*, Sutton Publishing, p53; *The Scotsman*, 11 Sept 1916, p8].

*** VC8.6

However, Ritchie's mother suggested he actually played his captured German bugle, which was in fact the case. By his own initiative, Ritchie rallied 'many men ... who, having lost their units, were wavering', although afterwards, he would only say 'I like to forget about these things [on] this side of the Channel'. For his impromptu leadership, spirit and bravery in 'repeatedly carrying messages over [gun-] fire swept ground', he was awarded the Victoria Cross. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 27 Nov 1916, p6; *The Scotsman*, 11 Sept 1916, p8; *London Gazette*, Issue 29740, Supplement to 8 Sept, Published on 9 Sept 1916, p8871].

*** VC8.7

By 1915, Ritchie's father had become the caretaker of the Canal Boatmen's Institute in Port Dundas, Glasgow. This was a social centre for Forth and Clyde Canal workers, designed by architect John Keppie assisted by another of Glasgow's famous sons, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and the Ritchies had a flat within the building. It was here that journalists broke the news of Ritchie's award to his proud parents. [Sources: David Stark, 2004, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh & Co, 1854 to 2004*, Stenlake, p98-9; *The Scotsman*, 11 Sept 1916, p8; Valuation Rolls, Glasgow, 1915, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; Thomas James Ritchie, *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

*** VC8.8

'Like a bombshell', Mrs Helen Ritchie made 'the chance remark that Walter had been court-martialled', for dropping and losing his drum in action, and picking up a rifle, although Mrs Ritchie assured the press that the reprimand was only a formality. 'He later restored the balance by wresting a bugle from a German'. At his homecoming after receiving his VC at Buckingham Palace, in November 1916, he was characteristically reticent about his bravery. Members of the Canal Boatmen's Institute, Port Dundas, however, celebrated by presenting him with a gold watch and £23, a considerable sum, while Port Dundas's Roll of Honour was also unveiled. [Sources: *The Scotsman*, 5 Dec 1916, p6; *Glasgow Herald*, 27 Nov 1916, p6; 4 Dec 1916, p10].

*** VC8.9a and VC8.9b use both

He disregarded regulations, and 'ignore[d] the ruling that musicians should not take their instruments into the trenches ... Later he commented that had things gone the other way, he would have been court-martialled, not decorated'. Ritchie's VC bugle was later presented to The Seaforths, and is now in The Highlanders' Museum (Queens Own Highlanders Collection), Fort George, Ardersier. [Source: 'Round the Salerooms', *Coins, Medals and Currency Weekly*, 12 Sept 1970; Information in 'Biography R43: Corporal Walter Potter Ritchie VC', VC Files, Canon William Lummis Collection, National Army Museum, London].

*** VC8.10a or VC8.10b, and use VC8.10c as well (reverse of card)

Ritchie's two brothers also joined the forces; electrician Thomas J Ritchie served with The Lovat Scouts, attached to various units in Salonika (Greece), and France. When he emigrated and wished to join the Canadian army in 1934, he mentioned Walter's name to help his case. Arthur Ritchie, a skilled metal-turner with five children, spent the war at home working both at G & J Weir's munitions foundry in Cathcart, and in The Royal Garrison Artillery in England. [Sources: Arthur Ritchie, and Thomas James Ritchie, *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *The Scotsman*, 11 Sept 1916, p8].

***** VC8.11a and VC8.11b use both**

Walter Ritchie married local woman Mary McLagan in Cromarty, in 1919, and was posted to The Seaforths' 1st Battalion in Belfast in 1921. He eventually retired, as a Drum Major, in 1929, after which he became a school attendance officer for the Education Department of Glasgow City Council. He rejoined a Territorial unit of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps as a senior non-commissioned officer during the Second World War, and worked in a Glasgow recruiting office. [Sources: Personal Information courtesy of The Highlanders' Museum (Queens Own Highlanders Collection), Fort George, Ardersier, at www.thehighlandersmuseum.com; Statutory Register of Marriages, at www.scotlandspople.gov.uk].

***** VC8.12a and VC8.12b use both**

Walter Ritchie latterly lived in Edinburgh, where he died in 1965, and was cremated at Warriston Crematorium. In 1970, it was reported that medal-dealers Spinks had purchased his Victoria Cross at auction for £1,700, considered a high price at the time, and it was later resold in Australia in 1981. [Sources: *The Times*, 1 Oct 1970, p14; Personal Information courtesy of The Highlanders' Museum (Queens Own Highlanders Collection), Fort George, Ardersier, at www.thehighlandersmuseum.com; Advertisement by John Burrige, Medal Dealer, Claremont, Western Australia, Nov 1981, in 'Biography R43: Corporal Walter Potter Ritchie VC', VC Files, Canon William Lummis Collection, National Army Museum, London].

***** VC8.13**