

VC Biog 11 Young, William

Morag Cross 3 March 2014

***VC11.1

William Young was one of the older recipients of the Victoria Cross, aged forty, and the father of nine young children. His deeds were rendered more poignant as he survived the deed which gained the honour, but died in an English hospital a few months later, as a result of the serious wounds that he had sustained.

***VC11.2

William Henry Young was born in Wyndford Street, Maryhill, in Glasgow, on 15 Jan 1876. His parents, Samuel and Mary Young, were Irish immigrants, and his mother signed his birth certificate with a cross, as she was unable to write her name. They had married in the Catholic Church in Girvan in 1872, and William was the eldest surviving child. Samuel Young was a general labourer, who worked both on the railways and at the docks, and the family moved around where he could find work. [Sources: Statutory Register of Births, Marriages at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; Census 1881, 1891, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

***VC11.3

William Young grew up in Colinton, outside Edinburgh, and in Greenock, before the family moved to Govan, in Glasgow around 1890. William Young had left school by 14, and was working as a railway labourer to help his family, as his father suffered from chronic bronchitis. By 1893, they were living in Dalrymple, Ayrshire, where Samuel Young died aged 47. [Statutory Register of Deaths, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; Census 1881, 1891, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

***VC11.4

William Young had moved to Preston by May 1899, when he joined the 1st Battalion of The East Lancashire Regiment, with which he would be associated for the rest of his life. He was by now aged 23 (not 17, as later newspaper accounts claimed), and served with the East Lancs in South Africa during the Boer War. They fought at Karee Siding, garrisoned Johannesburg, and during 1901, operated in the Southern Transvaal. [Sources: *The XXX*, ('Triple X', Regimental Magazine of the 1st Battalion, The East Lancashire Regiment), Vol 18, No 5, June 1899; Personal Information, Jane Davies, Lancashire Infantry Museum, Fulwood Barracks, Preston, www.lancashireinfantrymuseum.org.uk; ; David Biggins, 'Imperial Units: East Lancashire Regiment', and 'Cheshire Regiment', 2014, *Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 Website*, at www.angloboerwar.com].

***VC11.5

Having completed his service, Young married local woman Mary Ellen Simmon[d]s at Preston in June, 1902. He transferred to the Army Reserves, and returned to his pre-military trade as a manual labourer to support his growing family. He worked at Fulwood Barracks in Preston, the regimental headquarters of the East Lancshires, and also for the Preston Gas Company. Despite his relatively mature age, as a member of the Army Reserve, he was mobilised with his regiment immediately war broke out, and went to France with the 1st Battalion, on 14 September 1914. [Sources: Henry L

Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, p6; Mary Ellen Simmons and William Young, *England & Wales, FreeBMD Marriage Index, 1837-1915 and 1911 Census*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; 'Medal Card: William Young', *National Archives*, Cat No WO 372/22/126737, at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk; *Liverpool Echo*, 1 April 1916, p3; *Manchester Evening News*, 31 March 1916, p4; 'The East Lancashire Regiment', *The Long, Long Trail*, at www.1914-1918.net].

***VC11.6

The Regiment fought at Le Cateau, the Battles of the Marne, Aisne and Messines, and Young was wounded in the thigh at Ypres, in November 1914. He 'was nursed back to health in one of the Bristol [military] hospitals', for nine weeks, before returning to the trenches. The following September, 1915, Young suffered severe damage to his eyes during a gas-attack, and spent another three weeks in hospital. [Sources: Henry L Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, p6; *Western Times*, 3 April 1917, p2; *Liverpool Echo*, 29 Aug 1916, p3].

***VC11.7

By 22 December 1915, Young had transferred to the 8th (Service) Battalion, of The East Lancashire Regiment. This unit had landed in Boulogne in July 1915, so Young would have been one of their more experienced soldiers. Local Preston historian H L Kirby explains: 'Throughout the winter of 1915 ... the 8th Battalion ... occupied the trenches running along the Foncquevillers-Monchy au Bois line [near] Arras ... designated as a 'quiet sector' ... The German lines were about 400 yards away ... activity ... was largely confined to bombing raids .. and artillery exchange'. The weather was typically appalling, with rainstorms, deep mud and waterlogged trenches, all features that have since entered the popular imagination when the war is discussed. Conditions were so poor, that the men were only posted to the trenches for twenty-four hours at a time before being relieved by fresh troops. [Sources: 'The East Lancashire Regiment', *The Long, Long Trail*, at www.1914-1918.net; Henry L Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, pp7-8; Gerald Gliddon (editor), 2005, *VCs Handbook: The Western Front, 1914-1918*, Stroud, p45].

***VC11.8

On 22 December, Young, who had only recently returned to the trenches from hospital, showed the outstanding bravery that earned him the VC, and numerous serious wounds. He was interviewed at No 5 (Castle Street, or Bradninch House) VA Hospital, Exeter. 'There had been fighting and I noticed a sergeant lying wounded ... in front of our trench ... from 150 to 200 yards [away]. I went out to him ... Sergt Walter Allen ... a golf professional ... wounded in the thigh ... I carried him partly on my back ... [and returned] to the trench ... the mud was so deep- nearly to one's knees, and the Germans were sniping all the time'. 'Was it daylight?' 'Oh, yes, in the daytime. I felt the wounds, but none of them knocked me over. Another man {Pte Green} came out and helped me ... I believe he's got the DCM [the second-highest honour]. It was about a mile I walked to the dressing room [field medical station]'. [Sources: *Western Times*, 3 April 1916, p2; *Manchester Evening News*, 31 March 1916, p4; Henry L Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, p9].

***VC11.9

In reality, Young had had both his jaws shattered, and was shot in the right shoulder and chest. The sergeant had told Young to return to safety, but he had refused. The incredulous interviewer in Exeter again: 'But you must have lost a great deal of blood from the jaw?' 'Yes ... But I was a strongish chap ... At the dressing room ... they did seem to think it was impossible I could have walked ... it was really only about half an hour's work, and I don't want a lot said about it'. [Sources: *Western Times*, 3 April 1916, p2; *Liverpool Echo*, 1 April 1916, p3; *Manchester Evening News*, 31 March 1916, p4; *London Gazette*, Issue 29527, *Fourth Supplement* of 28 March, Published 30 March 1916, p3410].

***VC11.10a and VC11.10b use both

Young only discovered he had received the VC during his convalescence at Exeter. When his wife asked 'if he did not think it silly to risk his life ... considering his large family', he was unable to speak due to his fractured jaw. 'He wrote: 'I would do it again'. Young had nine children by this date, 'They run up like steps', he remarked, laughing.' [Sources: *Liverpool Echo*, 1 April 1916, p4; *Western Times*, 3 April 1916, p2; 30 Aug 1916, p2].

***VC11.11

After three months in hospital, during which several operations reduced his disfigurement, Young returned to Preston, although he could still only be fed through a tube. He returned to an ecstatic and official civic reception, met at the specially-decorated railway station by 'a vast display of local patriotism', his regimental band, and Preston dignitaries. His carriage was pulled to the town centre by fellow soldiers, and on 'the Town Hall balcony were seven of his nine children ... the first act of the gallant soldier was to kiss them'. [Sources: Henry L Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, p11; *Evening Telegraph*, 20 April 1916, p3; *Swindon Advertiser*, 28 April 1916, p2].

***VC11.12

As H L Kirby points out, his townsmen failed to appreciate just how severely wounded Young actually was, and he returned to hospital for further operations. A flag day for the support of his family raised the considerable sum of £208, and the total eventually raised was invested on his behalf. In August 1916, a final operation was undertaken on his jaw at Cambridge Military Hospital, in Aldershot, but he died under anaesthetic. [Sources: *Liverpool Echo*, 6 May 1916, p2; *Burnley Express*, 20 May 1916, p4; Henry L Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, pp10, 13; *Exeter Gazette*, 30 Aug 1916, p5; *Western Times*, 30 Aug 1916, p2; *Liverpool Echo*, 29 Aug 1916, p3].

***VC11.13

In a gloomy parallel to his welcome home, Preston now accorded their local hero a full-scale official funeral on 31 August 1916. His body was conveyed on a gun-carriage with a military escort, and the solemn procession made its way from his home in Heysham Street the three miles to the cemetery. The mourners included his family, the mayor, councillors and town clerk of Preston. The East Lancashire Regiment acted as pall-bearers, and provided the firing party at the cemetery, according

him full military honours. [Sources: Henry L Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, pp13-15; *Manchester Evening News*, 31 Aug 1916, p3].

*****VC11.14**

Mrs Mary Ellen Young received her husband's VC from George V at Buckingham Palace on 29 November, 1916. 'Everyone ... was very kind ... His Majesty ... gave her a tight grip of the hand ... and said he was sorry he was not able to bestow the Cross on Private Young himself. 'I sympathise with ... your great sorrow'. Young was the person who gained the VC during the war to both die and be buried in England between 1914 and 1918. His son donated Private William Young, VC's medals to The Queen's Lancashire Regiment in 1985, and it is now on display at the Museum of Lancashire in Preston. [Sources: *Liverpool Echo*, 1 Dec 1916, p5; Henry L Kirby, 1985, *Private William Young VC, One of Preston's Heroes of the Great War*, Blackburn, pp14-15, 17].

*****VC11.15a and b use both**