

**Tribute to Company Sergeant Major Edward Brooks VC
at the unveiling ceremony of an Oxfordshire Blue Plaque
at 16 Windsor Street, Headington on Saturday 29th July 2017**

given by

Brigadier Nigel Mogg DL, Chairman Darell-Brown Robin Trust

Company Sergeant Major Edward Brooks was, by any standards, a quite remarkable man. On behalf of his Regiment – The Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry – I would like to thank Professor Evans and the Members of the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board for their recognition for posterity of his supreme courage just 100 years ago this year in placing a Blue Plaque on his house here at No. 16 Windsor Street.

In winning the Victoria Cross in France, Edward Brooks was one of only two VCs to win the honour for the Regiment in the 1st World War. So you will understand that his actions and bravery at Fayet on 28th April 1917 are held in the highest possible esteem in his Regiment.

Edward (or Ted as he was often known) was born in 1883, the sixth of 13 children, in Oakley, just across the county boundary in Buckinghamshire, a few miles to the north-west of Thame.

His father was a farm labourer at Oakleywood Farm. Edward went to the village school in Oakley, but quickly showed his independence, leaving home at 13. Not for him life on the farm. With agricultural in depression, he went to Reading and got a job with Huntley & Palmers biscuits where his uncle worked.

In 1899 he volunteered for Army service in South Africa in the Boer War, but was rejected as too young. Three years later in 1902, he joined the Grenadier Guards for three years, mostly on ceremonial duties in London. This did not appeal, but it was here that he became a tough, disciplined and resilient soldier - and importantly, a 1st Class Marksman on the rifle and Vickers machine gun.

After leaving the Army, he worked in the building trade for Knowles & Sons (still an Oxford company today).

In 1910 he married Elsie Danbury, a Headington girl. They produced five children. On the outbreak of War in 1914, Edward joined the Territorials in Oxford – the

2nd/4th Battalion Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. A year later, he and Elsie moved into the house here in Windsor Street.

In May 1916, the Battalion was sent to France. Edward's experience, leadership and skill as a crack shot were quickly recognised. By then he was a Sergeant and promoted further early in 1917 to Sergeant Major.

On 28th April 1917, the Battalion went over the top at Fayet in the Somme Sector – it was to be a straight forward and simple raid clearing up some trenches thought recently to have been vacated by the Germans. A new Jaeger Battalion however had moved in. Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, an unknown German machine-gun post opened up at close quarters from the flank. Sgt Maj Brooks quickly saw the danger, which required instant action.

Single-handed, he rushed the enemy machine gun, killing some of the crew and capturing others. Shocked at the audacity of his action, the rest made off and Brooks turned the machine gun on the retreating enemy. In seeing the danger to his own men, and acting decisively with complete disregard for his own safety, he undoubtedly saved very many casualties and ensured the attack was a success.

For his outstanding courage and valour, HM King George V decorated him with the Victoria Cross in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace on Saturday 18th July 1917 – his wife Elsie was there too.

Later that Saturday afternoon, he and Elsie caught the 4.55pm GWR train from Paddington back to Oxford. What happened next, as Edward Brooks himself put it so modestly, was quite overwhelming:

The Headington Silver Band were on the platform to meet the 6.05 arriving at Oxford. As he and Elsie stepped off the train, the Band struck up with “See the conquering Hero comes” – The Mayor and Corporation were on the platform to welcome him home.

The Mayor (the title Lord Mayor was only introduced in 1962) then escorted him and Elsie in an open, horse-drawn carriage provided by the Morrell brewing family, riding through the streets of Oxford, preceded by the Band.

Down the High, across Magdalen Bridge, through St Clements and up Headington Hill – the entire route was lined with people cheering, waving flags and throwing flowers. The carriage made its way to a Reception at Headington Manor – today it is part of the JR site.

The Mayor, Sir Robert Buckell, in his address at the Reception declared:

“I have witnessed many welcomes to the Royal Family, and to great men in Oxford, but never have I ever seen such loyalty and enthusiasm as shown by thousands of Oxford people, who turned out to welcome Sgt Maj Brooks back home today.”

After the War, Edward worked at the Morris Cowley works. He and Elsie continued to live here in 16 Windsor Street until 1930, when they moved to 42 Morrell Avenue. He died in 1944, aged 61 and is buried with his wife Elsie at Rose Hill Cemetery.

I think we can all be greatly humbled by Edward Brooks’ selfless courage and leadership in our Country’s hour of need. His Regiment are immensely proud of him, as are the City of Oxford and the County.

Quite clearly, Edward Brooks’ family are also hugely proud of him, with so many grandchildren and great-grandchildren here for the ceremony. It is entirely appropriate that his grandson, Keith Brooks, has unveiled this Blue Plaque on behalf of the family. Grandfather would have been very proud of you all today!

I will now ask Buglers from 7th Battalion Rifles based in Edward Brooks Barracks, Abingdon to sound Last Post in honour and memory of Company Sergeant Major Edward Brooks Victoria Cross, The Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

We also remember at this time his friends and comrades-in-arms in 2nd/4th Battalion Oxford & Bucks LI who did not return from the trenches in 1917. This will be followed by a short period of silence and then Reveille to end our ceremony.