

BROTHERS IN ARMS

In 1914, four brothers went to fight in the First World War. None came home. Here, on Armistice Day, Michael Ashcroft tells the heartbreaking story of the gallantry and sacrifice of one Scottish family

On a grey March evening nearly 100 years ago, close to a sunken road in the Somme valley, Acting Lieutenant Colonel William Herbert Anderson - or Bertie, as he was affectionately known to his family and friends - led his men the only way he knew how: from the front.

After four days of relentlessly fighting the Germans' so-called Spring Offensive, and weary from the toils of a conflict billed as 'the war to end all wars', Lt Col Anderson steeled himself for a counter-attack, unaware that he was entering the final hour of his life.

At around 5pm on 25 March 1918, at Bois Favières in northern France, the 36-year-old Scottish officer rallied his depleted force from the 12th Battalion, Highland Light Infantry (HLI) in order to drive the enemy from Maricourt Wood and its neighbouring timber yard.

The Germans were initially so surprised by the ferocity of the attack, they fell back some 1,000 yards to a slope that provided protection.

When the advancing British force came to a railway line, they briefly took shelter from the heavy machine-gun fire before pressing forward once more. At around 6pm, as he advanced ahead of his men with his revolver in one hand and his swagger stick in the other, Lt Col Anderson fell to the ground, mortally wounded by enemy fire.

At this moment, William Anderson Snr, a chartered accountant, and his wife Eleanor - always known as Nora - were left childless. Lt Col Anderson was the last of four brothers to die.

Today is Armistice Day and just five months before the centenary of the day Mr and Mrs Anderson lost their eldest son. That day in March is also the centenary of an act of bravery so out-



standing, that Lt Col Anderson was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross (VC), Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious gallantry award for courage in the face of the enemy.

I recently completed the private purchase of Lt Col Anderson's medal group. As the proud custodian of the Anderson VC and, as the centenary of his death neared, I resolved to tell the full story behind what is undoubtedly one of the Great War's most heartbreaking family tragedies.

For the Anderson boys were a real-life, four-strong 'band of brothers' who each gave their life for king, country, comrades and wider freedoms. They were born nearly 15 years apart: William Herbert (Bertie) on 29 December 1881, Alexander Ronald (Ronnie) on 4 February 1884, Charles Hamilton (Charlie) on 15 August 1888, and Edward Kerr (Teddie) on 11 July 1896. A fifth brother, Harry, died a week after being born on 7 March 1887.

The four boys spent their time between two vast houses in Scotland. Their parents owned both a country pile, Strathairly in Upper Largo,

Fife, and a rambling Georgian townhouse in Lansdowne Crescent, a prosperous area of western Glasgow. They holidayed with their family in Sutherland, where they had a boat called *The Gertrude*, and they played golf at Prestwick, South Ayrshire, where two photographs were taken of the boys all together. School was Fettes College in Edinburgh and the Glasgow Academy.

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, Charlie was serving with the HLI in India, but soon he was moved to Port Said, Egypt, and then on to France. 'So glad we are all in this war,' Charlie wrote in a letter home soon after his three brothers

had joined the Armed Forces. Like many young men at the time, their main concern in the late summer of 1914 was that the war would be over before they had a chance to see action. Charlie was gazetted as a second lieutenant in 1908 and as a lieutenant in 1911. By October 1914, two months into the war, all four brothers were serving.

Bertie, the eldest, had already had one military career: he had joined the 1st Lanark Rifle Volunteers on 20 December 1902, nine days before his 21st birthday. Commissioned as a second lieutenant, he served in the Army for nearly eight years before leaving to join his father's accountancy firm of Messrs Kerr, Anderson and Macleod as a partner. In July 1909, he married Gertrude Campbell, and the couple went on to have two sons.

Within little more than a month of the outbreak of the Great War, on 10 September 1914, Bertie was recommissioned as a temporary captain, initially in the 17th Battalion, HLI.

Ronnie, who was farming in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), happened to be home in Scotland

Above: troops in France at the height of the First World War, 1916

when the war broke out and soon enlisted, initially as a rank and file soldier, in Lovat Scouts.

Teddie, who had only turned 18 the month before the outbreak of war, enlisted into the HLI shortly after hostilities began, accepting a commission as a second lieutenant.

Shortly before Christmas 1914, Mr and Mrs Anderson received a telegram saying their third son, Charlie, had gone missing in action on 19 December during fierce fighting on the front line in northern France. It soon became clear the couple had lost one of their four sons, for there was no suggestion he had been taken as a prisoner of war.

Lieutenant Charlie Anderson was 26. His death was confirmed by a short article in *The Times* of 12 August 1915: 'Lt CH Anderson, 1st HLI, who was reported missing on December 19, 1914, is now stated to have been killed in action near Givenchy on that date.' Charlie's status had changed from 'missing in action' to 'killed in action' after a sergeant from his company revealed, in a letter home, he had seen Charlie's body during the retreat from the trenches.

After the war ended, Jean Hamilton, Nora Anderson's cousin, prepared a notebook called 'Easter 1918', which contained her thoughts and memories about the brothers' deaths. Jean Hamilton was the wife of General Sir Ian Hamilton, who was the commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force during the Gallipoli Campaign.

In her tribute to Charlie, she wrote: 'He was recommended by his Colonel for gallantry and daring - loved by all his colleagues for his cheerful helpful nature, and a certain cool, aloof well-balanced judgement. His men would and did follow him everywhere.'

By March 1915, Ronnie had accepted a commission in the HLI as a second lieutenant. Within days, he was on the front line in France.

On 8 October 1915, men from the 1st Battalion, HLI confronted an enemy patrol and, in a firefight, Second Lieutenant Ronnie Anderson was killed, aged 31. The 1st Battalion's war diary reported simply: 'A quiet day. A hostile patrol was located on the front about 11.30pm. Second Lieutenant AR Anderson killed.'

It may have been a 'quiet day' by the standards of the Great War, but it was a tragic one for Mr and Mrs Anderson: they had lost the second of their four sons with the war little more than a year old.

Jean Hamilton's notes reveal: 'Ronnie was the next to go, careless, gay Ron of the golden curls...

'He kept well and cheery, however, and was very popular with the men and made many friends amongst them. His genial sunny nature, and a touch of daredevil recklessness about him, appealed to the men.'

Ronnie had written to his mother from the front, saying: 'If I get killed, don't say: "So like Ron's careless way," and disclosed that one night he had been sitting sadly in the French moonlight

looking towards Béthune and the area where his brother Charlie had disappeared.

Ironically, Jean Hamilton noted that his death did appear to have been the result of his carelessness. 'Ron stopped passing through a trench to speak to two of his men in his kindly way, and did not notice he was standing just where there happened to be a dip in the trench, his friend passed on into the safety but Ron was shot through his handsome head by a sniper and died instantly.'

'Ronnie was buried within a few miles of where his brother had lain down his life, and the shadow of death deepened round Strathairley [sic].'

Meanwhile Teddie, the youngest boy, began to have a fascination with flying. The first powered flight by the Wright brothers had only taken place in December 1903, so at the start of the Great War aircraft were still a dangerous novelty. Having served on the front line with his regiment, Teddie transferred from the HLI to the Royal Flying

Corps (RFC), the forerunner of the RAF.

Teddie had, in fact, survived far longer than the average life expectancy of a pilot in the First World War. Indeed, he seems to have enjoyed flying so much that in September 1917 he applied for a permanent commission so he could stay in the RFC as a career. However, on 15 March 1918 disaster struck when Teddie was carrying out a test flight in a scout aircraft over Winchester, Hampshire. After apparent mechanical trouble, he was forced to make a crash landing. He suffered multiple serious wounds in the accident and died the next day.

The Times made only a brief mention of his death in its News in Brief column under the heading 'Flying Accident': 'An aeroplane crashed at Worthy Down, near Winchester on Saturday. The pilot, Captain EK Anderson, attached to the Royal Flying Corps from the Highland Light Infantry, later died of his wounds.' Teddie was 21.

Mr and Mrs Anderson received letters of comfort from two sources in England. The matron who had cared for Teddie during his final hours wrote telling them: 'I was with your boy nearly all the time and talked to him. In a sense he was conscious, but not entirely so. You see he had morphia to save him from the pain. His mind was full of his work, and I am sure he thought he was in a 'plane... His was a beautiful face, and I am sure he was good and true and knightly.'

Lt Col JA Chamier, of Hursley Camp, Winchester, also wrote to Teddie's parents: 'Your son had served under me for many months before the accident, and I am not saying "the usual thing" when I state that I have never known a more efficient Flight Commander... Apart from his

professional capabilities he was one of the most likeable men I have come in contact with - and I have had many through my hands - for he had a charm of manner which made him liked by all who knew him.'

Jean Hamilton's diary records the tragedy thus: 'And now Teddie has gone too, Teddie the sunshine, "Little Ben" as his brothers called him, and his mother's "Honey Bee" for he was all sweetness to her.'

'Only the eldest is now left. A friend wrote that when B [Bertie] saw his brother's death announced in the papers he shut himself into his room for two hours, but never said a word to anyone, it must have been a terrible blow to him - the home letters telling him of the accident had been delayed.'

'Three have been taken - three as lovely boys as ever delighted a mother's heart have laid in the grave life's glory dead.'

Teddie's funeral took place on 21 March, just as his brother Bertie was poised to become involved



Ronnie had written to his mother: 'If I get killed, don't say: "So like Ron's careless way"'

Corps (RFC), the forerunner of the RAF.

In the spring of 1916, Teddie was serving with the RFC in northern France and, soon afterwards, he flew over enemy infantry while carrying out reconnaissance work during the Battle of the Somme. Indeed on 4 August 1916, he wrote a letter home saying: 'It is most awfully interesting work and I would not have missed it for anything.'

Later, he was moved away from the front line to work as a flying instructor back in Britain. While his principal role was to teach young pilots to fly, he also made some test flights.

By early 1918, what turned out to be the final year of the Great War, Bertie and Teddie, the oldest and youngest of Mr and Mrs Anderson's boys,

Above, from left: Bertie (1881-1918), Ronnie (1884-1915), Charlie (1888-1914) and Teddie Anderson (1896-1918), photographed in the grounds of a Scottish golf club

in some of the heaviest fighting of the war.

Late March 1918, after a winter lull in hostilities, the embattled German army launched its Spring Offensive in an attempt to claw back some lost ground. With Russia out of the war, the Germans also sought to win the conflict before the Americans arrived in real numbers.

The offensive enabled the Germans to push west and, having captured the French towns of Bapaume and Péronne, the enemy was approaching Albert on 25 March, the fifth day of the massive German onslaught.

The British 35th Division was in the line, north of the Somme and west of Péronne, tasked with halting the German advance. The HLI was part of the 35th Division and, as already recounted, Lt Col Anderson was killed in the heat of battle on the evening of 25 March 1918, aged 36.

It meant the Great War had claimed the lives of all four of Mr and Mrs Anderson's courageous sons. Yet the couple had to wait several days before rumours of Bertie's death were confirmed.

On 2 April 1918, Mr Anderson sent a telegram to the War Office: 'Hear report my son Lt Col WH Anderson 12th HLI killed on 25th. Is this true?' The following day came the reply: 'Your wire. No report of any casualty to Lt Col Anderson of HLI received at War Office, Secretary, War Office.'

However, on 5 April, Gertrude Anderson received a telegraph that confirmed her husband's death: 'Deeply regret Lt Col WH Anderson's Highland Light Infantry killed in action March twenty-sixth. The Army Council express their sympathy.' The date of his death was later corrected to 25 March.

Lt Col Anderson, the only one of the four brothers to have married, left a widow and two sons aged six and four. Among his few possessions to have survived is a slim black notebook in which he wrote some favourite quotations and thoughts.

One page read: 'To let the dead bury its dead, to live in the present and for the future, is not only a stern duty but the only recipe for a happy life.'

General Ferdinand Foch, the French military commander, later singled out Lt Col Anderson for praise when he addressed Scottish troops: 'Your brave colonel was killed in the terrible fighting. Such men can never die. He lives today in your hearts and in the hearts of all men who revere heroism, and his name will prove an inspiration to all who fight the battle of liberty against the Boche.'

In her diary entry dated 'Saturday after Easter', Jean Hamilton wrote: 'We have travelled far along the road of sorrow these last few days. I thought the end of that road was in sight for the desolate father and mother when darling Teddie crossed the bar; but no, the road still winds on and on revealing ever wider and deeper suffering.'

'No definite news had reached us of Bertie till today, but terrible rumours of his death have been growing in accuracy during the week and as I sat with his mother today the final blow came. I had been reading letters that had come home from the front mentioning our young hero - describing

him walking calmly from shell-hole to shell-hole under fire, cheering and heartening up his men - surrounded on all sides by Germans - the last seen of him was in a shell-hole firing at point blank range with his revolver at Germans quite near.'

'His Brigade-Major wrote to his own home: "We have come through the hardest fighting ever yet known. The last week has been simply terrible, but we have stopped the Hun all right, though at the cost of some fine fellows. Poor [Bertie] Anderson died magnificently and every one who witnessed his gallant act of self-sacrifice spoke highly of him. He certainly deserves the VC."

Jean Hamilton also wrote: 'All four [brothers] are together again now, as in the old childish days - no gap between this band of glorious brothers - her [Nora's] four young knights, one can almost hear the tread of that goodly band, only a little time to wait till they will greet her in the Courts of Heaven. But here and now I feel so certain her



'The last seen of him was in a shell-hole firing at point blank range with his revolver'

four gay young knights will not desert her, but will be near her to lift her drooping head - to bind up her broken heart - to cheer and protect her till she, too, may be with them again.'

During the war, William Anderson Snr, the boys' father, had been raising funds for the Red Cross, while his wife Nora had assisted with the charity work and helped to arrange the delivery of parcels to soldiers serving on the front line.

The loss felt by the Andersons later, briefly, extended to pride when it was announced in *The London Gazette* of 3 May 1918 that Bertie had been awarded a posthumous VC. His citation began: 'For most conspicuous bravery, determination and gallant leading of his command.'

And the citation ended with the words: 'The counter-attack drove the enemy from his position, but resulted in this very gallant officer losing his life. He died fighting within the enemy's lines,

setting a magnificent example to all who were privileged to serve under him.'

Bertie's widow, Gertie, received his VC from King George V at an investiture in Leeds on 31 May 1918. Mr and Mrs Anderson Snr were, of course, utterly heartbroken to have lost all their children. The body of only one of their sons was ever returned to Scotland.

Charlie was never found and he is one of 13,000 men commemorated at Le Touret Memorial in Pas de Calais. The memorial honours more than 13,400 British soldiers who were killed in this sector of the Western Front from the beginning of October 1914 to the Battle of Loos in late September 1915, and who have no known grave.

A few miles away, Ronnie is buried at the Cabaret-Rouge British Cemetery. This graveyard contains 7,650 burials from the First World War, over half of which remain unidentified.

Bertie's remains lie close to where he was killed, at the Péronne Road Cemetery outside Maricourt. There are 1,348 Great War fatalities commemorated there, including 366 unidentified men.

There is a bronze plaque in the nave at Glasgow Cathedral that was unveiled on 22 January 1920 in a ceremony attended by their parents. It is 'to the memory of four brothers, natives of this city, who died for their country and in the cause of honour and freedom'. Details of the names, dates of birth and dates of death of the four Anderson boys are listed one by one.

William Anderson Snr died in January 1922, aged 70, two years after the plaque was unveiled. Nora died in 1939, aged 79.

Gertie Anderson, who never remarried after Bertie's death, died in 1967, aged 82. Her sons, Allan and Charlie, served during the Second World War and both survived the conflict.

Robin Scott-Elliott, the great-grandson of Lt Col Bertie Anderson, wrote a novel, *The Way Home* was published in 2007 and gave a fictionalised account of the events of a century before.

Scott-Elliott believes William and Nora Anderson never recovered from the loss of their four sons. 'Unsurprisingly, the family's grief impacted on everyone's lives,' he said.

There is a second memorial stone, this one made of granite and some eight feet high, to the four brothers and their parents under a horse-chestnut tree in the cemetery at New Kilpatrick Parish Church, Bearsden, a prosperous town in East Dunbartonshire that is situated some seven miles from Glasgow city centre. It is here, too, that Teddie's remains were laid to rest. He was the only brother, in the words of one family member, who 'made it home' after his death.

Below the names of all the members of the family is an inscription from the Book of Timothy. It reads: 'I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.'

Lord Ashcroft has asked for his fee for this article to be donated to the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association (vcgca.org).

Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II is out now. For more information visit victoriacrossheroes2.com

Above: Lieutenant Colonel Bertie Anderson, the last of the brothers to die in the First World War