

William Barnsley Allen: a medical hero of the Battle of the Somme

On the morning of 1 July 1916, 100 years ago, after 5 days of intense artillery bombardment, the British Fourth Army, under Sir Henry Rawlinson, advanced into what hereafter would be called the first day of the Battle of the Somme. They numbered 519 324 men, supported by two divisions of the Third Army, under General Sir Edward Allenby.

Fatally for the British troops, the artillery had failed to destroy the German deep and heavily reinforced dugouts, or to cut the barbed wire entanglements. This enabled the German machine gunners to emerge largely unscathed from their shelters to man their guns and to mow down the advancing troops. Within the first 60 minutes of the attack, the British sustained some 30 000 casualties, killed and wounded, and that number would be doubled by the end of that fateful day; the heaviest casualties sustained by the British armed forces on any one day before or since. The Battle of the Somme ended on 14 November 1916. During those 140 days the British sustained 400 000 casualties and advanced 6 miles.

In the First World War, battalion medical officers frequently left their regimental aid posts and, together with their stretcher bearers, would go out in close support of their men in no-man's land. There were many acts of amazing courage. Among the most remarkable of these was the bravery of Captain Barnsley Allen. His citation for his award of our highest honour for bravery in action, the Victoria Cross, reads: 'For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty. When gun detachments were unloading high explosive ammunition from wagons, the enemy began to shell the battery position. The first shell fell on one of the limbers and caused several casualties. Captain Allen at once, with utter disregard of danger, ran straight across the open under heavy shell

fire, commenced dressing the wounded and undoubtedly by his promptness saved many of them from bleeding to death. He was himself hit four times by pieces of shell, one of which fractured two of his ribs, but never mentioned this at the time and went on coolly with his work until the last man was dressed and safely removed. He then went over to another battery to attend a wounded officer. It was only when this was done that he returned to his dugout and reported his own injury.'

Remarkably, only 1 month before, during the battle on 26 September, he was awarded the Military Cross during the Somme fighting. His citation reads: 'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He was telephoned for when an artillery man was severely wounded and brought him in over ground that was being heavily shelled at the time. On another occasion, he did similar work under heavy shell fire.'

On 9 January 1918 came the award of a Bar to his Military Cross, again for collecting wounded men under fire although seriously gassed himself. What the citation fails to mention is that, in 1917, Captain Allen had been invalided home, having been blinded and was on leave for 6 months until recovery occurred. He was invalided again after his injuries sustained while gaining his Bar to the Military Cross.

A month before the war ended, Allen gained his last award, the Distinguished Service Order. His citation reads: 'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty... He showed a very high degree of fearless initiative for the arranging of the collection of wounded from ground under continuous hostile shell fire and by his inspiring example, untiring energy and contempt of danger, he was able to move large numbers of helpless wounded from positions of danger before he was himself gassed.'

At the end of the war, during which time he had been wounded or gassed in all seven times, he was posted to India with the rank of major. He was obviously not a fit man and his health was further impaired by both malaria and dysentery. He was sent home and retired from the army in 1923.

Barnsley Allen was born in Scarborough in 1892, the only son of a commercial traveller. He entered the Sheffield Medical School in 1908 and qualified in 1914, having gained the University Gold Medal, a string of other awards and a scholarship. He was appointed house physician at the Royal Hospital, Sheffield, but within 4 days of the declaration of war he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted to France in a field ambulance unit in 1915. On leaving the army, Dr Allen went into general practice in Hounslow, later moving to a practice near Chichester. He had married in 1916 and had a daughter, but the marriage failed and he married again in 1925 and had a son.

As if he had not suffered enough, he fell victim to encephalitis lethargica in the post-war epidemic of this mysterious outbreak. Plagued with suffering from his wounds and insomnia, he was now taking large amounts of alcohol as well as opium and veronal (a barbiturate). In 1932 he was charged with driving under the influence of drink, fined £1 and had his licence suspended for 5 years.

On the morning of 27 August 1933 he was found unconscious in his bed by the housemaid and died later that day; he was 41 years of age.

The deputy coroner of Chichester at the inquest stated that he was given to understand that Major Allen had been in the habit of taking drugs from a bottle without measuring the dose. One could quite imagine how possible it would be for an overdose to be taken in such circumstances. He returned a verdict of 'death from the effects of an overdose of narcotic accidentally taken'.

A glance at Barnsley Allen's photograph in uniform reveals a slim, youthful, intelligent face. A man who, if not caught up in the horrors of war might well, with his student record, have embarked on an academic medical career. Our most decorated military doctor deserves our memory on the centenary of his award of the Victoria Cross in the carnage of the Somme. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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