



WAR ATHLETES

Christopher Warner on sporting figures in conflict.



DONALD BELL

The steady rainfall only exacerbated the misery for 9 Battalion Yorkshire Regiment, better known as the Green Howards. British troops had already suffered staggering losses during the first week of the Battle of the Somme and faced more carnage from relentless German machine gun fire.

Temp 2nd Lt. Donald Bell, relying on adrenaline and instincts, led two men from his company through the mud of no man's land, firing his revolver in one hand and hurling a well-aimed Mills bomb in the other.

In a matter of seconds, he shot the machine gunner dead, de-

stroyed the post, and scattered additional bombs into the dugout, killing more than 50 Germans.

Afterward, Bell downplayed his battlefield heroics in letter to his family back in Harrogate. 'I only chucked one bomb, but it did the trick... my athletics came in handy this trip.'

The Bradford Park Avenue fullback attempted a similar feat just five days later but died from shrapnel wounds. His valour earned him a posthumous Victoria Cross, making him the only professional English football player ever to receive the British Army's highest decoration.

Donald Simpson Bell was born on 3 December 1890 in North Yorkshire to Smith and Annie Bell. One of seven children, Donald (called

FACTFILE

Born: 3 December 1890

Died: 10 July 1916 (aged 25)

Service/branch: British Army/ Yorkshire Regiment

Awards: Victoria Cross (posthumous), 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-20, Victory Medal 1914-19

British and French forces had advanced roughly six miles during the bloody Somme campaign – approximately the same total distance a footballer covers during a 90-minute match.”

'Don' or 'Donnie' throughout his life) attended local schools in Harrogate and excelled academically and on sporting fields year-round.

In 1908, he qualified to attend Westminster College, a teacher college based in London and earned colours in cricket, football, swimming, and rugby. He also captained Westminster's athletics team, starting as its top sprinter on the track.

His prowess in football, however, attracted the most attention and he signed on to play as an amateur for Crystal Palace.

DUTY BOUND

After completing his education, Bell returned to Yorkshire and served as the assistant master at Starbeck County School.

There, he became a popular member of the staff, and in his spare time, laced up for several local amateur football clubs, including Newcastle United, Bishop Auckland, and Mirfield United.

To supplement his teacher's salary, he signed a professional

contract with Second Division Bradford Avenue Park, earning £2/10s a week. He made a total of five first-team appearances at left and right back and helped Bradford gain promotion to the topflight for the 1914-15 season.

But the outbreak of the so-called 'war to end all wars' soon affected the lives of an entire generation – especially sportsmen such as Bell.

The young footballer wrote to the club's board of directors and asked for the immediate release from his contract. 'I have given the subject very serious consideration and have now come to the conclusion that I am duty bound to join the ranks.'

Heeding Lord Kitchener's call to arms, Bell became one of the first professional footballers to enlist in the New Army of volunteers in November 1914 and joined the 9th (Service) Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment.

A few months later, however, a chance meeting with an old school chum would steer Bell's military

career down an unexpected path.

While camped at Belton Park, Grantham, he ran into Archie White, who he knew from Harrogate Grammar School. White, now a junior officer with the Yorkshire Regiment, introduced him to his commanding officer, Lt Colonel EH Chapman.

White later recalled: 'Colonel Chapman took one look at him and so impressed was he that he recommended him for a commission on the spot.'

The story became even more remarkable when the two former classmates were both awarded the Victoria Cross on the same battlefield from the same regiment within a few months of each other.

BELL'S REDOUBT

Bell had hoped to join his friend in the 6th Battalion as they prepared

BELOW Bell in a football kit. He played professionally until the First World War broke out.



for departure to the Dardanelles but was instead assigned to the 9th Battalion after completing his officer training.

He embarked from Folkestone and landed in Boulogne on 27 August 1915. As they moved south, the new arrivals were attached to more seasoned units on the front lines to learn the business of trench warfare. But nothing could have prepared them for the approaching battle at the Somme.

Temp Second Lieutenant Bell took leave in early June 1916 and returned to England, where he married Rhoda Margaret Bonson in her hometown of Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria. He returned to the Western Front shortly afterward, just as British and French troops began mobilizing en masse for the 'big push' towards Amiens.

Following a week-long heavy bombardment intended to soften enemy defences, the Battle of the Somme began on the morning of 1

July. The well-entrenched Germans hardly flinched.

By the end of the fateful first day, nearly 60,000 British soldiers had been wounded or killed. The Yorkshires, initially held in reserve as part of 23 Division, saw action two days later.

On 5 July, near the town of La Boisselle, 9 Battalion attacked a mile-long section known as Horseshoe Trench. Bell's 'A' Company came under intense enfilade fire from a concealed German machine gun post that threatened to annihilate his men.

Acting on his initiative, he crawled through slimy muck down a narrow communications trench supported by Corporal Colwell and Private Batey. The young officer then overcame torrential rain and German bullets to make his charge that earned him the 'Vic'.

The first taste of the Somme also accompanied unimaginable horrors that soon defined the campaign. The deafening roar of guns, decaying dead bodies, slime, rats, lice, and soggy conditions were impossible to ignore — as too was the constant threat of being blown to bits or picked off by a sniper.

For Bell, that moment arrived on 10 July during a bombing raid on the village of Contalmaison. Once again, the footballer from Harrogate led his party in a successful frontal attack but died from shelling in an area that later became known as Bell's Redoubt.

TEACHER FIRST

The shock and grief hit the Battalion hard. The officer's batman, Private John Byers, wrote to Bell's widowed bride: 'The men worshipped him in their simple, wholehearted way... he saved the lot of us... by his heroic act'.

Archie White, who survived the slaughter at Gallipoli and later displayed his conspicuous gallantry in France, added to the praise of his old friend. 'Probably no one else on the front could have done what he did. Laden with steel helmet, haversack, revolver, ammunition, and Mills bombs in pouches, he was yet able to hurl himself at the German trench at such speed that



ABOVE Bell's Redoubt at Contalmaison. The former footballer was killed here on 10 July 1916, just five days after the act of bravery which earned him a posthumous Victoria Cross. (LEFT)



the enemy would hardly believe what they saw.'

King George V presented Rhoda with her husband's Victoria Cross in a private ceremony at Buckingham Palace in late September 1916. The following month, one of the deadliest battles in history finally ended, resulting in a combined total of more than a million casualties.

British and French forces had advanced roughly six miles during the bloody campaign — approximately the same total distance a footballer covers during a 90-minute match.

After the war, military officials reinterred Bell's body from its initial resting place to the Gordon Dump Cemetery at Ovillers-La Boisselle.

In 2000, the Players Football Association (PFA) funded a memorial placed on the site of Bell's Redoubt and later acquired his Victoria Cross and campaign medals at auction for £252,000. The awards and a permanent display now grace the National Football Museum in Manchester.

Elsewhere, a plaque still hangs in the building where Starbeck Primary School previously stood. Carl Watts, Learning Officer at the Green Howards Museum in Richmond, notes the tribute holds special significance.

'Bell saw himself as a teacher first, footballer second,' Watts said. 'His final letter home asks if any scholarships had been awarded to his pupils that year.' •