

**A SCARCE B.E.F. MAY 1940 'BATTLE OF ESCAUT' M.M. GROUP AWARDED TO GUARDSMAN, 2<sup>ND</sup> COLDSTREAM GUARDS FOR HIS GALLANTRY SAVING WOUNDED DURING THE GERMANS ATTEMPTS TO CROSS THE RIVER AT PEQC ON 21/22 MAY 1940. THIS THE FIRST BATTLE IN WHICH THE 2<sup>ND</sup> COLDSTREAM'S TOOK PART DURING THE 2<sup>ND</sup> WAR, HIS AWARD BEING REPORTED IN NEWSPAPERS ON 19 JUNE 1940 AND WAS AMONG THE FIRST AWARDS ANNOUNCED TO THE B.E.F. AFTER THEIR EVACUATION FROM DUNKIRK AND 1 OF JUST 3 M.M.'s 2<sup>ND</sup> COLDSTREAM'S**



MILITARY MEDAL, G.V.I.R. '2655363 GDSMN. R. ABSON, C. GDS.'; 1939-45 STAR; WAR MEDAL 1939-45

M.M. *London Gazette* 22 October 1940. The original recommendation states:

*'During the period 21-22 May 1940, at Pecq on the Scheldt, Guardsman Abson was in charge of the Company's stretcher-bearers. The posts were in a very exposed position. He repeatedly went across the open to attend the wounded under heavy rifle fire. He showed no regard for his personal safety and was a fine example to all ranks.'*

The attack on the Guards positions at Pecq, part of the battle of Escaut was the first battle in which the 2nd Coldstream Guards took part in during the Second War. The battalion itself formed part of the 1st Guards Brigade, along with the 3rd Grenadier Guards and the 2nd Hampshire's, itself part of the B.E.F. On news of the German attack on 10 May 1940, the 2nd Coldstream's marched to Tournai and then on to Brussels. By 13 May they were at Lefdael and started to dig positions but with the German attacks on Dyle on 15 May, the battalion would be pushed back and for the next five days they would



be constantly marching and digging in as they withdrew. On the evening of 20 May the battalion entered Peq on the Escaut river (the French name for the Scheldt river), some of the companies being posted in the town itself, overlooking the river, others digging in positions on the riverbank itself; with a front extending 1,800 yards that they shared with the 1st Grenadiers who were to the right of the Coldstream's. Here the 1st Guards Brigade formed the centre of the BEF's 32 mile defensive line.



COLDSTREAM GUARDS ON THE MARCH 1940

In the early hours of 21 May German mortars and artillery were brought to bear on the Guards positions and the rest of the day was spent in a battle to deny the Germans cross the river. German troops attempted to cross the river in small boats and over blown bridges and exploited a gap between the Grenadiers and No2 Company of the Coldstream's. The Germans were eventually pushed back, Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls of the Grenadiers was later awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry during a counter attack. The following taken from a post on the WW2talk forum:

***"1940 MAY 21 - At 0100 hours Battalion H.Q. moved again to a large Chateau just East of ESTAIMBOURG. There was a river mist in the early morning.***

*At about 0200 hours No. 3 Company was heavily mortared but though a very unpleasant experience, few casualties were sustained. Some movement observed near the bridge.*

*At 0600 hours Mortar and Artillery fire started on the whole of the Battalion Front, and shortly afterwards it was reported that the enemy had crossed the river by No. 1 Company's position. Major W.S. STEWART BROWN was, therefore, sent forward to restore the situation, taking with him the Carrier Platoon under Captain FANE, who was shortly afterwards killed by a shell when making a recce.*

*The situation on the COLDSTREAM Front was soon restored as it was found that only a few GERMANS had managed to get across despite the intensity of the GERMAN covering fire, but a gap had appeared between our right and the GRENADIER GUARDS' Left and other GERMANS were losing no time in exploiting this.*

No. 2 Company formed a defensive flank towards the GRENADIER GUARDS, while Major STARKEY's Company of GRENADIER GUARDS was ordered to counter attack on our Right. In this counter-attack all the Officers were killed, including Captain The Duke of Northumberland under whose command was Lance-Corporal NICHOLLS, to whom was awarded the first V.C. given to the Army in this War.

Until the successful conclusion of these counter attacks the line on our right was withdrawn from the Canal to the PECQ - PONT-A-CHIN Road. Now it was restored to the Canal bank and one Platoon of No. 2 Company under the command of 2/Lieutenant BRITTON took up a position to fill the gap between the GRENADIER GUARDS and ourselves. At about this time Battalion H.Q. received several salvoes of GERMAN medium Artillery which killed C.Q.M.S. BURNETT and several pioneers.

By about 1700 hours No. 1 Company reoccupied their posts on the Canal, some of which had been earlier evacuated. P.S.M. COURT, who had remained at his post regardless of what was happening on his flanks, was found killed.

Our casualties in this encounter were not so heavy as first appeared, numbering about 30 killed and wounded, which included Lieutenant Sir John PIGOTT-BROWN who was evacuated with a scalp wound. Lieutenant C.H. FIELDEN who was commanding No. 1 Company was also ordered back to rest at "B" Echelon with a very badly burned hand.

Lieutenant E.L. GIBBS was transferred from No. 4 Company to command. This day Guardsman SWABEY of No. 4 Company shot 14 GERMANS with his own rifle from the windows of the tannery to the North of PECQ.

**1940 MAY 22** - This day passed peacefully, and orders were received for a further withdrawal. Towards evening the GERMAN pressure increased on No. 1 Company's flank, and towards midnight No.s 1 and 2 Companies were ordered to withdraw from the river line to the line of the main PECQ - TOURNAI road."

Reginald Abson was recommended for his M.M. by Lieutenant-Colonel L. Bootle-Wilbraham, C.O. of the 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards for his gallantry during the battle of 21/22 May, a submission approved by Brigadier Beckwith-Smith of the 1st Guards Brigade. His award was reported in newspapers on 18 and 19 June 1940 with several others to members of other units. This was among the first awards to be announced for action by the BEF in France and several months before it was actually Gazetted. The first announcement for awards appears in newspapers on 12 and 13 June, this consisting of 31 awards, including 8 M.M.'s, the second, on 15 June, consisting 3 RA M.M.'s and the third, including Abson's on 18 and 19 June, which consisted of 16 awards, including 6 M.M.'s. Lieutenant-Colonel L. Bootle-Wilbraham award of the D.S.O. was announced in the latter, he and Abson being the only awards to Coldstream's. Two other M.M.'s were awarded to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coldstream Guards for service with the B.E.F., both also for the attack at Pecq on 21 May, the others to a dispatch rider and a carrier driver.

**D.S.O.:** Lieut.-Col. Lionel Bootle-Wilbraham, M.C., Coldstream Guards, for conspicuous coolness and determination in handling his battalion throughout the withdrawal from the River Dyle to the River Scheldt. On May 21, when his battalion was holding the line of the River Scheldt, the enemy made repeated and determined efforts to turn the flank of the battalion, but Lieut.-Col. Bootle-Wilbraham organized his defences and counter-attacks with such skill that the enemy were thrown back over the river with heavy loss.

**M.M.:** Gdsm. Reginald Abson, Coldstream Guards: During May 21-22, on the Scheldt, Gdsm. Abson was in charge of his company's stretcher-bearers. He repeatedly went across the open to attend to the wounded under heavy rifle fire.

Given the description of Abson's recommendation, it is likely he was one of either 1 or 2 company as these companies were still defending positions on the river line on 22 May.

The 2nd Coldstream's formed part of the rearguard protecting the evacuation from Dunkirk, the main part of the battalion embarking on 2 June.

<https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2020/06/01/coldstream-guards-1940/>



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