

**Private Henry Tandey**  
**30 August 1891 - 20 December 1977**

Henry Tandey was born in Leamington, Warwickshire, on the 30th August 1891, after a difficult childhood, part of which was spent in an orphanage; he became a boiler attendant at a hotel in Leamington before enlisting in the British Army. Tandey enlisted into the Green Howards Regiment on 12 August 1910 and after basic training he was posted to their 2nd Battalion on 23 January 1911. Serving with them in Guernsey and South Africa prior to the outbreak of World War I Tandey took part in the Battle of Ypres in October 1914, and was wounded at the Battle of the Somme on 24 October 1916. On discharge from hospital he was posted to the 3rd Battalion on 5 May 1917, before moving to the 9th Battalion on 11 June 1917. He was wounded a second time on 27 November 1917, during the Battle of Passchendaele.

After his 2nd period in hospital he returned to the 3rd Battalion, on 23 January 1918, before being posted to the 12th Battalion on 15 March 1918, where he remained until the 26 July 1917. On 26 July 1918 Tandey transferred from the Green Howards to the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment. He was posted to their 5th battalion on 27 July 1918. On 28 August 1918, during the 2nd Battle of Cambrai the 5th Battalion was in action to the west of the Canal du Nord. Tandey was in charge of one of several bombing parties on the German trenches. As the forward parties were being held up Tandey took two men and dashed across open ground (No man's land) under fire and bombed a trench. He returned with twenty prisoners. This action led to the capture of the German positions and Tandey was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM); Tandey's citation read:

*34506 Pte. H. Tandey, 5th Bn., W. Rid. R. (T.F.)  
Leamington). He was in charge of a reserve bombing  
party in action, and finding the advance temporarily  
held up, he called on two other men of his party, and  
working across the open in rear of the enemy, he rushed  
a post, returning with twenty prisoners, having killed  
several of the enemy. He was an example of daring  
courage throughout the whole of the operation.*

A short time later, on 12 September the 5th Battalion was involved in an attack at Haverincourt, where Tandey again distinguished himself by rescuing several wounded men under fire the previous day, Tandey again led a bombing party into the German trenches, returning with more prisoners. For this action Tandey was awarded the Military Medal (MM) on 13 March 1919. 16 days later, on 28 September 1918, during a counter-attack following the capture of Marcoing, France, his platoon was stopped by machine-gun fire. Tandey crawled forward, located the gun position and with a Lewis gun team, silenced it.

Reaching the river crossing, he restored the plank bridge under heavy fire, but that evening he and eight comrades were surrounded by an overwhelming number of the enemy the day still not over he successfully led a bayonet charge against outnumbering enemy troops which helped bring hostilities to an end. As the ferocious battle wound down and enemy troops surrendered or retreated, a wounded German soldier limped out of the maelstrom and into Private Tandey's line of fire, the battle weary man never raised his rifle and just stared at Tandey resigned to the inevitable. *"I took aim but couldn't shoot a wounded man," said Tandey, "so I let him go."* The young German soldier nodded in thanks and the two men took diverging paths, that day and in history. Although twice wounded during this action Tandey refused to leave until the fight was won; eventually going into Hospital for the 3rd time on 4 October 1918. An eye witness, Private H Lister, recounted the episode:

*"...On 28th September 1918 during the taking of the crossing over the Canal de St. Quentin at Marcoing I was No.1 of the Lewis gun team of my platoon. I witnessed the whole of the gallantry of Private Tandey throughout the day. Under intensely heavy fire he crawled forward in the village when we were held up by the enemy MG and found where it was, and then led myself and comrades with the gun into a house from where we were able to bring Lewis gun fire on the MG and knock it out of action. Later when we got to the crossings and the bridge was down, Pte Tandey, under the fiercest aimed MG fire went forward and replaced planks over the bad part of the bridge to enable us all to cross without delay. On the same evening when we made another attack we were completely surrounded by Germans, and we thought the position might be lost. Pte Tandey, without hesitation, though he was*

*twice wounded very nastily, took the leading part in our bayonet charge on the enemy, to get clear. Though absolutely faint he refused to leave us until we had completely finished our job, collected our prisoners and restored the line..."*

Soon after rejoining his regiment Tandey found that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross. It was also around this time that Private Tandey became aware that he had been mentioned five times in dispatches. Tandey's actions were recognized and his award of the VC was gazetted on 14th December 1918. The citation read:

*"No. 34506 Pte. Henry Tandey, D.C.M., M.M., 5th Bn., W. Rid. R. (T.F.) (Leamington). For most conspicuous bravery and initiative during the capture of the village and the crossings at Marcoing, and the subsequent counter-attack on September 28th, 1918. When, during the advance on Marcoing, his platoon was held up by machine-gun fire, he at once crawled forward, located the machine gun, and, with a Lewis gun team, knocked it out. On arrival at the crossings he restored the plank bridge under a hail of bullets, thus enabling the first crossing to be made at this vital spot. Later in the evening, during an attack, he, with eight comrades, was surrounded by an overwhelming number of Germans, and though the position was apparently hopeless, he led a bayonet charge through them, fighting so fiercely that 37 of the enemy were driven into the hands of the remainder of his company. Although twice wounded, he refused to leave till the fight was won. "*

In addition to his major awards Tandey had also been Mentioned in Despatches on five occasions. He was personally decorated by King George V at Buckingham Palace on 17 December 1919.

After the Great War he was posted to the 2nd Duke of Wellington Regiment in Gibraltar, Turkey and Egypt on 4th February 1921. He was discharged from the army on 5th January 1926 at the rank of Sergeant,

leaving the highest decorated private soldier in the British Army during the Great War, had he been a member of the officer class there is little doubt a knighthood would also have been one of his rewards. The 35 year old settled in Leamington where he married, settling back into civilian life he spent the next 38 years as Commissionaire, or plant security chief, at the Triumph car company.

In 1938 Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940), Conservative PM from 1937-40, made his gloomy trip to Munich to meet Chancellor Hitler in a last ditched effort to avoid war which resulted in the ill-fated 'Munich Agreement'. During that fateful trip Hitler invited him to his newly completed retreat in Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, a birthday present from Martin Bormann and the Nazi Party. Perched 6017 feet up on Kehlstein Mountain it commanded spectacular views for 200 kilometers in all directions. While there the Prime Minister explored the hill top lair of the Fuehrer and found a reproduction of Matania's famous Marcoing painting depicting allied troops, puzzled by the choice of art Hitler pointed to Tandey and explained, "that man came so near to killing me that I thought I should never see Germany again, providence saved me from such devilishly accurate fire as those English boys were aiming at us".



Hitler seized the moment to have his best wishes and gratitude conveyed to Tandey by the Prime Minister, who promised to phone him on his return to London. It wasn't until that time Tandey knew the man he had in his gun sight 20 years earlier was Adolf Hitler and it came as a great shock, given tensions at the time it wasn't something he felt proud about.

The story first broke in 1940 but no one gave it much thought at the time, however in recent years it has generated greater interest. Some historians are doubtful as it sounds too good to be true, however it has an unmistakable ring of truth to it. No one in their right mind would

make up a story about having spared the life of a tyrant who at that time had just fire bombed Coventry, was Blitzing London and mass murdering people on the continent. Hitler's regiment was in the Marcoing region at the time although his presence cannot be verified, a great deal of German records for the Great War were lost in WWII due to allied bombing of Berlin which resulted in the destruction of a significant amount of the State Archives. So documents showing Adolf Hitler's exact whereabouts on 28 September 1918 are not available, Hitler biographers have differing opinions.

However there is irrefutable evidence that Hitler possessed a copy of the famous Matania painting featuring Tandey as early as 1937, acquiring it from Tandey's old regiment. "Colonel Earle said that he had heard from one Dr. Schwend that Hitler had expressed a wish to have a large photograph of the Matania painting. Obviously one was sent because Captain Weidmann, Hitler's Adjutant, wrote the following to Earle

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*"I beg to acknowledge your friendly gift which has been sent to Berlin through the good offices of Dr. Schwend. The Fuehrer is naturally very interested in things connected with his own war experiences, and he was obviously moved when I showed him the picture and explained the thought which you had in causing it to be sent to him. He has directed me to send you his best thanks for your friendly gift which is so rich in memories."*

The Tandey family were in no doubt of the story's authenticity, they were present when Prime Minister Chamberlain phoned, Tandey's nephew, William Whateley, from Thomaby, calls to mind a mysterious phone call almost 60 years ago, when the storm clouds of war were brewing and Prime Minister Chamberlain was futilely appeasing Herr Hitler. One evening the telephone rang and Henry went off to answer it, when he came back he commented matter-of-factly that it had been Mr Chamberlain. He had just returned from a meeting with Hitler and whilst at Berchtesgaden had noticed the painting by Matania of the 2nd Green Howards at the Menin Cross Roads in 1914. Chamberlain had asked what it was doing there and in reply Hitler had pointed out Tandy in the foreground and commented, "that's the man who nearly shot me"

The reproduction was destroyed or stolen by allied troops who ransacked, looted and badly damaged the Eagles Nest as the war approached its end. British troops were preparing a truck load of

explosives to blow it off the face of the earth when American officers arrived on the scene appalled by the waste of time and munitions, and ordered them back to the real war.

Tandey was haunted the remainder of his life by his good deed, the simple squeeze of a trigger would have spared the world a catastrophe which cost tens of millions of lives. He was living in Coventry when the Luftwaffe destroyed the city in 1940, sheltered in a doorway as the building he was in crumbled and city burned like a scene from Dante's Inferno.

He was also in London during the Blitz and experienced that atrocity first hand, he told a journalist in 1940, "if only I had known what he would turn out to be. When I saw all the people, woman and children he had killed and wounded I was sorry to God I let him go".

When war erupted the 49 year old tried to rejoin his regiment to see to it that, "he didn't escape a second time", but failed the physical due to wounds received at the Battle of the Somme. Nonetheless he did his bit on the home front, volunteering wherever he could be of service but was always haunted by an act of decency to an indecent man. Henry Tandey VC DCM MM died without issue in Coventry in 1977 aged 86, in accordance with his wishes he was cremated and interred at the British Cemetery in Marcoing alongside fallen comrades and close to where he won his Victoria Cross 60 years earlier. His widow sold his medals three years later for a record £27,000 and on Armistice Day 1997 they were presented to his old regiment, the Green Howards, by Sir Ernest Harrison OBE at a special ceremony at the Tower of London and are displayed with great pride at the Green Howards regimental museum.