BY
GARY WHITLEY

Gary was born in 1943 in Worcestershire, and left school at 15 to take up an engineering apprenticeship with a local firm. He married Rosalyn in 1968 and moved to Shropshire in 1982 to take work with the Central Electricity Generating Board. An interest in military history was probably brought on by his grandfather, a regular soldier in the South Staffordshire Regiment. Gary likes researching the person behind medals and other awards and is a member of the Orders & Medal Research Society. He obtained one of the two Tribute Awards (as they are known), the subject of this Special Paper, from a friend and the second from an antiques centre at Shrewsbury.

Boer War Tribute Awards were given by the officers and men of ‘C’ Company (Wellington) 2nd Volunteer Battalion, Kings Shropshire Light Infantry (K.S.L.I.) to comrades on their return from active service in South Africa.

This is the story behind two awards in the form of useful ‘Vesta’ boxes which provided a safe and convenient way to carry matches.

These compact silver artefacts, often made from hallmarked silver or a variety of other metals and named after the Roman goddess of fire and hearth, contained ‘strike anywhere’ safety matches which were lit by dragging the match head across a ribbed surface incorporated into the design, usually on the base of the box.

In early 1900, when the war against the Boers in South Africa was at its lowest ebb, Mafeking, Ladysmith and Kimberley were under seige. Furthermore, the British Army had suffered defeats at Spion Kop, and reinforcements were urgently required.

The War Office took the unusual action of appealing to the Volunteer Force (the Volunteers became the Territorial Army in 1908) for volunteers to serve on active service with the Regular Army in South Africa.

This was quite unheard of as the Volunteer Force had been formed and maintained entirely for Home Defence.

However, the Volunteers responded magnificently to the appeal and, from the length and breadth of the British Isles, men put themselves forward for active service.

Wellington was no exception, and had little difficulty in providing its share of men willing to fight for Queen and Country.

Men volunteered from ‘C’ Company, 2nd Volunteer Battalion Kings Shropshire Light Infantry, who at that time were based at The Armoury and Drill Rooms, Market Hall Buildings, Wellington (see the entry below from Kelly’s Directory of Shropshire, 1900).

They, together with other volunteers from the different companies of both the 1st and 2nd Volunteer Battalions of the K.S.L.I and the 1st Herefordshire Rifle Volunteers (Hereford & Radnor), raised a total of 116 men of all
ranks, commanded by Captain W.H. Trow (who died of enteric fever at Kroonstadt). They were collectively known as the 1st Volunteer Service Company (VSC) K.S.L.I. and sailed for South Africa on the 3rd March 1900 aboard the S.S. Ninevah.

They joined the 2nd Regular Battalion K.S.L.I. at Jacobsrust in the Orange Free State on 2nd May 1900, participating in the march to Pretoria and the advance to Barberton. They received their baptism of fire at Zand River and fought at Vredfort Weg, Rhenoster Spruit, Howling Spruit, Krugersdorp, Olifants Nek and Barberton.

During their tour of duty, they marched over 1,000 miles, sharing fully in all the engagements of the 2nd Battalion K.S.L.I. whom they left en route for home on the 18th October 1900 under the command of Lieutenant B. Head, sailing for the United Kingdom on 9th April 1901 and arriving there on 10th May 1901.

For their services in South Africa each man (or their next-of-kin) was awarded the Queen's South Africa medal; the majority of them received the clasps (bars) Cape Colony, Orange Free State, Johannesburg and South Africa 1901. Many of the recipients were presented with their medals at Shrewsbury on 19th October 1901.

The men of the 1st Volunteer Service Company had originally enlisted for one year’s service and their tour of duty had now come to an end. However the war was far from over and it was again found necessary to appeal to the Volunteer Battalions of Shropshire and Herefordshire for a second contingent of volunteers to serve in South Africa. This was formed at Copthorne Barracks, Shrewsbury in 1901.

The 2nd Volunteer Service Company consisted of 116 men of all ranks commanded by Captain B.W. Treasure. The Company sailed for South Africa in March 1901, arriving there on 29th April 1901.

The Map of Southern Transvaal with some places mentioned in the text.
The 2nd VSC were, like their predecessors the 1st VSC, attached to the 2nd Regular Battalion the K.S.L.I. Their period of active service was spent occupying sections of block-houses, escorting trains and guarding baggage.

They left the 2nd Battalion K.S.L.I. on the 24th April 1902, returning home on 4th June 1902. For their services in South Africa, they qualified for the Queen’s South Africa Medal 1899-1902, the majority of men also receiving the Cape Colony, Orange Free State, South Africa 1901 and South Africa 1902 clasps.

The Volunteers of all counties were welcomed home with great gusto, parties were given in their honour and many towns gave their returning volunteers tribute medals, illuminated addresses, suitably engraved watches, cigarette cases etc. as marks of their appreciation.

The Officers and Men of ‘C’ Company (Wellington) 2nd Volunteer Battalion K.S.L.I. presented their returned Volunteers with an aptly engraved silver Vesta box. The following two are examples.

**PRIVATE J. BRASSINGTON**

The first Tribute Award is hallmarked Chester 1901 and engraved with this inscription:

**C.Co. 2nd V.B. K.S.L.I. PRESENTED BY THE OFFICERS N.C. OFFICERS AND MEN To PRIVATE J. BRASSINGTON on his return from Active Service IN SOUTH AFRICA WITH THE 1st & 2nd Shropshire Volunteer Co June 1902**

I believe Private J. Brassington is unique in that he was the only man to serve in both the 1st and 2nd Volunteer Service Companies K.S.L.I. in South Africa.

On enlistment into the 1st VSC, he gave his age as 24 years five months; he was 5ft 6ins tall, weighed 145lbs, had a chest measurement of 35 inches minimum, 36½ inches maximum. His complexion was fresh, eyes were grey, hair was brown, religion was Church of England and he was a fishmonger by trade.

He was given the rank of private and the regimental number 7355. He gave his next-of-kin as his brother Albert Brassington living at Mill House, Mill Fields, Wellington.
He was probably invalided home early from South Africa but volunteered again on the 7th February 1901, this time to serve in South Africa with the 2nd VSC. and was given the regimental number 7560. He confirmed that he had previously served in South Africa with the 1st VSC.

During this second period, he served in South Africa with the 2nd VSC from 23rd March 1901 to 5th June 1902 and was discharged at home at his own request on 6th June 1902, having served a total of 1 year 120 days with that company.

For his services in South Africa he received the Queen’s South Africa Medal 1899-1902 with clasps bearing the names Cape Colony, Orange Free State, Transvaal, South Africa 1901 and South Africa 1902.

James Brassington’s background
James Brassington was born in Wellington, Shropshire, circa 1876. The 1881 census shows him aged four living with his grandparents Thomas Palmer (aged 42, fishmonger) and wife Ann (41) together with Charles March (19, servant), Thomas Clarke (14, fishmonger’s assistant) and Mary Bowles (14, domestic servant). Their address is given as 32 New Street [now the premises of hairdresser’s Golden Scissors], Wellington.

Thomas Palmer remarried between 1881 and 1891; in the 1891 census he is shown as aged 51, still living at the fish shop in New Street, this time with his 39 year old wife Elizabeth, stepson John Alfred Smith (10, scholar), Lillian

Little is known of Private G. Collis other than his first name was George, that his regimental number with the 1st Volunteer Service Company K.S.L.I. was 7365 and that he received the Queen’s South Africa Medal with four clasps – Cape Colony, Orange Free State, Transvaal and South Africa 1901.

There was a Private (later Sergeant) George Collis who was a regular soldier serving with the K.S.L.I at the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914. He landed in France on 21st December 1914. His regimental number was 7304 and, for his services during the war, was awarded a 1914/15 Star, British War Medal and a Victory Medal. He was discharged to Class Z Reserve on 12th September 1919 but I have no idea if this is the same man.

Elizabeth Smith (stepdaughter, 5, scholar), James Brassington (grandson, 15, fishmonger’s assistant), William Palmer (nephew, 5, fishmonger’s assistant) and Ellen Jones (18, domestic servant).

James’s brother Albert Brassington is also on the 1881 census (aged 6, a scholar). He lived with his other grandparents: Charles Brassington (aged 50, an agricultural engineer – see advert above), his wife Elizabeth (57) and their sons George (20, a carpenter), Thomas (17, an agricultural engine driver) and Samuel (15, labourer in a wire mill). Their address was at Watling Street, Wellington.

The parents of James and Albert were probably James Brassington and Ada Maria Brassington (nee Palmer) who were married in Atcham District in the June quarter of 1874. This James Brassington was born in Wellington in 1856 and died there in 1885.

PRIVATE G. COLLIS
The second Tribute Award is hallmarked Chester 1900:

C.Co. 2nd V.B. K.S.L.I.
PRESENTED BY
THE OFFICERS
N.C. OFFICERS AND MEN
TO PRIVATE G. COLLIS
on his return from Active Service
IN SOUTH AFRICA
WITH THE
First Shropshire Volunteer Co.
MAY 1901

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