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## Sale of Fine Modern & Antique Guns 20th June 2013

Lieutenant-General Sir Adrian de Wiart VC, KBE, CB, CMG, DSO



As our language evolves or is changed, it seems we have a good number of words which are either over or misused. One of those words must surely be 'hero'. Most Oxford English Dictionaries define the word as "A person, typically a man, who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities." The man who commissioned [Lot 1500](#) in this sale however, is thoroughly deserving of the accolade.

Lt.-Gen. Sir Adrian Paul Ghislain Carton de Wiart, V.C., K.B.E., C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. was possessed of all the qualities required by that noun and, as we shall read, was the stuff of legend. His exploits (and injuries) were legion, and his career in the British Army must surely be one

of the most illustrious it has known.

Carton de Wiart was born into the Belgian aristocracy on 5th May 1880, the eldest son of L.C.G. Carton de Wiart and Ernestine Wenzig who, although her name suggests otherwise, was of Irish descent. He lost his mother aged six, and soon after his father moved the family to Cairo where he enjoyed useful connections in government circles. Here his young son learned to speak Arabic before being sent by his new English stepmother in 1891 to The Oratory School; a Catholic public school in Oxfordshire. Following this he went up to Balliol College to read law. However, his determination and mettle came to the surface after only one term when he left Oxford in 1899 and enrolled in the British Army to fight the Boers using a false name, and without the prior knowledge of his father. It wasn't long before "Trooper Carton" saw action and he was invalided home after being shot in the groin and stomach. His actions could no longer be hidden from his father who, reportedly, was furious at him 'dropping out' of university, but agreed that he should stay in the army.

After a period of convalescence he returned to South Africa in 1901 having gained a commission in the Second Imperial Light Horse, and later the same year received a regular commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 4th Dragoon Guards. His qualities were quickly recognised and by 1904 he had been promoted to supernumerary lieutenant and appointed A.D.C. to Sir Henry Hildyard, the Commander-in-Chief. In his memoirs he describes this period leading up to the Great War as his "heyday" and his relatively 'light' duties as A.D.C. enabled him to indulge his love of sport and hunting.

While Europe girded its loins for war, de Wiart was sent to fight the 'Whirling' Dervishes in the Somaliland Campaign, having been seconded to the Camel Corps. It was here in 1914, during an attack against the fort at Shimber Berris, that de Wiart was shot twice; losing an eye and part of an ear. For his actions he was awarded the D.S.O. in May the following year. In February 1915 he went by steamer to France to re-join his regiment on the Western Front where he fought with great vim; providing the perfect example of an officer who would never demand that his men should do something he was not prepared to do himself. This was aptly demonstrated during an attack on German positions at La Boisselle on 2nd and 3rd July 1916, when de Wiart's quick thinking and bravery saw-off the need to retreat. His valour was such that he was awarded the Victoria Cross, the citation reading:

"For most conspicuous bravery, coolness and determination during severe operations of a prolonged nature. It was owing in a great measure to his dauntless courage and inspiring example that a serious reverse was averted. He displayed the utmost energy and courage in forcing our attack home. After three other Battalion Commanders had become casualties, he controlled their commands, and ensured that the ground won was maintained at all costs. He frequently exposed himself in the organisation of positions and of supplies, passing unflinchingly through fire barrage of the most intense nature. His gallantry was inspiring to all."

All this from a man who was no stranger to injury; Carton de Wiart was shot seven times and lost his left hand during the Great War but returned from hospital each time to lead his men with renewed vigour. He had been promoted steadily during his time in France and ended the war with the temporary rank of Brigadier-General. He summed up his position succinctly;

“Frankly I enjoyed the war, and why do people want peace if the war is so much fun”.

His inter-war years were spent mostly in Poland where he inherited command of the British-Polish Military Mission from General Botha. Poland was fighting, in turn, the Bolsheviks, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and the Czechs and was sorely in need of help. The then Prime Minister, Lloyd George, was not overly sympathetic to their plight and he and de Wiart had a difficult relationship. The latter's tales of derring-do were numerous during his time there and included having his train being machine-gunned by Ukrainian troops, acting as a second in a duel involving Baron Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim; later President of Finland, and having his position compromised during a gun-running operation from Budapest using stolen Wagon-Lits (sleepers). Perhaps most notably, and soon after he had been appointed A.D.C. to The King with the rank of brevet colonel, he was acting as an official observer in August 1920 when the Red Army was threatening to engulf Warsaw. His train was attacked by Russian cavalry and he fought them off from a carriage running-board with his revolver, at one stage falling on to the track only to pick himself up and re-board.

The year is now 1939 and as Polish resistance crumbled against the German onslaught, de Wiart took the decision to evacuate his mission together with the Polish government and make for the Romanian border, where that country's leader was an allied supporter. The car convoy was strafed by the Luftwaffe and de Wiart fled Romania under a false passport on the same day that the Prime Minister, Armand Calinescu was assassinated.

He was soon re-called to the army and initially saw action during the early Norwegian campaign when he was tasked with safeguarding the city of Trondheim with the help of the Royal Navy. The mission was not a success and he and the whole force were evacuated to Scapa Flow on 5th May 1940, de Wiart's 60th birthday. After a brief period in Northern Ireland spent bringing the 61st Division up to full strength and ability he was sent (by now as an acting major-general) to Belgrade for talks with the Yugoslav government who were in imminent threat of invasion. However, during the journey his Vickers Wellington lost both engines and was forced to ditch a mile off the Italian controlled coast of Libya. In spite of the legacy of numerous injuries, he swam ashore in the company of the surviving crew but all were captured and sent to Italian P.O.W. camps.

De Wiart was sent to the camp at Castello di Vincigliata where he formed friendships with a number of senior British officers who had fallen victim to Rommel's early successes in North Africa. He made several escape attempts with his comrades and once evaded capture for eight days disguised as an Italian peasant. The scenario is quite remarkable; he had one hand, a patch over an eye, numerous scars and injuries, and spoke not a word of Italian. Not particularly true-to-type of the genre. He didn't spend long back in the camp though. He was taken to Rome in August 1943 for talks with the government who wanted to surrender and throw their lot in with the allies, and they wanted de Wiart to contact Westminster. The talks were arranged and took place in Lisbon under great secrecy. Carton de Wiart was told he must wear civilian clothes but announced that he would only wear properly made gentleman's clothing and not some “bloody gigolo suit”. In his memoirs he describes the resulting suit as the best he'd worn in his life! Once in Lisbon he was released and made his way home to England (he had long been a naturalised British subject), arriving on 28th August 1943.

De Wiart was not a man given to inactivity. This was just as well; within a month of his return he was summoned by Churchill and informed that he was being posted to China as his personal representative. He was promoted to acting lieutenant-general and flew out via India on 18th October. He stopped en-route to attend the Cairo Conference before spending some while in India where he became close with Sir Claude Auchinleck and the wonderfully eccentric Orde Wingate, creator of the 'Chindits'. He arrived at China's wartime capital, Chongqing, in early December and for the next three years was involved in senior diplomatic and reporting duties. He formed a good relationship with China's nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, and once his job in the Far East was done he was offered a position by Chiang. This he declined, but did return to China during the final months of the Pacific war and was then asked to stay on by Clement Attlee, who had come to power in the 1945 General Election.

Carton de Wiart formerly retired in October 1947 holding the honorary rank of lieutenant-general. Three years later at the age of seventy-one he married for the second time (his first wife died in 1951) and settled in County Cork. He was now free to return to his love of sport and was soon amongst the snipe and salmon in the surrounding countryside. By his standards he led a relaxed life in Ireland and died, aged eighty-three, on 5th June 1963. He is buried in Caum Churchyard which backs on to his old house in Killinardish.

Adrian Carton de Wiart was unquestionably a great man and deserves to be remembered as such. Always a military man at heart, he wrote in his memoirs, "Governments may think and say as they like, but force cannot be eliminated, and it is the only real and unanswerable power. We are told that the pen is mightier than the sword, but I know which of these weapons I would choose".

Roland Elworthy