Noel Godfrey Chavasse was born on 9 November 1884 to Reverend Francis (‘Frank’) James Chavasse and his wife, Edith Jane née Maude. He was the younger (by 20 minutes!) of twins, the other being his brother Christopher Maude Chavasse. There was already an older daughter, Dorothea, born in February 1883, and subsequently there were to be other children – Edith Marjorie and her twin sister Mary Laeta, born in 1886 and known as Marjorie and May; Francis Bernard born in December 1889 and known as Bernard; and finally Aidan born in July 1891.

Their father was at this time Rector of St Peter-le-Bailey having been ordained in the Church of England in 1870. So happy and satisfied was Frank Chavasse when appointed Principal of Wycliffe Hall, a residential college for students seeking ordination, that he is known to have turned down several offers of advancement within the Church. He was happy, his wife was happy and his children were more than content with their lot, especially Noel and Christopher who became pupils at Magdalen College School in Oxford. All this was to change however when early in March 1900 Frank was invited to become the second Bishop of Liverpool in succession to Bishop Ryle, who was to retire.
This no doubt represented a daunting challenge and would mean Frank and Edith leaving their beloved Oxford and Wycliffe Hall, but despite their children’s reluctance Frank felt that God had selected him for this mission in a Liverpool which was beset by all the problems which afflicted such a populous seaport. The family accepted this, albeit reluctantly, and moved together to their new home, 19 Abercromby Square, Liverpool, a large house known locally as the “Bishop’s Palace” which was sufficiently spacious to accommodate a tribe of boisterous children, allowed to grow up adventurously but always against the background of their father’s position as Bishop and the piety which this entailed.

All four of his sons attended Liverpool College, an independent Day School describing itself as offering “sound religion and useful learning”, where they settled quickly, although Noel and Christopher are said to have both been “late developers academically”. They did however rule the roost in terms of athletic ability – the twins were later to represent Oxford University and then Great Britain in the 1908 Olympic Games in London! Noel gave up his spare time to assist at an Industrial School in Grafton Street, Liverpool, within walking distance of the family home and Liverpool College but far removed in terms of poverty and deprivation, where he organised sports for the inmates, who were “destitute and abandoned boys”, leading them in bible classes and even accompanying them on their annual camps at Hightown, near Southport. He maintained this interest in his “Grafton Street boys” for the rest of his life, giving up part of his vacations even when he returned to Oxford.

Noel and Christopher Chavasse successfully applied to Trinity College, Oxford, and took their places in October 1904, with Noel opting to read Natural Sciences with the intention of qualifying in medicine. He gained a First in Physiology and continued his studies at Oxford where he was joined by his younger brother, Bernard. Together they joined the University Officer Training Corps in January 1909, with the ready approval of their father who informed them that their brother, Aidan, had joined the newly-formed Cadet Corps at Liverpool College. Noel took to his military training and was quickly promoted but left the UOTC in the summer of 1909 when he returned to Liverpool to concentrate on his studies towards medical qualification.

He passed his final Examination in January 1912 and decided to specialise in orthopaedic surgery, spending most Saturday and Sunday mornings “at the feet” of Robert (later Sir Robert) Jones, known as the “Father of Orthopaedics”. Jones was the nephew of Hugh Owen Thomas, a medically unqualified but highly respected “Anglesey bonesetter”, the inventor of the Thomas Splint which was to prove so beneficial during WW1. In October 1912, Noel was appointed House Surgeon to Mr
Douglas Crawford and took up residence at the Royal Southern Hospital in Liverpool; in October 1913 he took up the same position with Robert Jones himself, settling down to develop his skills as an orthopaedic surgeon.

Despite the demands upon him in his new post, Noel decided to join the Territorial Force, the forerunner of the Territorial Army (TA), and was accepted by the Royal Army Medical Corps and appointed as a junior medical officer to the 10th Battalion, King’s Liverpool Regiment - the Liverpool Scottish. At the end of July 1914, the Liverpool Scottish readied themselves for their annual two week camp in North Lancashire and Chavasse’s career as an orthopaedic surgeon in Liverpool came to an end. Thus begins the short but illustrious military career of one of the bravest officers of the Great War, a career which firmly placed him amongst the most famous of those who served. He was just one of many very brave men but the award of the Victoria Cross on two separate occasions singles him out as somebody extra-special.

**The Soldier**

Noel and his Liverpool Scottish comrades arrived at camp on 2 August 1914; within hours they were ordered back to Liverpool and dispersed to their homes to await further orders. War was declared on 4 August. This was not unexpected and tension and suspension had grown steadily over preceding days, especially within the Territorial and Regular Forces – for many the fateful decision came as a relief. For Noel Chavasse, his brothers and many of their contemporaries the prospect of serving their country was welcome and they readily indicated that they were prepared and wished to serve overseas. When, however, his first posting was to Chester Castle to examine prospective recruits he confided in his mother that he believed that the Battalion’s senior medical officer might accompany the Liverpool Scottish to France and was “terribly afraid lest I be left in England on one of these rotten recruiting jobs”. Days later he wrote to her “If ever I get sent to the Front with a regiment I shall almost shed tears of joy”.

His fears proved to be unfounded. He was sent with the battalion to camp at Edinburgh where he quickly was able to put into practice the training he had undertaken in preparation for war – or more precisely to look after his “Scottish Boys”. His ‘Sick Parades’ were unexpectedly busy – despite his strict attention to sanitation and cleanliness, his

1 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this article are from letters sent and received by members of the Chavasse family who have readily permitted their use in other works including Anne Clayton’s biography of Chavasse (“Chavasse- Double VC”) and in the recently privately published “Chavasse Family History”.
battalion quickly became known as having more sickness reports than any other. Chavasse attributed the abnormal number of colds and minor ailments to the fact that most of the Liverpool Scottish were from a clerical background and unused to the rigours to which they were now subjected. The main task of a Regimental Medical Officer was to safeguard the fitness of his men and Chavasse certainly did his best, including vaccinating them all against typhoid in preparation for service abroad. On Saturday 31 October he concluded a letter to his father with the words “I am going to do my best to be a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ and King George” and on the following morning the Liverpool Scottish set sail for France and Noel’s military career began in earnest.

As a Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) he would not be a combatant, as the perceived role of the RMO during fighting would be to set up a Regimental Aid Post as close to the front line trenches as possible to which his stretcher bearers would bring the wounded to the waiting doctor to receive preliminary treatment and have wounds dressed. The wounded would then walk or be taken further back behind the lines to the Advanced Dressing Station, the Main Dressing Station, a Casualty Clearing Station or eventually to a Base Hospital depending upon the severity of the wounds. In fact, Noel, in a letter to his father on 17 November 1914 wrote:

I am behind at HQ, probably a dugout where I sit and wait for the wounded to be brought to me. I believe that doctors are not allowed in the trenches, so really I shall run very little risk during the war, and I do not intend to run any risk at all unnecessarily, my blood is not heroic.

How ironic in view of what we now know! Was he trying to reassure his parents, especially his mother who now had all four of her sons serving, or did he really believe that this is what lay ahead of him? He wrote again a few days later having been advised by an old Oxford acquaintance that “A doctor must always try and save his skin and only take risks when circumstances demand it”. Despite these assurances, Noel Chavasse was to see more death and suffering than most of his fighting soldiers.

The Liverpool Scottish arrived in the trenches near Kemmel on 27 November and within 24 hours his friend Captain Arthur Twentyman, a fellow former Liverpool College student, was killed by a sniper. Noel Chavasse, with his stretcher bearers was tasked to recover Twentyman’s body, under fire. Twentyman was buried that night and Noel realised that staying behind to wait for the wounded to be brought to him was no guaranteed option. Over the next few months however, the fighting took
on a more settled format; the men spent only a limited period in the trenches, being relieved regularly, and the Doctor (Chavasse) was able to concentrate more on his duties as a doctor treating new phenomena such as Trench Foot and lice, as well as the inevitable wounds by rifle and artillery fire, although he made regular visits to the front line to treat the wounded. The Liverpool Scottish were soon to receive their baptism of fire however and the horrors would deeply affect Chavasse.

In March 1915 the battalion arrived in the Ypres Salient and were soon in the trenches around Hill 60 and St Eloi, witnesses to the German bombardment of Ypres and the fierce fighting in which Noel’s comrades were engaged to defend the Salient. By 5 June 1915, Noel had lost 7 out of his 16 stretcher bearers – 4 killed, 1 wounded, and two suffering from shell shock. He described how one of them was killed by a sniper while chopping some wood to boil water – “one bullet pierced his head and he dropped unconscious. He lived still when we put him on the ambulance but we hear he died on the way to hospital”.

Things were to get worse, for on 16 June 1915 the Liverpool Scottish were given the task of capturing the second line of German trenches at a village called Hooge following up an assault on the front line by the Royal Fusiliers and Northumberland Fusiliers. The first assault was a quick success and the Scottish, with the 1st Lincolnshires, rose and charged but quickly found themselves under fire from their own artillery and were forced to halt to allow their own shelling to creep ahead of them. There followed great confusion, when the Allies third wave raced forward running straight into the rear of the second wave troops! This last charge pushed the Liverpool Scottish and their comrades back into the range of their own artillery who, unable to make out what was happening in the smoke and haze of battle, continued to shell their own men. Although the British succeeded in taking their initial targets, they were unable to hold them and by the end of the day had withdrawn to the German original front line – an illustration of what was to happen subsequently on many occasions when very little was gained at enormous cost.

To his disgust, Chavasse had been ordered to stay some half a mile behind the British “jumping-off” trenches and wait for the wounded to be brought back – “I felt very mad at being shoved back like that, but had to obey orders”. At about 5am he had his first wounded to treat and from then on he and his helpers were fully engaged tending wounded and dying soldiers, many of whom they had to carry to a RAMC advanced dressing station for safety, leaving them there while he went up the trenches “to see how our brave men were getting on”. This inevitably led to him becoming embroiled in a fatiguing struggle to dress the wounds of the less injured and physically take the worse cases to the RAMC
Advanced Dressing Station. He then spent almost 24 hours bringing in wounded colleagues despite heavy shelling and constant machine gun and rifle fire. By the end of those 24 hours, 21 out of 23 officers and 378 of the Liverpool Scottish Battalion’s complement of 619 had been killed, wounded or were missing. It was during this fighting that Chavasse became as close as ever to taking up arms – he was given a spade and told to use it if he had to in order to repel what appeared to be an imminent German counter-attack! In the event this proved unnecessary. Chavasse’s greatest disappointment was to find that the RAMC had not treated and evacuated the wounded he and his stretcher bearers had delivered to the Advanced Dressing Station, something which was to greatly influence his future actions. Following this battle, Noel Chavasse was awarded a Military Cross but the Liverpool Scottish had been almost wiped out in their first major offensive and the next few days were spent burying their dead, including many friends, and tending the wounded.

Noel was now able for a few weeks to attend to the general needs of his men – improving their diets and constructing a “hospital” in the trenches so he could treat the wounded without the delay involved in moving them to the Advanced Dressing Station.

But war was never far away. By September the Liverpool Scottish losses at Hooge had been replaced and the battalion was ready for battle again – an attack on Sanctuary Wood. Although initially to be held in reserve, within the first 24 hours of heavy fighting they were ordered forward to the support line just behind the forward trenches. Although physically exhausted they trudged 3 miles through heavy mud, with Noel Chavasse constantly reminding himself of his own battalion’s experiences at Hooge, especially “the wounded lying strewn along the road and crying to be carried away; their terror of shell, their thirst, and my despair when the RAMC never came”. He and his men toiled throughout the night administering basic dressings and then carrying the wounded to the dressing station along narrow trenches knee-high in mud while fired at by snipers. Noel Chavasse was amongst those “Mentioned in Dispatches” for his efforts at Sanctuary Wood.

It has often been said by those who served with him that Noel Chavasse merited a Victoria Cross on many occasions, including Hooge and Sanctuary Wood, but that most esteemed of military awards was finally awarded to him the following year following the battle of Guillemont when the Allies launched what transpired to be an extremely costly but almost worthless attack on the German positions which began on 30 July 1916. Again the Liverpool Scottish were in reserve but at dawn on 9 August 1916, they attacked the German line – being repelled and regrouping for further valiant but futile attacks on no less than four occasions. Their attacks failed. Seventeen of the battalion’s twenty
officers were killed, missing or wounded; sixty-nine other ranks were killed, twenty-seven missing and 167 wounded – for a second time the Battalion was badly depleted. Chavasse and his stretcher bearers worked like demons, helping their wounded comrades. Not surprisingly, he underplayed his own part writing home to say that “I took up a party of volunteers and we pretty well cleared No Man’s Land…We found and brought in 3 badly wounded men lying only about 25 yards from the Hun line, but 2 have died since I am sorry to say. Then we started off again but this time we ran into the Hun trenches and got bombs thrown at us for our pains.” That night when he undressed, Chavasse found that he had been wounded, shrapnel having pierced his back and he was ordered not to return to the trenches, much to his chagrin, saying that it “cheers the men up if a practical civilian like myself is seen in the trenches” – clear evidence that he saw himself not as a soldier but as a doctor. Chavasse’s modesty was put to the sword by others who had witnessed his exploits that night – Frederick Jackson, an RAMC officer, described how:

That night, Doctor Chavasse went out into No Man’s Land with his devoted stretcher bearers, looking for wounded men and bringing them in. The amazing thing about this rescue exploit was that he carried and used his electric torch as he walked about between the trenches, whistling and calling out to wounded men…Ignoring the snipers’ bullets and any sporadic fusillade, he carried on with his succour throughout the hours of darkness.

In early September, the Battalion was deployed to Delville Wood, hardly worthy of the name as most of the trees had been destroyed during the fighting, but the resting place of the dead and the occasional wounded survivor. Chavasse described how he and a stretcher bearer found a survivor from the Royal Engineers who had sustained a severe wound to his arm – “I found that the arm was all but off and was only a source of danger, so I cut it off with a pair of scissors and did the stump up…by the light of an electric torch”.

On 26 October 1916, the award of a Victoria Cross to Chavasse following Guillemont was announced and the citation, although specific to this award, no doubt reflects many instances of bravery and devotion to duty displayed by “The Doc” both before and subsequent to Guillemont:

During an attack he tended the wounded in the open all day, under heavy fire, frequently in view of the enemy. During the ensuing night he searched for wounded on the ground in front of the enemy’s lines for four hours. Next day he took one stretcher-bearer to the advanced trenches and, under heavy fire, carried an
urgent case for 500 yards into safety, being wounded in the side by a shell splinter during the journey. The same night he took up a party of trusty volunteers, rescued three wounded men from a shell-hole twenty five yards from the enemy’s trench, buried the bodies of two officers, and collected many identity discs, although fired on by bombs and machine guns. Altogether he saved the lives of some twenty badly wounded men, beside the ordinary cases which passed through his hands. His courage and self-sacrifice were beyond praise.

After this well-deserved award, Chavasse turned down an offer to serve in a Base Hospital, safely behind the front line, where he would have had much greater opportunity to practice the surgery and medicine which he had for so long looked forward to – an opportunity to really do something more than the immediate First Aid which now seemed to be all that was expected of him. He explained his decision to his parents in letters sent in June 1917:

It is a great temptation. I could use all I have learnt at orthopaedic surgery and rub up my surgery again under Mr Crawford, so that at the end of the war I shall be a skilled surgeon instead of having to learn it all again…But it is too comfortable. Such jobs are for the older men, young fellows like myself ought to be with the fighting men…I don’t think I could leave the young lads here to fight it out while I luxuriate in a coast town.

Although he realised that the medicine he was able to practice in the trenches was “nil”, he welcomed the possibilities for helping his men afforded by his position as a Regimental Medical Officer and decided that he “had better stay with the lads”.

At about this time, Noel’s twin brother, Christopher, was awarded a Military Cross but sadly their youngest brother, Aidan, a lieutenant with the Liverpool Pals, was wounded and posted as missing, eventually assumed to have been killed, during a trench raid just outside of Hooge. Worse was to come for the Chavasse family for on 20 July 1917, Noel and his beloved Liverpool Scottish marched for the front line at Wieltje. By 24 July they had lost 4 officers and 141 other ranks to enemy artillery fire, including gas shells, before being relieved. On 31 July 1917, the allies attacked the German lines, making rapid progress and driving the Germans backwards. The Liverpool Scottish were at the forefront. As they moved forward, Chavasse took over an abandoned German ‘dug out’, considering it to be an ideal Aid Post, but while standing in the open to show his stretcher bearers the location of the Aid Post he was wounded.
in the head. His wound was dressed at the dressing station further back but he insisted on returning immediately to his Aid Post and throughout that night he and his bearers searched the battlefield for the wounded, taking them to the Aid Post in the most atrocious of weather and constantly being bombarded by enemy artillery. They cleaned and dressed wounds as quickly as possible before sending those who could walk to the Regimental dressing station at Wiertje. On 1 August, Chavasse was again wounded in the head but once more refused to leave his post. In the early hours of 2 August, he was wounded yet again, when a shell found its way into his Aid Post, exploded and killed or badly wounded all its occupants. Chavasse sustained severe abdominal wounds but, unsurprisingly in the light of what we have already learned about him, he crawled outside and staggered back towards Wiertje to seek help for his wounded comrades. He almost fell into a dug out occupied by British soldiers and is said to have examined his own wound while the medical personnel went off to help those he had left behind. Chavasse was taken to a Field Ambulance unit where he was seen by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Martin-Leake, RAMC, at that time the only man ever to have been awarded the Victoria Cross twice, before he was moved to a Casualty Clearing Station at Brandhoek where he was operated upon. Sadly he was never to recover from his wounds and he died on 4 August 1917, exactly three years after the outbreak of the war.

For his valour during the fighting at Wiertje, he was awarded, posthumously, a Bar to his Victoria Cross and became the only man to be awarded the Victoria Cross twice during the same war (a feat which was to be achieved by Charles Upham VC & Bar during World War 2). The official historian for the Liverpool Scottish, Major A. M. McGilchrist, describes, more succinctly than the official citation in the London Gazette, the circumstances in which Chavasse earned this auspicious award:

While carrying a wounded man to his dressing station early on 31 July 1917, (he) was himself severely wounded on the right side of the head. The other officers implored him to go back and have his wound tended to but he refused. The next day he was again hit, this time on the left side of the head. Still he insisted on carrying out his duties...he repeatedly went out with stretcher-bearers to the firing line in search of wounded and to dress those lying out, and he personally assisted in carrying in under heavy fire a number of badly wounded men...Though suffering intense pain he continued for two days to attend to casualties, and during this time had no rest and very little food. At last on the morning of 2 August, as he was dressing a wounded man, a shell pitched right into his dressing
station and he received a terrible wound in the body…and died on 4 August.

The Doctor

As a fully qualified doctor and a burgeoning orthopaedic surgeon it might be thought that Chavasse would have been well prepared for what he was to experience at war especially as he had worked at a busy hospital in the violent slum area of a bustling port. His letters home, however, show how unprepared he was. Never in Liverpool had he encountered Trench Foot caused by standing in cold wet mud and water for hours on end in the trenches; or Trench Fever, caused by the soldier’s pet hatred – lice; or Trench Leg – particularly prevalent amongst the Scottish contingents and caused by wet kilts which froze and severely injured their legs; or Trench Mouth, the result of dental hygiene neglect. He would never have treated anybody suffering the effects of ingesting chlorine or mustard gas. The modern weapons of war at the time brought wounds which had never before been seen. Shrapnel (metal fragments from exploding shells or lead balls deliberately intended to explode above ground level so as to cause most damage to the upper body, especially face and head), usually white hot, was a new phenomenon. Even the wounds caused by rifle bullets were absolutely new to him. In his own words Chavasse said of the early bullet wounds he treated:

the wounds were not the clean punctures I had imagined but, because of the close range, they at first made me think that they had been made by explosive bullets, for instance, with a wound in the fleshy part of the thigh, the entrance wound was neat and punctured but the exit was a gaping hole that I could put my fist into with broken muscles hanging out

– something which nowadays we take for granted but which was new to Chavasse and his colleagues.

The doctor’s problems at the front line were exacerbated firstly by the absence of antibiotics and secondly by the severe constraints caused by the physical conditions which prevailed in No Man’s Land. Water was a particular problem – not just the scarcity of clean water to drink but the fact that the little contaminated water available did not permit the doctor and other medical staff treating the wounded lying in the open to wash their hands in order to treat the wounds. Wounded were covered in mud and the doctors were more often than not as muddied as their patients. Chavasse and his colleagues were fully aware that open wounds
were susceptible to infection and this was especially so when the mud in which men were found and had lain was so badly contaminated by constant fertilisation of what had for many years been farmland, and the filth and decaying flesh which was everywhere. Again, Chavasse wrote home to voice his frustration:

We found one of our men shot through the thigh. By the time I got the muddy clothing off my hands were filthy and I had no water to wash them. All I could do was to pour iodine into the wound, put clean dressings on with some forceps, and give the poor fellow some morphia.

In my opinion, when Chavasse first went over to France he did so believing that his role as a doctor during battle would be exactly as he had promised his parents, i.e. that he would be operating from a position of relative safety. I believe that he changed his attitude and decided to stay with the fighting men to offer whatever succour, however limited, he could when in his opinion they needed him most – immediately they had been wounded. This attitude was reinforced by his experiences at Kemmel and later during the Battle of Hooge. His compassion and strong sense of duty, both as a doctor but also towards his fellow man, dictated that he would risk his life on many occasions to help those less fortunate than himself. There are strong arguments to support the suggestion that his medical ability was largely wasted because he was not in a position to provide proper medical treatment but it was not in his nature, except perhaps fleetingly in his mind, to desert his comrades at their moment of greatest need.

The Man

Noel Chavasse the man was the father of the soldier and the doctor. His compassion shone through from an early age in his involvement with the Grafton Street Industrial School in which he witnessed at first hand the sufferings of those in the greatest need. Even when he left Liverpool for Oxford University, he maintained this involvement whenever he was home on vacation. When he qualified as a doctor and worked in the Royal Southern Hospital in Liverpool he was never far away from his Grafton Street Boys as the hospital was almost in Grafton Street. The hospital was run by a Board of Trustees and it was extremely rare for the poor to be treated there without the recommendation of a Trustee. Chavasse, as a doctor at the hospital, was able to take the occasional patient of his own to the hospital and did so when he came across a young crippled boy crawling across the road. He gave the boy his visiting card
telling him to give it to his mother and ask her to bring him to the hospital to see him. The mother did so and Doctor Chavasse, with the assistance of his mentor, Robert Jones, successfully operated on the boy on no less than nine occasions, after which he was able to serve in the Merchant Navy. Serving with Liverpool Scottish, Chavasse was acutely aware that many of his men were from a similar background to the Grafton Street Boys—many having been born into poverty but by sheer determination or good fortune having obtained employment in respectable, mainly clerical, positions. He was constantly impressed by the spirit and stoicism of his stretcher-bearers and his soldiers in general. In a letter to the Board of the Royal Southern Hospital he wrote:

It is a real pleasure to be able to do anything for our soldiers, and I count myself very fortunate...to serve them out here. Certainly our soldiers do deserve all we can do for them. Every day I admire and love them more for their courage and cheery endurance.

His compassion was accompanied by a fervent sense of duty inspired, it is said, by his reading of a biography of General Charles Gordon, widely known as “Gordon of Khartoum”. As mentioned earlier, his written words to his father when about to leave for France in 1914 were “I am going to do my best to be a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ and King George”. Like many of his comrades, whose parents were brought up in the late Victorian era, Noel Chavasse had a strong sense of loyalty to his earthly King and the British monarchy. Chavasse’s upbringing ensured that he had a keen sense of loyalty to his Heavenly King as well. Add to this his duty as a doctor to his fellow man and we begin to get some idea of why and how he was capable of the acts of valour which he consistently displayed. Chavasse was driven by a determination to do his duty towards mankind as a whole and his Liverpool Scottish friends in particular. This was not confined to his brave deeds—throughout his short military life he constantly sought to find ways to alleviate the suffering and even the boredom of those with whom he served. Behind the lines he introduced makeshift bathing facilities; laundries for the uniforms of those returning from the trenches; provided newspapers and books for his men; procured primus stoves from home to provide hot drinks for the troops; created a Canteen; obtained gramophones and records; and with the help of his sisters at home ensured that his men were regularly supplied with new, dry socks, a major step towards controlling the curse of Trench Foot. He was somehow able to detect when a man was nearing the end of his mental tether—anticipating what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. By reading the symptoms displayed by men whom he knew well, he knew when to take
them from the immediate stress of battle and by using them as helpers was able to allow them to recover. His concern for his men did not end when they died; he reported that:

We bring our dead about 5 miles back behind the firing line now and they are buried by a chaplain. I have a stretcher-bearer who is a carpenter and he makes very good crosses…we are very keen to mark (their graves) as well as possible.

Long before the death of his youngest brother, Aidan, near the Menin Road on 4 July 1917, Chavasse had been acutely aware of the worries and concern the absence, let alone the death, of a son serving abroad, caused mothers and families. He made it his duty to write to as many of the families of men killed and wounded as he possibly could in the hope that his letter might be of some consolation to them.

But perhaps the most important factor in attempting to understand how a man could be so brave, so often and constantly at the risk of losing his life, is his Christian upbringing and his fervent belief in the New Testament. He realised that religion played a most important part in sustaining and succouring his men, many of whom, in his own words, “have at home been religious boys, choir boys and Bible Class boys”. Moreover, he was very often tending young men who were wounded and dying, men who were in dire need of being assured that their Saviour was present to help.

His brother, Christopher, served throughout the war as a chaplain to the Forces and Noel, speaking perhaps with some authority as the son of a Bishop, was often critical of the padres he came across and on occasions held his own church parades for the Liverpool Scottish. He was never very appreciative of the ritual of High Church of England services and sincerely believed that:

Now that everybody is up against elemental things like sudden death as an everyday occurrence of life…we all go back to the simplest beliefs…When they go into danger, our men want a Fatherly God to keep an eye on them, just as when they are hit they all want their mothers and long for home. The two wants seem to be instinctive, and death, God and home all equally real.

It was totally unsurprising that Noel Chavasse died after Holy Communion and that his final words to the nurse who attended him at the end were “Tell (Gladys) that duty called and called me to obey”. (Gladys was his first cousin and his fiancée.)
Noel’s brother, Bernard, in a letter to their father on 7th August 1917, declared that Noel:

never lost his courage during his last hours. This was not the snuffing out of a beloved nonentity but the death of a man of valour who was also a man of God.

In reply his father wrote back:

(Your letter) drew many tears from our eyes, tears of sorrow at the death of such a noble son, tears of thankfulness that he followed his Saviour so closely to his death and literally laid down his life for his men…He was a man of valour because he was a man of God…Continually your dear mother and I thank and glorify God for such a son, for his beautiful life spent in helping others and crowned at last by his noble death.

I leave the final words with Major McGilchrist:

In the manner of his passing he overtopped even his own past record of courage and self-sacrifice…There never was a man who was better loved by officers and men alike; there never was a man who gave himself more unsparingly in the service of others. His bravery…was the bravery that sprang from his determination that nothing should stand in the way of whatever he considered his duty…The award of two Victoria Crosses was the official recognition of his work; the Battalion’s is in the hearts of those who served with him…The Bar to his Victoria Cross was a fit reward only because there is no higher distinction.