

# Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Archer GC, OBE, ERD

Time and again, Acting **Lieutenant (later Lieutenant Colonel) Stuart Archer** showed premeditated courage in defusing enemy bombs during the first year of the Second World War. In the latest of his "Hero of the Month" series, **Lord Ashcroft** salutes a soldier who tackled well over 200 explosive devices, and lived to tell the tale.

**S**TUART "ARCHIE" Archer is the oldest living recipient of the George Cross. All being well, he will celebrate his 100th birthday early next year, almost seventy-five years after taking part in actions for which he was rewarded with Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious decoration for gallantry not in the face of the enemy.

Bertram Stuart Trevelyan Archer was born in Hampstead, north London, on 3 February 1915, during the First World War. He attended Sheringham House School in Hampstead and the then Regent's Street Polytechnic. Aged twenty-one, he qualified at the youngest possible age as an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He pursued a career as an architect all his working life - with the exception of

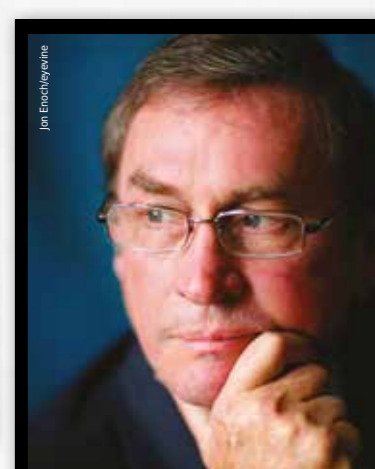


**LEFT:** Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Archer GC, OBE, ERD pictured during a VC & GC Association function. (COURTESY OF TONY GLEDHILL GC)



**ABOVE:** German ground crew pictured with a selection of bombs about to be loaded on to Heinkel He 111s in preparation for another raid on the UK. Both 50kg and 250kg bombs can be seen here - both types that Archer would have dealt with. (WW2IMAGES)

**MAIN PICTURE:** The controlled detonation of a German bomb, which fell on the parade ground at RAF Hemswell, Lincolnshire, on 27 August 1940. The bomb did not explode, but buried itself deep in the ground where it was subsequently destroyed by the Station Armament Officer. The announcement of Acting Lieutenant Archer's award of the George Cross included a description of similar work he had undertaken: "On the 15 July 1940, four 250 kilogram bombs were dropped on St Athan aerodrome, South Wales, two of them within 10 yards of some vitally important assembly sheds. Lieutenant Archer immediately went to the scene and the first bomb was excavated. As its fuse was expected to be booby trapped, it was loaded, with the fuse still in, on to a lorry. Lieutenant Archer himself drove the lorry to a site some two miles away and the bomb was detonated. The other bomb was dealt with in the same way." (WW2IMAGES)



## Lord Ashcroft's "Hero of the Month"

his time in the Army. In 1937, he joined the Honourable Artillery Company, Territorial Army.

In January 1940, the year after getting married, he was commissioned as an officer into the Corps of Royal Engineers and was posted to 553 Field Company. Lieutenant Archer quickly became a veteran bomb disposal expert and, by the end of August 1940, he had already dealt with some 200 bombs.

These incidents included difficult and dangerous work on 27 August 1940, when he had to tackle the first enemy bomb with a new type of delayed-action fuse. At this time, enemy bomb makers had been deliberately tasked with coming up with a fuse that would kill bomb disposal experts - and others >>



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the local bomb disposal section led him to a storage area where some oil tanks were already burning fiercely and others were so hot they seemed as though they were ready to burst into flames at any moment. In a relatively small part of the storage area, there were four unexploded bombs, including one directly under an oil tank.

Archer chose to tackle this bomb first, judging this to be the best way to prevent further fires from breaking out. Although this oil tank was not alight, two others just fifty and eighty yards away were already in flames. These were generating such intense heat that it was feared the tank that Archer was working on might also burst into flames. Indeed temperatures became so high that steel melted and – in the words of the historian John Frayn Turner – “the tanks flared like gigantic Roman candles”.

To add to their already-considerable difficulties, the bomb that Archer and his team were tackling had embedded itself diagonally in the corner of the concrete plinth at the base of the oil tank. With the heat generated from the two nearby burning oil tanks bearing down on them relentlessly, Archer and his men had to work in short, sharp stints before retreating to gather themselves for the next inevitable onslaught. Archer figured out that fifteen-minute shifts were ideal because they reduced the chance of one of his men making a fatal mistake.

After two hours of the most tense and difficult work, and with flames and smoke spiralling hundreds of feet into the sky, one of the three other bombs – the one nearest to the device they were working on – went off. The midday explosion took place 150 yards from

where the men were working, forcing them to throw themselves on the floor in case they were hit by debris, flames or boiling oil. By 14.00 hours, just as Archer and his colleagues were uncovering the bomb casing on their device, another of the two other bombs in their area exploded. Miraculously, yet again the bomb disposal team escaped injury.

The bomb that Archer and his team were tackling was a 250kg device, the casing of which had been split on impact with the ground. This left the main explosive so exposed that it was clearly visible through the crack. The fuse pocket had also been ripped away and there was a tangle of wires visible too. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect was that Archer spent most of the time that he was defusing the bomb, hanging

A member of a US Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit pictured with a defused German 250kg - the damaged casing has revealed some of the explosive content. (US NATIONAL ARCHIVES)



upside down and reaching deep into the device at full stretch.

Initially, he took off the circular base plate. Then he saw that it was powder explosive, which he scooped out of the way. Next, he examined the fuse pocket. As he gripped the exposed wires with pliers, he pulled until the fuse came away. This exposed the clockwork delayed-action apparatus at the rear. Then he unscrewed the gaine mechanism and placed the clockwork components in his pocket.

When he looked again into the tube and shook it gently, another mechanism with another gaine came into view. He realised he was looking at a sophisticated booby trap that had been intended to kill any bomb disposal expert who was seeking to make safe the device. Moments after Archer unscrewed this second gaine there was a crack and a flash – which he realised had been caused by the detonation of a small cap.

The worst of the bomb disposal team's ordeal was over by 14.50 hours. By then, they had been working in the hottest, tensest and most dangerous of circumstances for more than four and a half hours. During the operation, the men must have been aware that they were more likely to die than live, yet at no time did they flinch from their task, or ask to withdraw.

A study of the device by experts at the War Office revealed that the mechanism Archer had discovered was fitted with anti-withdrawal fixture. It worked on the basis that, if the first gaine was removed, the second would detonate, causing death and carnage. Archer had been fortunate in that his bomb, unlike two others that had dropped nearby, was not timed to explode until after

the period when he was handling it. He emerged from the experience with the distinction of being the first man to pull out a fuse from an anti-withdrawal booby trap – and live to tell the tale.

Archer's George Cross was announced on 30 September 1941. The citation praised his “most conspicuous gallantry in carrying out hazardous work in a very brave manner”.

On another occasion during the war, after defusing ten small bombs in Swansea, Archer crashed his car into a lorry because of the black-out and broke his leg. His wife reacted to the news by saying “Thank god for that!”, hoping it would mean his bomb-dangerous disposal work was ended for a time. However, Archer was soon back defusing bombs.

Archer, who rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, survived the war and later became closely involved with

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the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association. He served as chairman of the association from 1994 until 2006. Archer, who retired as an architect from his firm Archer and Son in 1995, represented the association at the funeral of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 2002.

Archer, who has also been awarded the OBE, lives in north London. His wife Katherine, who was known to family and friends as Kit, died nineteen years ago. However, he has three grown-up children, ten grandchildren and eleven great grandchildren. While researching my book *George Cross Heroes* four years ago, I discovered there are some five hours of his tapes at the Imperial War Museum in London in which he talks about bomb disposal work. Furthermore, his daughter, kindly supplied me with two diagrams that her father had drawn more than twenty

years ago to explain the work he carried out near Swansea on 2 September 1940. The first showed a close-up view of the device that he tackled and the initial seven steps that he took to make it safe.

The second diagram is even more revelatory for it shows Archer reaching, upside down and with his sleeves rolled up, deep down into the bomb, which was, in turn, embedded in concrete close to an oil tank. By way of explanation, he wrote two short notes in capital letters. The first note read: “We excavated out to get at the fuse but the fuse top had been broken off by passing through the concrete and I could not get the fuse out from this side.” The second note, which had an arrow pointing at his arm as it extended into the bomb, read: “Could just get at the fuse pocket by reaching inside.”

Archer's daughter was also keen to point out that on numerous occasions her father, after making a bomb as safe

**BELOW LEFT:** On 11 February 1940, as a civilian instructor at RAF Manby, Leonard Henry Harrison was called to use his knowledge and skill when a grain carrier limped into Immingham Dock having been bombed in the North Sea. An unexploded bomb was wedged in the main deck. The bomb had a fuse of a type unknown at that time. With help from a colleague, Flight Lieutenant John Dowland, Harrison managed to defuse the bomb (depicted here). A month later, he was called to defuse another bomb, this time onboard a fishing vessel in the Humber. “For acts of exceptional coolness and courage on several occasions”, Harrison was awarded the George Cross. Like Archer, Harrison was also involved with the VC & GC Association, including a period as Honorary Treasurer. (HMP)

within its range. The arrival of the delayed-action fuse meant that eighty hours were meant to elapse between the bomb being dropped, or found, and the device being tackled – unless there were exceptional circumstances.

The events of 2 September 1940 were, most certainly, exceptional. To start with, they took place after four of the most sustained days of bombing of the entire war. The German bombing of Britain had started in June 1940, shortly after the Dunkirk evacuations. But 29 August marked the start of a sustained period of enemy attacks which resulted in there being 2,500 unexploded bombs waiting to be tackled within forty-eight hours. During this period of heavy bombing, Archer, plus a sergeant from the Royal Engineers and twelve Sappers, was based at Cardiff.

It was around 09.00 hours on 2 September 1940, that Archer was told that a large number of unexploded bombs were hampering attempts by fire-fighters to control a major blaze at the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's refinery at Llandarcy, near Swansea. Already that year, Archer had time and again held his nerve and displayed great courage while dealing with unexploded bombs.

However, the situation he found shortly after arriving at the oil refinery at around 10.00 hours was more hazardous than even he had encountered before. The officer with

**ABOVE:** A Royal Navy Bomb Disposal team pictured having successfully completed a task in London during September 1940. The bomb seen here is a 250kg device, similar to that dealt with by Acting Lieutenant Archer at the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's refinery at Llandarcy on 2 September 1940. (HMP)

**BOTH RIGHT:** The George Cross. The Royal Warrant states: “It is ordained that the Cross shall be awarded only for acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger.” (HMP)



**GEORGE CROSS HEROES**

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story of Archer's life appears in his book *George Cross Heroes*. For more information please visit: [www.georgecrossheroes.com](http://www.georgecrossheroes.com)  
Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum in London. For more information visit: [www.iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes). For details about his VC collection, visit: [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com)  
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