

LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH"
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Jon Enoch/Eyevine



ABOVE: Italian troops, members of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, disposing of an IED which had been planted on a roadside near a Coalition base. (ISAF)



TOP RIGHT: Detectors pictured being used to discover possible hidden IEDs in Afghanistan. (© CROWN/MOD COPYRIGHT, 2014)



ABOVE: Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes, The Royal Logistic Corps, is decorated with the George Cross, by The Queen at Buckingham Palace on Wednesday, 9 June 2010. (JOHNNY GREEN/PA)

LEFT: Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes holds up the George Cross he received. (JOHNNY GREEN/PA)

When Hughes reached the first injured soldier, he discovered another VOIED within a metre of the casualty. This threatened the lives of all the casualties and, of course, Hughes himself. Hughes did not know the power source of the device but he did know the servicemen needed urgent medical help. So he carried out a "manual neutralisation" of the device knowing that any error would be instantly fatal.

He had, in effect, carried out a "Category A" action which should only be attempted in two circumstances: a hostage scenario where explosives have been strapped to an innocent individual and a "mass casualty" scenario where not taking action would be certain to result in further casualties. Both >>>

As part of the preparations for the operation on 16 August 2009, a part of 'A' Company 2 Rifles deployed early to secure an emergency Helicopter Landing Site (HLS) and to isolate enemy compounds to the south of the route. During these preparations, a serviceman initiated a Victim Operated Improvised Explosive Device (VOIED) and was seriously wounded. As the casualty was being recovered, one of the stretcher bearers initiated a second VOIED which resulted in two people being killed outright and four others being very seriously injured (one of whom later died

from his wounds). It became clear that the area was effectively an IED minefield being over-watched by the enemy. Hughes and his team were called to what the Army described as a "harrowing and chaotic situation". Their task was to recover casualties and bodies, and they knew speed was of the essence if further lives were not to be lost. To save time, Hughes did not wait to put on protective clothing. Instead, he immediately set about clearing a path to the injured servicemen, while providing constant reassurance that help was on its way.



MAIN PICTURE: A member of a British Explosive Ordnance Disposal team tentatively brushes away the dust from a suspect object, possibly an Improvised Explosive Device, beneath the surface of a road near Garmsir, Afghanistan. (© CROWN/MOD COPYRIGHT, 2014)

KIM HUGHES was one of two bomb disposal experts, both staff sergeants serving with the Royal Logistic Corps (RLC), to be awarded the George Cross in March 2010 - but there the similarities end. For although Hughes survived an unbelievably demanding tour of duty in Afghanistan, his comrade and friend, Staff Sergeant Olaf "Oz" Schmid, did not: he was tragically killed, aged 30, on 31 October 2009 while dealing with a complex Improvised Explosive Device (IED) left in an alleyway in Sangin, Helmand Province.

Kim Spencer Hughes was born in Munster, Germany, on 12 September 1979. He was the middle of three children and the son of an Army

serviceman who was a staff sergeant in the Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers (REME). As a boy, Hughes was brought up in Weston-Super-Mare, Avon, and later Telford, Shropshire. He attended William Reynolds Junior School and Thomas Telford School for his secondary education, both in the Shropshire town. He left school at sixteen to join the RLC but was initially unsettled in the Army and left after less than a year. However, he quickly decided that "civvy street" was not for him and, after a year doing manual work, rejoined the Army at eighteen - and never looked back.

After working as a RLC driver as a private for three years, he trained to be a driver with a bomb disposal team. However, he then successfully

applied to become an Ammunition Technician, training for three years and being promoted to Lance Corporal. He then served three tours in Northern Ireland, two in Bosnia, one in Iraq and two in Afghanistan.

He went to Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in April 2009 as a staff sergeant working as a high threat Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD) operator. He took part in Operation Panther's Claw and worked closely with the Danish Battle Group. By August, Hughes was working alongside the Royal Engineers Search Team (REST) and was tasked with providing close support to the 2 Rifles Battle Group during an operation to clear a route south west of Sangin.

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ABOVE: A Royal Logistic Corps Explosive Ordnance Disposal team, part of ISAF's forces in Afghanistan, remotely detonate a suspect explosive device using the Wheelbarrow Mk.8b Bomb Disposal Robot. Able to cross almost any terrain at a speed of up to 6mph, the "barrow" can climb stairs and with an all up weight of 300kg, is more than capable of pushing a saloon car with its brakes applied. (© CROWN/MOD COPYRIGHT, 2014)



scenarios place the emphasis on saving other people's lives, if necessary at the expense of the operator. Hughes had, by any standards, been responsible for an exceptional act of gallantry. With shots now keeping the enemy at bay, Hughes calmly turned his attention to the remaining casualties and to retrieving the dead: servicemen will never knowingly leave the bodies of comrades to the Taliban who have been known to carry out unspeakable acts on the corpses of Western service personnel.

As he cleared a path, Hughes discovered two further VOIEDs. Twice more, he carried out highly risky "manual neutralisations". By this selfless action, he enabled all the casualties to be extracted and the bodies recovered. Yet even this was not the end of Hughes's courage.

The REST had detected a further four VOIEDs in the immediate area. Hughes set about disposing of them too - just as he had done to more than eighty similar devices over the previous five months of his tour of duty.

BELOW: The prevalence of IEDs in Afghanistan led to the development of a number of specialist pieces of equipment or vehicles - such as the British Army Trojan armoured engineer vehicle seen here (© CROWN/MOD COPYRIGHT, 2014)



The award of the George Cross was announced on 18 March 2010 - one day ahead of when it was formally published in *The London Gazette* - when the citation ended: "Dealing with any form of IED is dangerous [but] to deal with 7 VOIEDs linked in a single circuit, in a mass casualty scenario, using manual neutralisation techniques once, never mind 3 times, is the single most outstanding act of explosive ordnance ever recorded in Afghanistan. That he did it without the security of specialist clothing serves even more to demonstrate his outstanding gallantry. Hughes is unequivocally deserving of the highest level of public recognition."

After the news of his GC and his courage was made public, Hughes said that the thought of being killed had not entered his head. "You are always thinking one step ahead. Thinking you are going to die doesn't cross your mind. You just crack on and get on with it." Colonel Stuart Archer and Major Peter Norton, both awarded the GC for gallantry, were present as the Ministry of Defence announced the awards for Hughes and a posthumous award for "Oz" Schmid.

Hughes received his decoration from the Queen at an investiture at Buckingham Palace that June. After the ceremony, he said of his GC: "When you do your training, you don't think you'll get recognition like this. We're just out there doing our job: to get this is outstanding. I accept it on behalf of all the other operators in Afghanistan." His mother, Frances, brother, Sergeant Lee Hughes, and sister in law, Emma Hughes, joined him at the investiture.

In an interview at the Marlborough Barracks in Warwickshire, for my book *George Cross Heroes*, Hughes disclosed to me that on his previous day "on the ground" - three weeks before the incident for which he was primarily awarded the GC - he had been injured in an explosion working with the Danish Battle Group. A VOIED initiated directly under Hughes as he sat in an armoured personnel carrier. He was knocked unconscious, injured his leg, had a perforated ear drum and suffered concussion, the latter resulting in a period of rest and recuperation being brought forward after he was evacuated in a US Black Hawk (call sign *Pedro*) helicopter to Camp Bastion.

His first day back "on the ground" was when his eleven-man team came across the terrible scenes of dead and injured servicemen on 16 August 2009 near Sangin. "We had gone out on patrol from FOB [Forward Operating Base] Jackson with 2 Rifles. It was just before first light and we had been briefed that we had to clear a route. Guys were patrolling forward when the first explosion took place. We were about 100 metres back at the time. My search team then got a request to clear a HLS [Helicopter Landing Site] but once they had done that a second explosion took place within five to ten minutes. We heard there were



ABOVE: Troops of 2nd Battalion The Rifles come to a halt after a suspected IED is detected during a patrol near Patrol Base Wishton in Sangin, Afghanistan. (© CROWN/MOD COPYRIGHT, 2014)

situation - a grave and immediate threat to life - you just have to get on with it. There wasn't the time to get a bomb suit on or send a robot down the road. The priority was to get the casualties out.

"I was faced with a device and I had to make an assessment of how it worked. With our metal detection equipment and a little bit of fingertip searching, I was able to uncover parts of the device to see the key components and then make the assessment.

"I tackled them one by one: each had a main charge of about twenty kilos. I made each one safe with a set of 'snips' [wire cutters]. To be brutally honest, if I had got something wrong I wouldn't have known about it, which in a sick sort of way is the beauty of it. The search team then found another two devices and I found another two, so I dealt with seven in all. I only had to spend a couple of minutes or so on each one. The whole task was completed in about forty-five minutes. Eventually, we learnt that all seven devices were linked to one circuit, which we hadn't seen before."

Hughes said that the Taliban tactic of using IEDs was hard to combat. "We are fighting

an enemy we can't see. When we move on from an area, they move back in and place IEDs but that is the nature of the beast over there. The part that keeps me going is that I am achieving something by helping the Battle Group and the troops out on the ground. To see the faces of the troops when you rock up is great - it's like the cavalry has arrived. They are very appreciative of what we do. But there are down days too - notably when we lost four of our [bomb disposal] guys in fifteen months. We are all very, very close and so it's hard to lose mates - people who feel like family. It's horrendous really."

Hughes, who has since been promoted to Warrant Officer Class 1, is now 34 years old and is still serving in the Army. He is currently about to end a second tour of Afghanistan where, in his role as Senior Ammunition Technician (SAT) for Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and Search, he is responsible for training both UK and international high threat Improvised Explosive Device Disposal Teams. (©)

GEORGE CROSS HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story of Hughes' life appears



in his book *George Cross Heroes*. For more information visit: www.georgecrossheroes.com

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at IWM, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

casualties and we got called forward.

"As soon as we got there, I went forward with two [IED] searchers leaving the rest of the team behind. I just had my body armour and helmet on. Straight away I could see a fallen soldier who was dead. Then I could see the carnage - bodies and soldiers all over the place and a young female medic was screaming. The two searchers then started finding the devices [unexploded IEDs] initially three in close proximity to the injured soldiers. For me, it was just a case of cracking on and rendering the devices safe. When there is a Category 'A'

RIGHT: A photographer captures the moment that a coalition vehicle (from the US Wisconsin Army National Guard) was struck by an IED in eastern Afghanistan. No one was hurt in the blast and the vehicle was able to drive away. (PHOTOGRAPH BY M/SGT CHRIS HAYLETT; ISAF)

