

LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH" LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR PHILIP NEAME VC

As there were no awards of the Victoria Cross announced in March 1915, Lord Ashcroft investigates the actions of a recipient who was one of the 12 listed the previous month, Lieutenant (later Lieutenant General) Philip Neame.



ABOVE: Lieutenant General Sir Philip Neame VC's medal ribbons on his battledress tunic. They include that of the Victoria Cross, Order of the British Empire (Military), Order of the Bath, Distinguished Service Order, Venerable Order of St John, 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-18, Allied Victory Medal, 1939-45 Star, Africa Star, Italy Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939-45, George V Jubilee 1935, George VI Coronation 1937, Elizabeth Coronation 1953, *Légion d'Honneur*, *Croix de Guerre* (France), *Croix de Guerre* (Belgium), and the Order of the White Lion of Czechoslovakia. (COURTESY OF THE ROYAL ENGINEERS MUSEUM)

LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR PHILIP NEAME VC ENDURANCE



THE MANY Victoria Crosses and George Crosses in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London are displayed under one of seven different qualities of bravery. Lt. General Sir Philip Neame's award is part of the collection, and Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of endurance:

"Endurance is the opposite of Aggression. It is all about 'cold courage', about knowing the cost and being prepared to pay it. It involves mental and physical resilience, not giving in and rising above the pain. It is almost infinite."

ABOVE: Senior British officers captured in North Africa. Lieutenant General Sir Philip Neame VC (centre) is seen here with other British officers (including Major General Richard O'Connor who can be seen in centre, middle distance, Brigadier John Combe on the left and Major-General Michael Gambier-Parry on the right) waiting to be transported to Europe by Junkers Ju 52 aircraft following their capture by Germans troops at Derna.

PHILIP NEAME, the son of a farmer/land agent, was born in Macknade, near Faversham, Kent, on 12 December 1888. After being educated at St Michael's School in Westgate, Kent, and Cheltenham College, Gloucestershire, he attended the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich.

Neame was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant into the Royal Engineers in July 1908 and was one of five brothers from his family to serve in the armed forces during the First World War. As a subaltern with the 15th Field Company, Royal Engineers, part of the 8th Division, Neame arrived in France in November 1914 and soon he and his comrades had occupied positions in waterlogged ground near Neuve Chapelle.

On 27 November, Neame was part of a small party that blew up Moated Grange, a farm building being used by German snipers. Over the next three weeks he and his comrades carried out a series of attacks on other enemy positions.

The action for which Neame was awarded the Victoria Cross took place on 19 December 1914. During the previous night, Allied forces had attacked enemy positions at Moated Grange and attempted to link the German trench system to the British one so as to gain ground.

In the morning, the Germans launched a counter-attack using grenades and Neame (by now a lieutenant) was ordered by his CO to consolidate the position. He

advanced towards the fighting where he learnt from the forward infantry commander that the Germans appeared to have fought off the British advance: the enemy was still throwing bombs and the British, according to the senior officer, could not retaliate because all the men were wounded.

In fact, when Neame encountered one of the British servicemen the latter explained to Neame that he and his comrades were unable to light the damp fuzes to the bombs. Neame, however, knew a way to detonate the bombs without a fuze and he ordered everyone to collect every available bomb so that he could target the two enemy positions.

Neame initially concentrated on the position directly in front of the men and had to stand up on the fire-step, exposing himself to the enemy, before throwing each bomb. Each time he did this, he came under German machine-

gun fire but he always got back down again before any bullets hit him.

Time and again, Neame threw his bombs and screams from the enemy positions indicated the success of his one-man attack. Soon, the enemy bombing petered out and eventually it stopped altogether. By this point, many of the wounded men had been rescued.

Neame then held his advanced position with three infantrymen until ordered to move back. Neame now became aware of the heavy casualties - dead and wounded - from the fighting earlier in the day and he began taking one wounded man along a ditch until the enemy fire became too heavy. Neame then switched to taking the injured man along a road in full view of the enemy, who chose not to fire, before handing him to stretcher-bearers.

Neame's action-packed day ended when he was told to take a party of men to repair the British front line of defences because the commanders feared a German counter-attack.

On Christmas Day, Neame learned that he had been recommended for the VC, his award being announced on 18 February 1915. His medal was presented to him by George V in an investiture at Windsor Castle on 19 July 1915. I have included his VC under the "endurance" label because he showed courage during a whole day under great pressure to succeed.

Neame served with distinction for the remainder of the war, during which he received the Distinguished Service Order. He had advanced into Belgium when the war ended on 11 November 1918. His other awards included the French and Belgium *Croix de Guerre* and the French *Légion d'Honneur*.

Neame remained in the Army after the war and was promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1919, and then to full colonel in 1926. Ten years after his VC action he won a gold medal for shooting in the 1924 Paris Olympics, thereby becoming the first and, to date, only man to have received the VC and an Olympic gold medal. His other interests included exploring, polo, shooting and hunting.

While participating in big game hunting in India in 1933, Neame was mauled by a tigress and needed hospital attention. Harriet Alberta, the nurse who treated him, went

on to marry him in the following year in Bombay and the couple eventually had four children together.

During the Second World War, Neame again served in the Army but was captured and taken as a prisoner of war in April 1941 while serving in Cyrenaica (now Libya). He used his time in captivity to write his autobiography, which he hid from his captors. Incredibly, his hand-written book was found after the war ended and returned to him.

He retired in the rank of lieutenant general in 1947. Sir Philip Neame, whose many distinctions and decorations included a knighthood, died at Selling near Faversham, Kent - close to his birthplace - on 28 April 1978, aged 89.

Neame's medal group is not part of my VC collection but it is on display at Imperial War Museums, London. ☉

ABOVE LEFT: Lieutenant Philip Neame, Royal Engineers, is depicted holding back the enemy and attempting to rescue wounded men. (ALL IMAGES HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS UNLESS STATED OTHERWISE)

BELOW LEFT: Lieutenant General Sir Philip Neame VC's medal set.

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *Victoria Cross Heroes* is largely based on his VC collection. For more information, please visit: www.victoriacrossheroes.com Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at Imperial War Museums, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

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