

Major Sir Tasker Watkins
VC GBE PC QC DL



HERO
of the
MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Given his immense courage on the battlefield, it is little wonder that, as president of the Welsh Rugby Union, Tasker Watkins was sometimes asked to address his nation's players before a big international match. As he attempted to inspire them to victory on the rugby field, he would compare their chosen sport to warfare, since he stated that both required "a cool mind, discipline and self-sacrifice".

As a talented player in his younger days, Watkins was hugely respected by those sporting the famous red rugby jerseys. They knew only too well why he had been decorated with the Victoria Cross during the Second World War. Tasker Watkins was born in Nelson, Glamorgan, on 18 November 1918. The son of a Welsh-speaking miner, Bertram Watkins, and his wife Jane (née Phillips), the young Watkins divided his early childhood between his own parents' home in Station Road, Nelson, and the nearby home of his grandparents in Shingrig Road.

He was one of seven children and had been christened with his grandmother's maiden name. While still living in South Wales, he attended Llanfabon Infants School

and Pontypridd Grammar School. After his family moved to Essex, he attended Romford County School before working for Crookes Laboratory in the chemical industry. However, he was released from his job to take a degree in law and commerce at London University.

Rising Through the Ranks

After the outbreak of war, he served in the ranks of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry from 16 October 1939 to 16 May 1941 until, on 17 May 1941, he was granted an emergency commission as a second lieutenant in the Welch Regiment and was promoted to substantive lieutenant on 3 April 1942.

Various significant postings followed including, while in the rank of temporary major, a role as a senior instructor at the War Office Battle School at Llanberis, north Wales. Here Watkins earned a reputation as a hard taskmaster.

Shortly after the D-Day landings of 6 June 1944, Watkins reverted to his role as a substantive lieutenant and returned to the front line, serving with the 1/5th Welch

Regiment in Normandy from the end of July that year. He was part of the reinforcements sent out as the Allies tried to push their way through France in the wake of the landings.

On the evening of 16 August 1944, as the Allies continued to squeeze the Falaise 'pocket' in their effort to trap two German armies, Watkins' battalion attacked targets near Bafour, a village a few miles west of Falaise itself. His 'B' Company came under heavy and relentless machine gun fire while advancing through corn fields that had been booby-trapped with mines.

By the time the men reached two enemy machine gun posts, Watkins was the only officer left standing. By then, his men were isolated from the main British force and, to make matters worse, all radio communications were down between the two companies that led the attack and Battalion HQ. The regimental records described a feeling of fear as the enemy appeared to be advancing from all sides: ▶

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However, still with no communications and with no signs of support, he eventually withdrew. At 1am, he brought in the remaining 27 members of his company, along with some German prisoners: 33 men from his company had become casualties: killed or wounded. Watkins was unharmed and unbowed. "It didn't surprise me at all. It was typical of him," Captain Morgan, one of those present, said many decades later.

However, Watkins, by then an acting major, was severely wounded in a subsequent action. He received his injuries as the Allied forces advanced on Hertogenbosch in southern Holland. Crossing a canal in October 1944, he was hit by shrapnel in the right leg and lower abdomen.

When in hospital in Brussels, it looked as if the limb might need amputating but, having been transferred to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, it was assessed that

"The atmosphere was one of tenseness and helplessness. It was impossible to restore the situation."

As the enemy closed in on the company, Watkins decided he and his men would fight their way out of trouble and somehow get back to the British lines – and that he would lead from the front. He charged the first machine gun post, personally, with his Sten gun, shooting the enemy manning it. Next, he led the charge on an anti-tank gun that was targeting his men. When his Sten jammed, he threw the weapon in the face of a German gunner before shooting him dead with his pistol.

As 'B' Company continued to try to get back to the Allied lines, it crossed the cornfield where it had come under attack earlier. Once again, the Germans opened-up on the British soldiers. Watkins directed operations yet again and, when the enemy appeared to falter under the company's rifle fire, he led a bayonet charge, killing several more German soldiers.

Another Single-Handed Attack

At dusk, having by then manoeuvred around the enemy's flank, the company still found themselves separated from their battalion. At this point, Watkins, having assessed the situation, ordered his men to scatter. Before bringing his team to safety, he personally charged yet another machine gun post single-handed, killing or wounding all the enemy. For a time, he hoped to keep the position until reinforcements arrived.

ABOVE Sir Tasker Watkins' medal group, including his Victoria Cross.

RIGHT King George VI investing Major Watkins with the VC on 8 March 1945. (TOPFOTO)

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his leg could be saved. While recuperating in hospital, Watkins learned he had been awarded the VC for his earlier bravery. His citation concluded: "His superb gallantry and total disregard for his own safety during an extremely difficult period were responsible for saving the lives of his men, and had a decisive influence on the course of the battle."

Watkins never returned to the front line but, after recovering from his injuries, was appointed commanding officer of the Royal Engineers Battle School at Penmaenmawr, North Wales. He received his VC from George VI at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 8 March 1945.

He once said of his VC award: "I'm pretty grateful now... life's very precious, after all, it's all we've got really. It's easy to be philosophical out of battle but when you are heavily involved you don't have time to think of such things. You get on with what you are doing, what you are called upon to do." However, most of the time, his only comment on the VC was: "I am proud of that".

During the war, in 1941, Watkins had married Eirwen Evans in Dagenham, Essex, and the couple had a daughter and son. After leaving the army in 1946, he left

Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II



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Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum London. For more information, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes and details of his VC collection may be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft



a considerable mark in two very different spheres of life: the judiciary and rugby.

Distinguished Legal Career

After moving to Llandaff, near Cardiff, Watkins trained as a lawyer and was called to the bar in 1948. In 1965, he became a Queen's Counsel and, in 1971 (the same year he was knighted), he was appointed as a judge in the Family Division, followed later by the Queen's Bench Division and the Court of Appeal.

Watkins was appointed Deputy Chief Justice of England in 1988 and worked closely with Lord Lane, then the Lord Chief Justice, on judicial postings and the administration of the criminal justice system. He asked High Court judges to fill in time sheets to show how they spent their working days, in an attempt to boost the case for more judicial manpower.

In 1991, he sat alongside Lord Lane in the historic appeal case that established that husbands living with their wives could be convicted of raping them. According to Lord Lane, this was "the removal of a common law fiction that has become anachronistic and offensive".

Watkins retired from his legal career, aged 75, having by then taken on a senior role in rugby: in 1968, he was elected as president of Glamorgan Wanderers (the team he had played for as fly half in his younger days) and then became chairman of the Welsh Rugby Union Charitable Trust, set up to help seriously injured players, in 1975. Finally, in 1993 he was elected as president of the Welsh Rugby Union, a post he held for eleven years until 2004.

Upon standing down from the presidency of the WRU, Watkins was made honorary life vice-patron of the WRU, of which the Queen is patron. For a time from 1947, Watkins was also variously a member of the TA Association, Glamorgan and Wales, and he served as president of the Royal British Legion of Wales from 1947 to 1968. He was also president of the University of Wales College of Medicine from 1987 to 1998.

In common with most VC recipients, Watkins was proud of his award but always preferred to be remembered for career achievements in the worlds of law and rugby rather than his actions in war. However, shortly before Armistice Day 2001, he was asked to reflect on his VC award and replied: "You must believe me when I say it was just another day in the life of a soldier. I did what needed doing to help colleagues and friends, just as others looked out for me during the fighting that summer..."

"I didn't wake up the next day a better or braver person, just different. I'd seen more killing and death in 24 hours – indeed been part of that terrible process – than is right for anybody. From that point onwards, I have tried to take a more caring view of my fellow human beings, and that, of course, always includes your opponent, whether it be in war, sport or just life generally."

In August 2007, Watkins fell heavily at his home in Llandaff. He was admitted to the University of Wales Hospital, where he died on 9 September, aged 88. Later that day, the Welsh players wore black armbands for their opening match of the Rugby World Cup in Nantes, France. He was cremated after a funeral service at Llandaff Cathedral, where there is also a memorial to him in the Welsh Regiment Memorial Chapel. There is also a fine statue in his honour at the Millennium Stadium, Cardiff.

There were many affectionate tributes to Watkins after his death. Rhodri Morgan, then the First Minister of Wales, described him as "one of the outstanding Welshmen of the 20th century". I purchased Watkins' medal group privately in 2008 and I am immensely proud to be the custodian of this wonderful man's gallantry and service medals.

There is a lengthy and splendid tribute to Watkins by W Alister Williams in his book *Heart of a Dragon: The VCs of Wales and the Welsh Regiments 1914-82*. Williams writes: "Tasker Watkins was one of those rare men who rose from very humble beginnings to succeed in whatever field of endeavour he turned his hand to." ●