

Sergeant William Arthur Pickering MM



HERO of the MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Bill Pickering spent a quite extraordinary three months behind enemy lines fighting alongside partisans towards the end of the Second World War having been parachuted into northern Italy in February 1945. It was outstanding and sustained bravery that not only saw him decorated with the Military Medal (MM) but that also, indirectly, resulted in him having a near 70-year marriage to an Italian woman.

William Arthur Pickering was born in Oldham, Lancashire, on 21 September 1923 and was educated at Manchester Central High School. His father worked as the manager of a plumbing business and he had one younger sister. At the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939, Pickering was approaching his 16th birthday and was working as a clerk. He gained an appointment to the Royal Engineers' Cadet Corps in Manchester and subsequently enlisted in the local Defence Corps (also known as the Local Defence Volunteers). By the summer of 1940 he was still underage for military service but, by means of altering his birth certificate, he managed to enlist in the Welch Regiment just two days after his 17th birthday.

Pickering later transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals, where he qualified as a wireless operator. Driven by a sense of adventure, he volunteered for what was known as 'especially dangerous duties', achieving his wish when he was ordered to attend a parachute course at Chesterfield, Derbyshire, in 1942. This was followed by a Special Operations Executive (SOE) training

course at Fawley Court at Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.

By the end of 1942, Pickering's new SOE comrades were serving in Sicily, Salerno and Anzio and he was ordered to the Middle East. While serving in Algeria, he transmitted radio messages from British agents in southern France, Italy, Corsica and Sardinia. Furthermore, in Algiers itself, he helped establish the main radio relay station back to London and met Major Malcolm Munthe, an SOE agent who recruited Pickering for a special mission to Sicily in the summer of 1943.

In his memoir *The Bandits of Cisterna*, Pickering noted: "This time it was my job to put messages into code, so for the first time in the war I actually knew what was

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going on." His mission in Sicily was ended by the Salerno landings of September 1943, when he embarked for mainland Italy.

INTO BATTLE

In January 1944, he was taken by motor torpedo boat to the island of Ischia which he described as "a perfect jumping-off point for running agents to and from the west coast of Italy". Here, he taught agents in explosives and radio transmission, prior to joining the opening wave of the Anzio landings in a small team of SOE led by Major Munthe, with whom he had been in Sicily, and Captain Malcolm Gubbins, the son of the head of the SOE.

In his memoir, Pickering gave a vivid description of how Munthe and Gubbins ignored the danger as artillery and mortar shells fell on them and while other terrified soldiers lay flat on the ground sheltering from the incoming fire. Pickering wrote: "By now the Germans seemed to be concentrating their fire on us, but this failed to impress Munthe. He strolled round the farmyard wearing his green Gordon Highlanders kilt and seemed completely oblivious to the shells which were raining down all around him. Captain Gubbins, in the predominantly red tartan of the Cameron Highlanders, was equally unmoved by the mayhem. Perhaps it is their public school upbringing which prevents an English gentleman from flinching in the face of the enemy. But I did not share their enthusiasm for the job in hand when Munthe urged, 'Come along now, Pickering. There must be a frying pan lying around somewhere'.

"I could not believe this was happening to me. We were risking life and limb for a ▶

ABOVE

Sgt Bill Pickering's MM and medal group.

LEFT

British paratroopers and glider infantry with local partisans in Italy. (TOPFOTO)



...he pointed to a group of Allied soldiers crawling on their bellies along the trench lines behind us. 'What on earth are they doing?' he asked with genuine incredulity"

cooked breakfast. Munthe did not appear to recognise the danger. As we wandered in and out of the farm buildings, he pointed to a group of Allied soldiers crawling on their bellies along the trench lines behind us. 'What on earth are they doing?' he asked with genuine incredulity. In my younger days I might have been inclined to reply, 'Acting sensibly, unlike us,' but I held my tongue. On this occasion fortune favoured the brave and we led charmed lives. But we never did find that elusive frying pan." However, Munthe was seriously wounded a few days later, and Gubbins was killed in action, before Pickering himself was pulled out of Anzio.

OPERATION CHARLTON

Pickering was soon back in the thick of the action. On 4 February 1945, a crisp moonlight morning, he was parachuted with five other operatives into the Piedmont province of Italy, some 100 miles (160kms) behind enemy lines. Five of the six men, including Pickering, were SOE members destined to take part in Operation Charlton, while the other man had orders for a different mission.

The main role for those participating in Operation Charlton was to liaise with elements of the Liberation Committee for Occupied Italy and to arrange for supply drops and training for the partisans. They were a colourful bunch, although their

ABOVE Train sabotaged by Italian partisans. (TOPFOTO)

RIGHT SAS operatives and partisans maintaining Browning M2 machine guns in Catino. (TOPFOTO)

rag-tag appearance, including sporting old Italian army jackets and Nazi trouser, hid a fierce discipline.

Those hiding the SOE were taking as many risks as their secret visitors. Pickering wrote about how he and Captain Keany were hidden in a remote Italian farmhouse. "We slept in the house overnight and everyday just as dawn was breaking we would move into a small wooden shed about 200 metres above the house, where the farmer's wife would cover us with dry leaves. She would come up twice a day to bring us food, almost in sight of the German garrison, taking terrible risks to make sure that we were well looked after. Every evening after dark we would come down to the house and operate the radio from the attic, transmitting messages to our base in southern Italy."

After laying low for several days, Pickering and Keany moved on to Cisterna d'Asti, where they set up a transmission site in a farm building. Here – while in one of their hide-outs – the two SOE and some partisans were ambushed by an estimated 60 German soldiers. Pickering takes up the story as submachine guns opened up on them: "I flung myself to the ground and saw Keany's chest neatly stitched with a row of bullets. He was flung backwards without making a sound, at least no sound that could be heard above the noise of gunfire. Four other partisans had been cut down by the initial burst from another submachine gun to our right. The rest of us hurled ourselves full length on to our stomachs as the bullets whistled inches overhead."



Once again, Pickering had survived – and had even retained his wireless set – but Keany, of course, had not and the next day, the survivors returned to the scene of the ambush. Keany was lying on his back with six bullet holes across his chest. Pickering said that Keany's death had a numbing effect on him, but he also wrote in his memoirs with great honesty: "I can only confess that my sorrow at my friend's death was mingled with selfish thanks that I was not lying there in his place."

After Keany was killed, Pickering joined up with another mission deep behind enemy lines led by a Major Hope. From this point onwards, he regularly fought alongside the partisans, among whom he became known as 'Inglese Billy' or 'il biondino' (the blond one). By then, supply drops were being made on a regular basis and the partisans were well equipped to harass German and Italian Republican troops. This resulted in a flurry of ambushes and attacks on major targets, such as railway stations. Major Hope was killed during one mission, but again Pickering survived them all unscathed.

Special Ops Heroes



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. He has written six books on gallantry and a full write-up on Bill Pickering's exploits appears in *Special Ops Heroes*: www.specialopsheroes.com. 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. 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



WAR COMES TO AN END

Allied forces reached Turin at the end of April 1945, thereby bringing Pickering's adventure to a close. His recommendation for his gallantry award concluded: "Throughout his period in the field this NCO has shown outstanding qualities of courage, determination and resourcefulness. He has covered many miles in enemy-infested territory and during two periods after his two officers were killed, he continued to carry out the mission's activities under circumstances of great danger with exceptional efficiency. In view of his outstanding performance, he is most strongly recommended for the award of the immediate DCM [Distinguished Conduct Medal]." In fact, he received the MM which was announced on 4 October 1945.

Ahead of the sale of Pickering's gallantry and service medals in June 2012, David Erskine-Hill, then with auctioneers Dix Noonan Webb, explained that Pickering should have received the higher award of a DCM but did not due to a clerical error. "He was rightly recommended for an immediate award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal, though an ill-informed senior had this reduced to the Military Medal. Be that as it may, his Military Medal is a great rarity, more so than similar decorations issued to the wartime SAS."

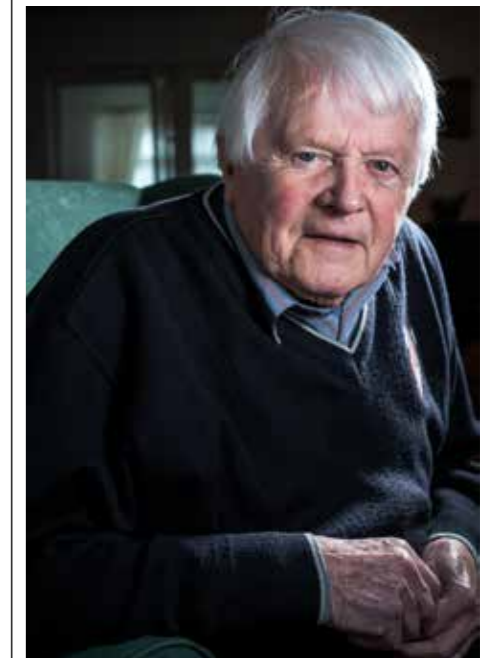
Pickering was sent his MM, which was accompanied by a letter of congratulations from King George VI. On New Year's Eve 1945 and – armed with some festive mistletoe – he met a young Italian woman, Rossana Reboli, at a dance held in the sergeants' mess in Florence. The couple were married back in Britain, in Chaddle, Greater Manchester, on 11 October 1947 – the year after Pickering had been demobilised.

After the war, Pickering received a commission in the Army Cadet Force, in which capacity he served for many years and attained the rank of major. He also ran a series of grocery businesses in the Manchester area, before becoming an area manager for Oxfam until his retirement in 1988, aged 65.

I interviewed Pickering for my book *Special Ops Heroes*, published in 2014. Furthermore,

he, his wife and their only child David, attended the book launch in London as my guests. Rossana Pickering told me: "In all the time we have been married, I have never known him worried by anything. He's an optimist and I am a pessimist, but we seem to get along pretty well nonetheless." Pickering, who was 91 and living in Hindley Green – near Manchester – when I first met him, told me: "Given what I did, I was lucky to survive the war and I have gone on to have a wonderful life."

Sadly, Bill Pickering died on Easter Sunday 2016, aged 92. By then, he had a grown-up son and daughter-in-law and two grandsons. Remarkably, he and his wife had been married for more than 68 years. He was quite simply a wonderful man – a real one-off – and I feel privileged to have met him in his twilight years and to be the custodian of his medal group. ●



ABOVE William Pickering MM in recent years. Sadly, he passed away in 2016. (LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)