

Wing Commander  
Hugh Malcolm VC



HERO  
*of the*  
MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



There can be few, if any, better examples of self-sacrifice in the air than the noble actions of Wing Commander Hugh Malcolm. Such outstanding bravery aimed at saving lives of infantry on the ground was recognised with the reward of a posthumous VC. I am immensely proud to be the custodian of this courageous and selfless man's gallantry and service medals, having purchased them at auction in 2010.

Hugh Gordon Malcolm was born in Broughty Ferry, Dundee, on May 2, 1917. He was the son of Kenneth Malcolm, a Dundee jute merchant, and his wife Marjorie (née Smith). He was educated at Craigflower Preparatory School, Dunfermline, and Trinity College, Glenalmond, Perthshire. As a young man, Malcolm was shy and quiet, but he was sporty and excelled at golf and hunting. After completing his schooling, he entered RAF College Cranwell, Lincolnshire, as a cadet in January 1936, where he graduated as a commissioned pilot in December 1937. The following month, Malcolm was posted to 26 Squadron, based at RAF Catterick, in Yorkshire.

On May 20, 1939 he was piloting Westland Lysander I L4784 in practice flight for a forthcoming Empire Air Day display when he was involved in a major accident that wrote off the aircraft.

### *“Malcolm and his crew participated in the first of Bomber Command’s ‘thousand bomber’ raids on Cologne”*

“It just fell out’er me hands,” he noted in his logbook, with masterly understatement. Malcolm suffered serious injuries, including a fractured skull, and was told he would never fly again.

He spent four months in the Princess Mary Hospital at RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire and it was while recuperating there that Malcolm met a nurse, Helen Swan, who would become his wife; the couple married in Sussex in 1940. Meanwhile, Malcolm’s eventual recovery was so complete that he returned to his unit in September 1939.

As the war intensified, he was promoted, first to flight lieutenant in September 1940 and then again to squadron leader in December 1941.

### **Hunting the Hunters**

Malcolm served as a flight commander with the Bristol Blenheim-equipped 18 Squadron based at RAF Wattisham,

Suffolk. He then flew mainly night sorties, the first being on May 6, 1942. Many of these operations were in support of main bomber force raids and his role was to attack German night-fighter airfields.

Malcolm and his crew participated in the first of Bomber Command’s ‘thousand bomber’ raids on Cologne on the night of May 30/31, 1942. It involved 18 Blenheim IVs from 18 Squadron, which flew intruder sorties against three Luftwaffe air bases, with Malcolm leading seven of these aircraft against St Trond airfield in Belgium. On June 1, 1942, while involved in another major raid, this time on Essen, Malcolm and his crew again returned to attack St Trond. They also participated in the next ‘thousand bomber’ raid, this time to Bremen, on the night of June 25/26.

On July 1, Malcolm and his men were commended for their bravery in searching for and locating a dinghy – containing British aircrew – some 50 miles (80km) off the Dutch coast. This was carried out in daylight and in clear weather – which put them at great risk of an enemy attack – and Malcolm remained in the air for four hours to obtain seven fixes on the dinghy so that the crew could be rescued. ►

ABOVE: BLENHEIM MK.IV V6083. NOTE THE PAIR OF REMOTELY CONTROLLED REARWARD-FIRING MACHINE GUNS MOUNTED BENEATH THE NOSE. (KEY COLLECTION)

BELOW: BLENHEIM MK.IV V6437/WV-C OF 18 SQUADRON, CIRCA 1941. (18 SQUADRON RECORDS)

BOTTOM: LYSANDER II L4777, 26 SQUADRON, 'C' FLIGHT, AT CATTERICK, SHORTLY BEFORE HOSTILITIES. MALCOLM WAS SERVING WITH THE UNIT AT THE TIME. (COURTESY J JOHNS)

OPPOSITE: HUGH MALCOLM'S MEDALS, PART OF LORD ASHCROFT'S COLLECTION. (VIA LORD ASHCROFT)

## Promotion and Posting

In September 1942, he was promoted to wing commander and became the squadron's CO. Two months later, he moved with his men to north Africa, where he was initially based at Blida airfield in Algeria. By then, his unit, part of 326 Wing, was flying new Blenheim Vs, which were proving unreliable in the difficult conditions encountered in North Africa.

The aircraft's failings became apparent on their first operational sortie on November 17, 1942. Malcolm and his

squadron attacked Bizerta airfield in Tunisia at low-level in daylight and without a fighter escort. They bombed and strafed their target, but encountered both bad weather and the Luftwaffe on their return flight; the unit lost two bombers to the German fighters and two more in an air collision. Undeterred, the squadron returned to Bizerta 11 days later to strike the airfield a second time, despite a massive barrage of fire from the German air defences.

By this point, the ground war in north Africa had become intense and, on December 4, eleven Blenheim Vs from 326 Wing were flown to Souk-el-Arba in Tunisia to support the army units in the battle area. Six of the bombers, led by Malcolm, took off at 9.15am to search for targets in the Chouigui area.

When they located a Luftwaffe landing strip some ten miles north of Chouigui, they bombed and strafed it before flying to Canrobert, Algeria, to refuel, and then

returned to Souk-el-Arba. However, less than an hour after landing, Malcolm received a message from the forward army battle zone, requesting urgent air support in the area they had just come from.

This meant flying in broad daylight over a war zone area without fighter support because it was not possible to organise this in the time available. Malcolm was aware quite how hazardous the mission would be, but knowing the infantry desperately needed help, he did not hesitate. However, he was ordered to abandon the attack if there was insufficient cloud cover to complete the task satisfactorily.

Eleven Blenheims from 326 Wing were chosen for the sortie, but one burst its tail wheel attempting to take off and was taken out of service. The ten remaining aircraft kept a tight formation knowing that this was their only defence against the Luftwaffe, but within 20 minutes, one of the aeroplanes had to make a crash-landing 15 miles east of Souk-el-Arba. The crew survived but the mission was now down to only nine aircraft.

## Onto the Target

On arrival at the target area, the much-needed cloud cover was lacking, but Malcolm refused to abandon his mission. After circling the area, the Blenheims started to bomb, but they were set upon by a huge number of Bf 109 fighters, as many as 60 at any one time. One by one, in a five-minute 'battle' that was more like a massacre, the Blenheims were shot down until only Malcolm and his crew remained. Then, their Blenheim was hit, too, and the aircraft, with its crew of three, crashed and burst into flames some 15 miles from its target. Malcolm, his navigator Pilot Officer James Robb, and his gunner Pilot Officer James Grant, did not survive the crash. Group Captain (later Air Vice-Marshal Sir) Laurence Sinclair, who described Malcolm as "one of the bravest officers I had known", had no hesitation in submitting a recommendation for the VC.

But others questioned his judgment and suggested a lesser award while he was officially still missing in action: the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). Once it emerged Malcolm had died, this was ruled out (it was not and is not given posthumously), leaving him eligible for the VC or a mere Mention in Despatches. Fortunately, the arguments of Sinclair and others eventually won the day.

Malcolm, who died aged 25, was gazetted for a posthumous VC on April 27, 1943, both for his bravery during his final sortie and his earlier courage in north Africa. His lengthy citation ended: "Wing Commander Malcolm's last exploit was the finest





example of the valour and unswerving devotion to duty which he constantly displayed.”

After learning of her husband’s posthumous award, his widow, Helen, who lived in Worth, Sussex, said: “My husband’s commanding officer wrote and told me of his last flight. I can only say how very proud I am of him. After his [1939] crash, he was told he would never fly again, but he was determined to get back. He made an amazing recovery and was able to return to his unit in September 1939, just after war was declared.”

Malcolm’s widow received his VC from George VI at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on June 11, 1943. Malcolm is buried at the Beja War Cemetery in Tunisia and his name is on the RAF Memorial at St Clement Danes Church in central London.

### Unfair Fight

Sub-Lieutenant K G Wallace, of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, who had been loaned to the RAF for special observer duties, was one of three men to survive their crash-landing after being shot down during the raid that claimed Malcolm’s life. After returning home to Britain, Wallace, who was not in Malcolm’s actual aeroplane, provided a vivid description of the final attacks and his own remarkable survival: “Our bombs were still going down when 50 to 60 Messerschmitt fighters came in at us. In the tightest possible formation, we weaved as a single unit through the valley of the hills. We could see the fighters’ cannon shells bursting all along the mountainsides on a level with our faces. Finally, we were forced out of formation

*“Wing Commander Malcolm’s last exploit was the finest example of the valour and unswerving devotion to duty which he constantly displayed”*

and, with the starboard engine on fire, the fuselage on fire and a large piece of wing missing, we went into the hillside at about 150 miles per hour.

“Out of the blazing aircraft all three of us emerged more or less in one piece and, as we were in No Man’s Land, we began to run like hell. Behind us were a party of men running down a hillside and ahead was a second party of men – our own troops – coming to meet us. We were accelerated by cannon-shells from an enemy fighter who was trying to get us, but we made it. Then I passed out, and the party was over.”

Wallace also provided an affectionate tribute to Malcolm, explaining that every member of the crew knew there was only the smallest chance of surviving the mission: “But we would have gladly followed Malcolm anywhere. He was superb. Malcolm radiated a joy of living and fighting which was irresistible.”

In his book *For Valour: The Air VCs*, Chaz Bowyer wrote: “Hugh Malcolm’s cool determination to complete this ill-fated sortie, against all the odds, but in his constant endeavour to fulfil his duties, was the culmination of a flying career in which

his qualities of courage and leadership had been manifest.”

Several months after Malcolm’s death, Lady Tedder, the wife of the Middle East Air Commander-in-Chief, went to open the first in a series of rest and leisure recreation centres in north Africa. To people’s surprise, she named it the Malcolm Club despite the fact that she had barely known him. However, the name stuck and was soon applied to other similar clubs in the region. ●

### Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes II*, was first published in 2016 and is available in hardback

and paperback. For more information, visit: [www.victoriacrossheroes2.com](http://www.victoriacrossheroes2.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](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes) Details of his VC collection may be found at: [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com) For more information on Lord Ashcroft’s work, visit: [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com) Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

