

HICKEY

BEGINNING filming of his Napoleon Bonaparte epic this month – starring Joaquin Phoenix and Jodie Comer – celebrated movie director Sir Ridley Scott, 84, has no wish for an easier life in old age.

South Shields-born Sir Ridley, pictured, whose classics include *Gladiator* and *Blade Runner*, announces: “In my job you’ve got to embrace stress. When I get stressed, I feel alive!”



NOW that Vanessa Redgrave has finally been made a dame after previously turning down the gong in 1999, what of fellow octogenarian and double Oscar-winner Glenda Jackson?

When asked about potentially accepting a damehood, the formidable actress and former Labour MP – who received her CBE in 1978 – once replied: “I accepted a CBE – why not?” She later cheekily claimed, however: “I’d only want to be a dame if it was in panto.” Did she really mean it?

MEANWHILE, one of Gyles Brandreth’s high-profile fans suggests the cheery name-dropper deserves to be finally honoured.

“I really, really think you should have been in the New Year’s Honours list, Gyles,” insists outspoken former Conservative minister Edwina Currie. “You’ve been making me laugh – in a good way – for over 50 years, since you stood on your head while speaking in the Oxford Union. Surely that long record deserves a gong?”

Fellow ex-Tory MP Gyles diplomatically responds: “Those Oxford Union days...only seems like 10 minutes ago.”

REFLECTING on her career breakthrough in *Coronation Street* 20 years ago, award-winning actress Suranne Jones, who hails from Chadderton, Greater Manchester, suggests her old stamping ground had its limitations at the time.

“That feels like yesterday to me,” Vigil star Suranne, pictured, remarks on pal Gaby Roslin’s podcast. “When there were only a few channels that people got excited about and really the only interesting things that happened in Manchester were *Corrie* and *Man United*. Surely plenty of proud Mancunians would beg to differ?”



A CONFIRMED enemy of the younger “woke” brigade, John Cleese happily says of his live stage shows: “When I look out there at the audience, there are people aged 40, 50, 60, 70, and none of them have any concerns or sympathy for the politically correct society. So I get no problems at all.”

BORN 100 years ago this week, late actor and animal rights campaigner Bill Travers once dramatically came to the rescue of wife and co-star Virginia McKenna.

Prior to commencing filming of their 1966 movie *Born Free* in Kenya, the pair were following lions stalking a herd of Thomson’s gazelles – only for one of the predators to suddenly pounce on Virginia’s shoulders, breaking her leg.

As more lions arrived on the scene, McKenna, now 90, has since recalled: “Bill had to act quickly...he took his shirt off and wiggled it through the grass, and lured them away from me to the Land Rover.”

‘Saint’ who went marching on...into a hail of gunfire



UNDER FIRE: Colour Sergeant Alwyn Stevens on active service in Helmand Province where he fought off Taliban forces leading a small team of troops

As his medals join the world’s greatest collection of gallantry awards, the long journey of Colour Sergeant Alwyn Stevens from the remote island of St Helena to guts and glory in Afghanistan



HONOURS: Stevens joined the Royal Irish Regiment and served 22 years. Below, the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross



DANGER ZONE: British soldiers took their lives in their hands each day on patrol in Afghanistan

WAS a toddler when I first visited St Helena. It was a stop-off for my family on our way to Africa where my father Eric Ashcroft was taking up a post as a colonial officer. I’ve had a soft spot for the remote volcanic island ever since and until Covid-19 intervened, was a regular visitor to the British Overseas Territory where Napoleon was exiled after his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo.

My well-known interest in gallantry stems from my father telling me about his experiences as a young Army officer charging up Sword Beach as part of the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944. I was aged around ten when he first explained how his commanding officer had been shot dead at his side. My father was wounded by shrapnel, fighting on until ordered from the battlefield.

For the past 35 years, because of this interest sparked by my father, I have been a collector of gallantry medals and it’s wonderful when two of my great passions meet.

With this in mind, I’m delighted to reveal I recently became the privileged custodian of a rare and much treasured award second only to the Victoria Cross in terms of Commonwealth awards for bravery in the presence of the enemy: the Conspicuous

EXCLUSIVE By Lord Ashcroft



During a stellar 22-year career, he later completed six tours of Northern Ireland, as well as tours of Iraq and Afghanistan. He qualified as a sniper in 2006.

In 2008, Stevens took part in a challenging tour of Afghanistan as part of Operation Herrick 8. It was while serving as a corporal, he performed the remarkable acts of gallantry which led to the award of the CGC. He was an Afghan National Army (ANA) platoon mentor deployed at Patrol Base ATTAL in Gereshk Valley in the troubled Helmand Province.

On September 12, 2008, Stevens and his six-man Operational Mentor Liaison Team (OMLT) were patrolling the vegetated “green zone” to the north-east of their base when a local approached them and warned of a sizable Taliban force planning an ambush.

Pushing forward, Stevens moved to secure a nearby compound from which he could observe the area. As his official citation states: “Approaching the mud-walled compound, he came across eight

Gallantry Cross (CGC) – awarded to a “Saint”, as people from St Helena are widely known.

Colour Sergeant Alwyn Stevens was decorated for his courage in Afghanistan and today, with his co-operation, I’m able to tell the full story of his unusual life – and his outstanding valour – for the first time.

The son of a lorry driver, Stevens, who has a sister, was born at Longwood, St Helena, on October 16, 1978. He was educated locally and lived on the South Atlantic island with his family until he enlisted in the British Army in October 1999.

Upon completion of his basic training, he joined the Royal Irish Regiment. Only a few weeks later he was deployed to Sierra Leone.

‘Instinctively, Stevens charged the enemy, firing from the hip. But the engagement was far from over’

Taliban fighters who engaged with heavy small arms fire.

“Instinctively, Stevens charged the enemy, firing from the hip as he advanced. With his initial response, he successfully killed two enemies, wounded another and forced the remainder to withdraw and take cover in a field of corn, seven feet high.”

But the engagement was far from over. The insurgents established themselves in a strong position, and machine gun and RPG fire rained down on Stevens and his team.

HE RALLIED his five men to him and organised them to try to win the firefight. At the same time, a second OMLT patrol put in a flanking assault on the enemy while the Fire Support Team cued up 105mm artillery and an airstrike.

Despite the danger, Stevens decided to hold his position so he could guarantee the destruction of the enemy.

He and his men applied controlled fire, just 120 metres from the artillery strike, preventing the enemy from fleeing.

The citation continues: “Following the suc-

cessful fire mission and flanking assault, Stevens led an assault on a further enemy position which was suppressing from 100m away. Stevens led from the front and assaulted with grenades and his personal weapons supported only by his small team.

“His quick and aggressive attack accounted for most of the enemy, forcing the remainder to fall back under his onslaught.

“The battle continued for over three more hours. A further ten Taliban positions unveiled themselves and engaged the two OMLT patrols. Depleted stocks of ammunition now forced the OMLTs to withdraw. Stevens moved his men, still under heavy fire, into a position where they could suppress the enemy and thus extract the other OMLT.

“All the time, he remained in contact with the artillery and air support as 105mm guns conducted ‘danger close’ fire missions. Stevens stayed firm, dominating the enemy until his patrol had gained relative safety. Only then did he fall back and join them.”

The citation finishes: “Stevens displayed extraordinary courage, selflessness and leadership. He personally engaged and killed several Taliban Fighters and set conditions for the defeat of a strong enemy force.

“His actions ensured the enemy never again appeared in such strength in the ATTAL area during Op Herrick 8. Stevens’ outstanding gallantry was witnessed by two British Captains and his peers; it deserves the highest recognition.”

His CGC was announced in The London Gazette on March 6, 2009, and was presented to him by The Queen in an investiture at Buckingham Palace.

Remarkably, two other soldiers from the Royal Irish Regiment were awarded the CGC for gallantry on the same tour.

Recounting the incident, Stevens told me: “I came across three of them [Taliban fighters]. I shot those three and called airstrikes on their positions. You rehearse your drills in the UK. Those skills keep you alive, and then the adrenaline kicks in. You don’t have much

‘You rehearse your drills in the UK. Those skills keep you alive and then the adrenaline kicks in’

time to think, it is more of a reaction but, if I hadn’t done what I did, I probably wouldn’t be here today. I was just doing my job.”

Stevens became a Sniper Platoon Commander in 2014. In June 2019, he was seconded to The Black Watch, the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland.

He retired from the Army in October and his medal group was sold at auction by Duke’s in November.

Now aged 43 and married with four children, he lives in Inverness, Scotland, and works as a Training Area Operative for Landmarc, a Ministry of Defence partner.

Stevens’ mother still lives on St Helena but he has only been back twice in 23 years, most recently for his father’s funeral two years ago. “But I still call it home,” he adds.

St Helena and its inhabitants should take enormous pride in the actions of this courageous and modest man.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information, visit lordashcroft.com or follow him on Twitter and Facebook via @LordAshcroft. His new website lordashcrofthonbravery.com details all his work on gallantry