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Colour Sergeant Alwyn Stevens

By Lord Ashcroft



It is wonderful when two of my great passions meet, especially when it is unexpected. Both my fondness for St Helena and my fascination with bravery date back well over 60 years to my childhood.

I was a toddler when I first visited St Helena as my family stopped off on the island on our way to Africa where my father was taking up a post as a colonial officer. I have had a soft spot for St Helena ever since and in recent years, until Covid-19 intervened, became a regular visitor.

My interest in gallantry stems from my father, Eric, telling me about his experiences when he was a young officer charging up Sword Beach as part of the June 6 1944 D-Day landings. I was about ten at the time as he explained how his Commanding Officer had been shot dead at his side. My father himself was wounded by shrapnel, fighting on until ordered from the battlefield. For the past 35 years, I have also been a collector of gallantry medals.

With this in mind, I am delighted to reveal that I recently became the privileged custodian of a rare and much treasured gallantry award – the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross (CGC) – that was awarded to a “Saint”.

Colour Sergeant Alwyn Stevens was awarded the decoration – second only to the VC in terms of Commonwealth awards made for bravery in the presence of the enemy – for his courage in Afghanistan. Today, with Stevens’ co-operation, I am able to tell the full story of his unusual life – and his outstanding valour – for the first time.

Alwyn John Stevens was born at Longwood, St Helena, on October 16 1978. The son of a lorry driver, Stevens also has a sister. He was educated locally and lived on the island until he enlisted in the Army on October 18 1999. Upon completion of his basic training, he joined the Royal Irish Regiment.

He was only a few weeks out of training when he was deployed to Sierra Leone. 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. On September 12 2008 while serving as a corporal, he performed remarkable acts of gallantry in Helmand Province which led to the award of the CGC. His official citation stated:

“Corporal Stevens was an Afghan National Army (ANA) platoon mentor operating in support of an ANA deployed at Patrol Base ATTAL in Gereshkh Valley. On 12 Sep 08, he and his six-man Operational Mentor Liaison Team (OMLT), with a small group of ANA, were patrolling North East of the Patrol Base to dominate the surrounding vegetated Green Zone.

“A local national approached the patrol and warned them of a



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sizeable enemy force in the vicinity intent on ambushing the patrol.

"Stevens pushed forward with six men to secure a compound from which he could observe the area. Approaching the mud-walled compound, he had a sudden meeting engagement with eight Taliban 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, 7 feet high.

"The enemy quickly established a firm footing and resumed fire. Stevens no longer had the advantage as he was under effective small arms and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fire. Stevens rallied his five men to him and organised them to try to win the firefight. Concurrently, a second OMLT patrol manoeuvred to the West to put in a flanking assault while the Fire Support Team cued up 105mm artillery and an airstrike. Stevens decided to hold his position throughout the offensive support engagement despite being only 120m from the target in order to fix them in position for destruction. He and his men applied controlled fire, preventing and enemy egress.

"Following the successful 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. Stevens remained in position as Close Air Support, and 105mm guns conducted 'danger close' fire missions. Stevens stayed firm, dominating the enemy until his paired patrol had gained relative safety. Only then did he fall back and join them.



"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. It 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.

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 was discharged from the Army in October 2021 after 22 years' service. His medal group was sold at auction by Duke's last month. Stevens told me: "I came across three of them [Taliban fighters]. I shot those three and called airstrikes on their positions. The training kicks in, you rehearse your drills in the UK. Those skills keep you alive, and then the adrenaline kicks in [in battle]. You don't have much 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."

Now aged 43 and married with four children, Stevens lives in Inverness, Scotland, and works as a Training Area Operative for Landmarc, a partner of the Ministry of Defence. Stevens' mother, Joyce, still lives on St Helena but he has only been back twice in 23 years, most recently for the funeral of his father, Eric, two years ago. His sister, Deborah, who was also born on St Helena, also now lives in Scotland.

"But I still call it [St Helena] home," Stevens added. St Helena and its inhabitants should take enormous pride in the actions of this courageous and modest man.

* Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter and Facebook: @LordAshcroft. His new website www.lordashcroftonbravery.com details all his work on gallantry.