

Guardsman
Edward Colquhoun
Charlton VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



AN IRISH GUARDS FIREFLY AND A BREN TEAM GUARD A SECTION OF THE BREMEN-HAMBURG AUTOBAHN, APRIL 20, 1945 IWM BU 4157

“Why we have been kept back so long I don’t know but our day is coming”

It is rare for any gallantry medal to be awarded on the testimony of the enemy rather than comrades. However, in the spring of 1945, Guardsman Edward Charlton showed such outstanding courage that German soldiers later provided evidence that his actions were worthy of the Victoria Cross. Subsequently, his award proved to be the final VC of the European theatre.

Although not part of my collection, there is no doubt in my mind that Guardsman Charlton’s VC action was not just the final one before VE Day, but that it represents one of the finest actions in the decoration’s long, rich history.

Edward Colquhoun Charlton was born in Rowlands Gill, near Gateshead in County Durham, on June 15, 1920. After leaving school aged 14, he worked at Manchester Abattoir. With the outbreak of the war in September 1939 – and because he worked as a butcher – he was encouraged to join the Royal Army Service Corps, whose roles included supplying food for the Army.

He instead, aged 19, volunteered for the Irish Guards; he wanted to see frontline action and he hoped to join the police post-war, knowing that the Manchester and Salford forces only employed former Guardsmen. However, it was not until the next year that he got his call-up and he was mobilised on September 19, 1940.

After completing training at Caterham Depot, Surrey, Charlton, the middle of the three brothers, joined the 2nd (Armoured) Battalion of the Irish Guards in 1942. Known as both ‘Eddie’ and ‘Ed’, he was popular with his fellow

Guardsmen. Charlton penned several letters home, including one in 1942 in which he seemed disappointed to have not yet seen action. “Why we have been kept back so long I don’t know but our day is coming,” he wrote.

“I will come through this lot”

Several months after the D-Day invasion, Charlton moved with his battalion through Belgium and Holland, writing home to tell his family how grateful the locals had been to be rid of the German occupation and detailing their terrible deprivations. In early 1945, he wrote to his mother saying: “Don’t worry Mum. I don’t take any more risks than I have to so I will come through this lot with flying colours.”

On April 20, 1945, XXX Corps reached the outskirts of Bremen after the Allies had advanced across Germany from the Rhine to the Elbe. Allied commanders were keen to prevent German reinforcements reaching the city from Hamburg, to the northeast.

With this in mind, the 2nd Battalion, Irish Guards – part of the Guards Armoured Division – were ordered to block their route. One troop from No.1 Squadron advanced northwest from the town of Elsdorf to the village of Wistedt, only two miles from the autobahn, but they withdrew at dusk since there was no sign of the enemy in the area.

The next morning, April 21, 1 Squadron and a platoon of infantry returned to Wistedt. Among the advancing party, as the drizzle fell, was Charlton, co-driver of a Sherman tank. At first light, he was in one of four tanks rolling into the outskirts

of village, some with infantry riding on the back of the vehicles. Soon, in the best traditions of the British Army, they stopped to set about “brewing up” using their ‘Tommy Cookers’ (rations heaters).

However, before they able to enjoy their hot tea, they were ambushed by a large force. As Lieutenant (later Captain) Barry Quinan stood in the middle of the road looking through binoculars to see what lay ahead, an armour-piercing shell passed so close to his head that it blew his black beret off before hitting a house behind him. In the words of one eyewitness, “all hell was let loose”, with most of the fire coming from the right flank.

Shells, mortars and machine gunfire rained down on the soldiers: a young corporal was the first to die, hit by a German self-propelled gun and falling back down into his tank. Eyewitnesses saw Charlton and his co-driver race from their own tank after it had been hit and take shelter between two houses.

With three of the four Shermans knocked out and with the Irish Guards almost entirely surrounded and short of ammunition, the order was given to retreat. Several soldiers were unable to pull out and they were eventually forced to surrender.

Firing from the Hip

It later emerged, however, that, with his party in danger of being overrun, Charlton, then 24, decided that attack was the best form of defence even though they were against a large force from the 15. Panzergrenadier-Division supported by six self-propelled guns.

His citation for his VC takes up the story: "Whereupon, entirely on his own initiative, Guardsman Charlton decided to counter-attack the enemy. Quickly recovering the Browning machine gun from his damaged tank, he advanced up the road in full view of the enemy, firing the Browning from the hip. Such was the boldness of his attack and the intensity of his fire that he halted the leading enemy company, inflicting heavy casualties on them. This effort at the same time brought much needed relief to his own infantry.

"For ten minutes Guardsman Charlton fired in this manner, until wounded in the left arm. Immediately, despite intense enemy fire, he mounted his machine gun on a nearby fence, which he used to support his injured left arm. He stood firing thus for a further ten minutes until he was then again hit in the left arm which fell away shattered and useless.

"Although twice wounded and suffering from loss of blood, Guardsman Charlton again lifted his machine gun on to the fence – now having only one arm with which to fire and reload. Nevertheless, he still continued to inflict casualties on the

enemy, until finally he was hit for the third time and collapsed. He died later of his wounds in enemy hands.

"The heroism and determination of this Guardsman in his self-imposed task were beyond all praise. Even his German captors were amazed at his valour. Guardsman Charlton's courageous and self-sacrificing action not only inflicted extremely heavy casualties on the enemy and retrieved his comrades from a desperate situation, but also enabled the position to be speedily recaptured."

The German Perspective

Those who survived the ambush and returned unscathed did not know exactly who among those missing had been killed and who had been taken prisoner. In the hope he was still alive and in the knowledge that he had shown great bravery, Charlton was initially recommended for the Military Medal.

However, by May 10, 1945, two days after VE Day, the recommendation was marked "unsuccessful". This was because it had emerged that Charlton was dead and the award could not be awarded posthumously. Fortunately, a more vivid and accurate account of Charlton's astonishing gallantry started to emerge, first from Sergeant Jim Connolly, who had been captured on April 21 but was later released after the German surrender.

Connolly had not personally seen all of Charlton's last stand, but he had been told by a senior German officer about his courage. Connolly set about informing senior officers of the precise details and they were able to confirm those with German POWs who had observed the counter-attack at first hand. Those who bore witness to Charlton's bravery included Leutnant Hans-Jurgen von Bulow, the company commander who was awarded an Iron Cross First Class for leading the successful attack at Wistedt.

"[Charlton] advanced up the road in full view of the enemy, firing the Browning from the hip. Such was the boldness of his attack that he halted the leading company"



THE GUARDS ARMoured DIVISION HAD ALREADY BEEN INVOLVED IN MAJOR ADVANCES, INCLUDING OPERATION MARKET GARDEN. SHOWN, A SHERMAN FIREFLY OF THE IRISH GUARDS GROUP PASSES KNOCKED-OUT SHERMANS IWM BU 926



Connolly said later that had it not been for Charlton's courageous efforts in holding up the German advance, he did not think there would have been any survivors from the ambush. After many soldiers on both sides were interviewed, Charlton's VC was announced in the final wartime Honours' List, published on May 2, 1946.

It is extremely rare but not unprecedented for the testimonials of enemy servicemen to play a part in the award of a Victoria Cross. In fact, the decoration bestowed on Flying Officer Lloyd Trigg for bravery in the air on August 11, 1943, is the only VC to be announced solely on evidence given by the enemy. Trigg, of the Royal New Zealand Air Force but serving with 200 Squadron, RAF, was decorated posthumously after two German officers testified how he had attacked their surfaced U-boat at a range of just 50ft in his Liberator despite having been hit by anti-aircraft fire.

He Marches with Us

Charlton's former comrades were overjoyed by the news of his VC, announced more than a year after the action. Sergeant Hugh Gallagher, who had been wounded and captured during the ambush, wrote a letter to Charlton's parents: "I am writing this letter to you in reference to your son Eddie. Today I am one of the happiest men in England after I had seen in the paper of his reward, the VC. It was only through his gallantry

that saved my life that I am able to write to you. The work he did that day is indescribable, he saved quite a lot of our lives though badly wounded."

Gallagher also revealed that Charlton, badly injured and by then a POW, had said farewell to his fellow prisoners with the words "Up the Micks", an affectionate reference to his Irish comrades. He died from his wounds hours later.

Shortly before the June 8, 1946, Victory Day Parade in London, Guardsman James Mendes wrote an emotional tribute to his best friend: "There is a man who will march with me on the Victory Day Parade, a man who you will not see.

"Ed was my pal. Funny that an Englishman should have to win the VC for an Irish regiment, but that's the way it is. Yet after five years in the Irish Guards Ed was more Irish than English, in fact, more Irish than many of us.

"He had the blarney all right, and a temper with the physique to make it dangerous. But he had a heart of gold. He was a man, the way real men are and should be. He liked his beer and his fun. To me, Ed still lives. He will march with us through London. You won't see him, but he'll be there."

Charlton's posthumous VC was presented to his parents, Albert and Edith, at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on October 29, 1946. He was buried by the Germans near Elsdorf but he was reinterred and his grave is now situated at the Becklingen War Cemetery in Soltau, Germany. The

inscription on Charlton's gravestone reads: "Greater love hath no man that he lay down his life for others."

In 1956, Charlton's parents gifted his medal group, including his VC, to the Irish Guards and it remains on display at their regimental headquarters at Wellington Barracks, London.

Victoria Cross Heroes, Vol.2



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His bravery book, *Victoria Cross Heroes 2*, was published in 2016 and is

available in hardback and paperback. Visit www.victoriacrossheroes2.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London, see: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. Details of his VC collection can be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.

