

Lieutenant-
Colonel
Geoffrey Charles
Tasker Keyes
VC, MC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



THE BUILDING KNOWN AS ROMMEL'S 'DUG-OUT' THAT WAS THE TARGET IN ONE OF THE BRAVEST DEEDS OF THE WAR IWM K 4394

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Geoffrey Keyes was awarded the VC for one of the most daring actions of World War Two. As someone who has admired courage for more than half a century, and as the privileged custodian of the Keyes medal group, I am loathe to describe anyone as “too brave” because it implies criticism – and how can you fault someone who has given his all for King and country? However, the raid that cost Keyes his life was, with the benefit of hindsight, hopelessly misguided.

Geoffrey Charles Tasker Keyes was born in Aberdour, Fife, Scotland, on May 18, 1917, the son of Lord Keyes, the Admiral of the Fleet. Keyes Jnr was educated at King’s Mead School, Seaford, Sussex, then at Eton College. He had hoped to follow his father into the Royal Navy, but failed the eyesight test. Instead, he attended the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, and was commissioned into the Royal Scots Greys as a second lieutenant.

From October 1938, Keyes served in Palestine but, while on leave in February 1940, he volunteered for special service just as some senior officers were seeing the benefits of using small, highly specialised units to launch hit-and-run raids behind enemy lines. As an accomplished skier, Keyes was picked for the Narvik Expeditionary Force, joining the unit in April 1940. However, when the Allies retreated from Norway he was evacuated back to Scotland and later

re-joined his regiment. He then briefly served as liaison officer to the Chasseurs Alpins (the French Army’s specialist mountain infantry battalions), and for his work in that role was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Next, he volunteered to join the newly formed Commandos. Keyes was posted to No.11 (Scottish) Commando and, after rigorous training, embarked for the Middle East in January 1941. Two months later, he was promoted to acting major and in June was appointed the rank of acting lieutenant-colonel. In the same month he was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery in the Litani River action in Lebanon.

Daring and guile

By autumn, Keyes had formulated a daring plan and, after much persuasion, won over General Headquarters Cairo to sanction an attempt to destroy the German HQ, 250 miles behind enemy lines at Beda Littoria, Libya. Furthermore, the intention was to capture Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps. The ‘Rommel Raid’ – codenamed Operation Flipper – was timed to coincide with a major British offensive on November 17/18, 1941, Operation Crusader.

Colonel Robert Laycock, Officer Commanding Middle East Commando operations, had reservations about the mission but decided to accompany the

force as an observer. He remained at the landing site throughout Operation Flipper. It is Laycock’s own report – rather than the heavily edited version that appeared in *The London Gazette* – that follows:

“Lt-Col Geoffrey Keyes, Royal Scots Greys, commanded a detachment of a force which landed by submarine [...] behind the enemy lines to attack headquarters, base, installations and communications. The original plan, formulated several weeks in advance at Eighth Army Headquarters, included orders for attacks on various separate objectives. Although the whole operation was considered to be of a somewhat desperate nature, it was obvious that certain tasks were more dangerous than others.

“Colonel Keyes, who was present at all the meetings and assisted in the planning, deliberately selected for himself from the outset the command of the detachment detailed to attack what was undoubtedly the most hazardous of these objectives – the residence and headquarters of the General Officer Commanding the German Forces in North Africa. (When the plan was submitted to me as Commander of the Middle East Commandos, in which capacity I may be regarded as having some experience of this type of warfare, I gave it my considered opinion that the chances of being evacuated after the operation were very slender and that the attack on General Rommel’s house in

particular appeared to be desperate in the extreme. This attack, even if initially successful, meant almost certain death for those who took part in it.

“I made these comments in the presence of Colonel Keyes, who begged me not to repeat them lest the operation be cancelled.)

“In the execution of the operation Colonel Keyes led his detachment ashore. The majority of the boats, including his own, were swamped on the passage into the beach but, whereas his officers and men were able to take advantage of the shelter of a cave in which they lit a fire, warmed themselves and dried their clothing, Colonel Keyes remained throughout the night on the beach to meet any men who managed to get ashore from the second vessel.”

Pressing on

As the weather deteriorated, so too did the morale of some of Keyes’ men. However, the young lieutenant-colonel was determined to press ahead with the attack, moving towards his target only in darkness, until the party was close to

its objective by the fifth day. Once again Laycock’s report takes up the story:

“Having detailed the majority of his men to take up positions so as to prevent enemy interference with his attack on Rommel’s residence, Colonel Keyes was left with only one officer (Captain Campbell) and one other rank (Sergeant Terry) with whom to break into the house and deal with the guards and headquarters staff. At zero hours (2359hrs), having dispatched the covering party to block the approaches to the house and guard the exits from neighbouring buildings, Keyes himself with Captain Campbell and Sergeant Terry crawled forward past the guards, through the surrounding fence and so up to the house itself.

“Colonel Keyes hoped to be able to climb in through a window or enter by

the back premises, but these proved to be inaccessible. He, therefore, without hesitation, boldly led his party up to the front door and – taking advantage of Captain Campbell’s excellent German – beat on the door and demanded entrance. As soon as the sentry opened the door Colonel Keyes and Sergeant Terry set upon him but, as he could not be overpowered immediately, Captain Campbell shot him with his revolver.

“The noise naturally but unfortunately roused the inmates of the house. Colonel Keyes, appreciating that speed was now of the utmost importance, posted Sergeant Terry at the foot of the stairs to prevent interference from the floor above – a task which he accomplished satisfactorily by firing a burst from his Tommy gun at anyone who attempted to reach the landing.

“Without hesitation, he boldly led his party up to the front door and – taking advantage of Captain Campbell’s excellent German – beat on the door and demanded entrance”



THE GRAVE DUG FOR KEYES BY THE GERMANS, WHO BURIED HIM WITH FULL MILITARY HONOURS. THE CROSS CARVED BY THE GERMANS GIVES HIS RANK AS 'MAJOR' AND THE 'VC, MC' WERE LATER ADDED BY KEYES' BROTHER IWM K 4388



KEYES' MEDAL GROUP, CONSISTING OF HIS VC, MC, GENERAL SERVICE MEDAL (WITH PALESTINE CLASP), 1939-45 STAR, AFRICA STAR, DEFENCE MEDAL, WAR MEDAL 1939-45 AND HIS CROIX DE GUERRE 1939-45 WITH BRONZE CITATION STAR COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

“Although the lights in the passage were burning, those inside the ground floor rooms were extinguished by the occupants. If the raiding party was to achieve any measure of success these rooms had to be entered. This could be done by stealth which would however have taken time and, had the enemy been bold enough to come out into the passage, they would immediately have appreciated that they were attacked by three individuals only, whom they could easily have overpowered. The only alternative was to attempt to bluff the occupants by dashing into each room in turn with a minimum of delay. This latter course Colonel Keyes unflinchingly adopted although he undoubtedly realised that it was almost certain death for the man who first showed himself silhouetted by the passage lights against a darkened doorway.

“Colonel Keyes, who instinctively took the lead, emptied his revolver with great success into the first room and was followed by Captain Campbell who threw in a grenade, but the inevitable result of such daring occurred on his entering the second room of the ground floor. He must have been perfectly aware that it was occupied, since Sergeant Terry, who was a few yards away, reported to me later that he could distinctly hear the occupants breathing and moving about inside. Colonel Keyes was shot almost immediately on flinging open the door and fell back into the passage mortally wounded. On being carried outside by Captain Campbell and Sergeant Terry he died within a few minutes.” Of the entire force, only Laycock and Terry

made it back to British lines after 37 days in the desert. From the British party that had taken part in Operation Flipper, it is believed two were killed and 28 were captured, including three wounded. German casualties were put at four dead and three wounded. It later transpired that Rommel had never used the building raided by Keyes. In any event, he had been in Rome at the time of the attack.

Indisputable bravery

Nevertheless, he heard of the raid and clearly respected Keyes' bravery because he sent his personal chaplain to Libya to conduct the funeral of the commando. Sir Winston Churchill, who comforted Admiral Keyes on the loss of his son, said: “I would far rather have Geoffrey alive than Rommel dead.”

Keyes, who was single, died on November 18, 1941, aged just 24. His VC was announced on June 19, 1942 and the citation ended with the words: “By his fearless disregard of the great dangers which he ran and of which he was fully aware, and by his magnificent leadership and outstanding gallantry, Lieutenant-Colonel Keyes set an example of supreme self-sacrifice and devotion to duty.”

Laycock, who drew up the report on which the citation was based, had not been present when Keyes and his men attacked. There are suggestions, from author Michael Asher and others, that the account of the final attack used for the citation was not entirely accurate and more chaotic than described. It is not impossible that, in the confusion, Keyes was killed by a bullet fired from one of his own men, although this claim is disputed.

What is indisputable is that Keyes, keen to match his esteemed father's military career, was incredibly brave. His father was presented both his son's VC and MC by King George VI in December 1942. After the war, Keyes' remains were moved from a cemetery in Beda Littoria to Libya's Benghazi War Cemetery. In April 1950, a memorial to Keyes was unveiled by Churchill at St Paul's Cathedral. Keyes' father was given a portrait of his son by the British painter Sydney Kendrick. ●

Special Ops Heroes



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Special Ops Heroes*, was first published in 2014 and is available in

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Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. Details can be found at: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes
For information about his VC collection, go to: www.lordashcroftmedals.com
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