

Warrant Officer Class 1  
Barry Johnson GC



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

PHOTO: VC&GC ASSOCIATION



*“You can’t imagine the sound of an explosion when you are that close to it. That’s a vivid memory that will stay with me for ever”*

Nobody had been awarded the George Cross for well over a decade when Warrant Officer Class 1 (Staff Sergeant Major) Barry Johnson broke the trend in a terrifying incident in Northern Ireland during the Troubles; an incident that he was lucky to have survived. Indeed, few living people in the entire history of the medal could have come closer to receiving the gallantry award posthumously.

Johnson was born in Wood Green, north London, on January 25, 1952. Until he was an adult aged around 40, he thought his stepfather was his natural father. However, he later found out that his true father, a worker in a stained-glass studio, had separated from his mother shortly after he was born. He was brought up and educated in Buckinghamshire, where he had a half-brother.

Johnson left school at 15 determined to embark on a “uniformed career”. He arrived at the Army Apprentices College in Chepstow, south Wales, in April 1967 and embarked on a three-year apprenticeship

as an ammunition technician, before joining the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. He married in 1971 and went on to have two children.

After postings to Germany, Canada and Belize, he did a tour of Northern Ireland as a staff sergeant, and a second tour in 1989 as a warrant officer. Just months before the first tour, he had undergone an EOD course (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) and by his second tour he was a veteran of dealing with suspect devices.

Both tours of the province – where during the Troubles 17 ammunition technicians lost their lives – were particularly busy and hazardous. Time and again, he dealt with bombs, weapons’ finds, false alarms and hoaxes. During his two tours, he dealt with 80 disposal tasks, including the safe neutralisation of 12 live devices.

### Engulfed by flames

On October 7, 1989, Johnson was called to a van that had been abandoned in the middle of a housing estate in

Londonderry. The driver and passenger had been seen behaving suspiciously by a patrol. The van was driven away at speed in the late afternoon: the two occupants abandoning the vehicle and fleeing, although they were later detained.

By the time Johnson and his team arrived, security forces had already evacuated the area – including moving patients from a nearby hospital. Someone had already looked through the window of the van and seen six barrels loaded with mortars. The republican extremists’ intended targets were the security forces.

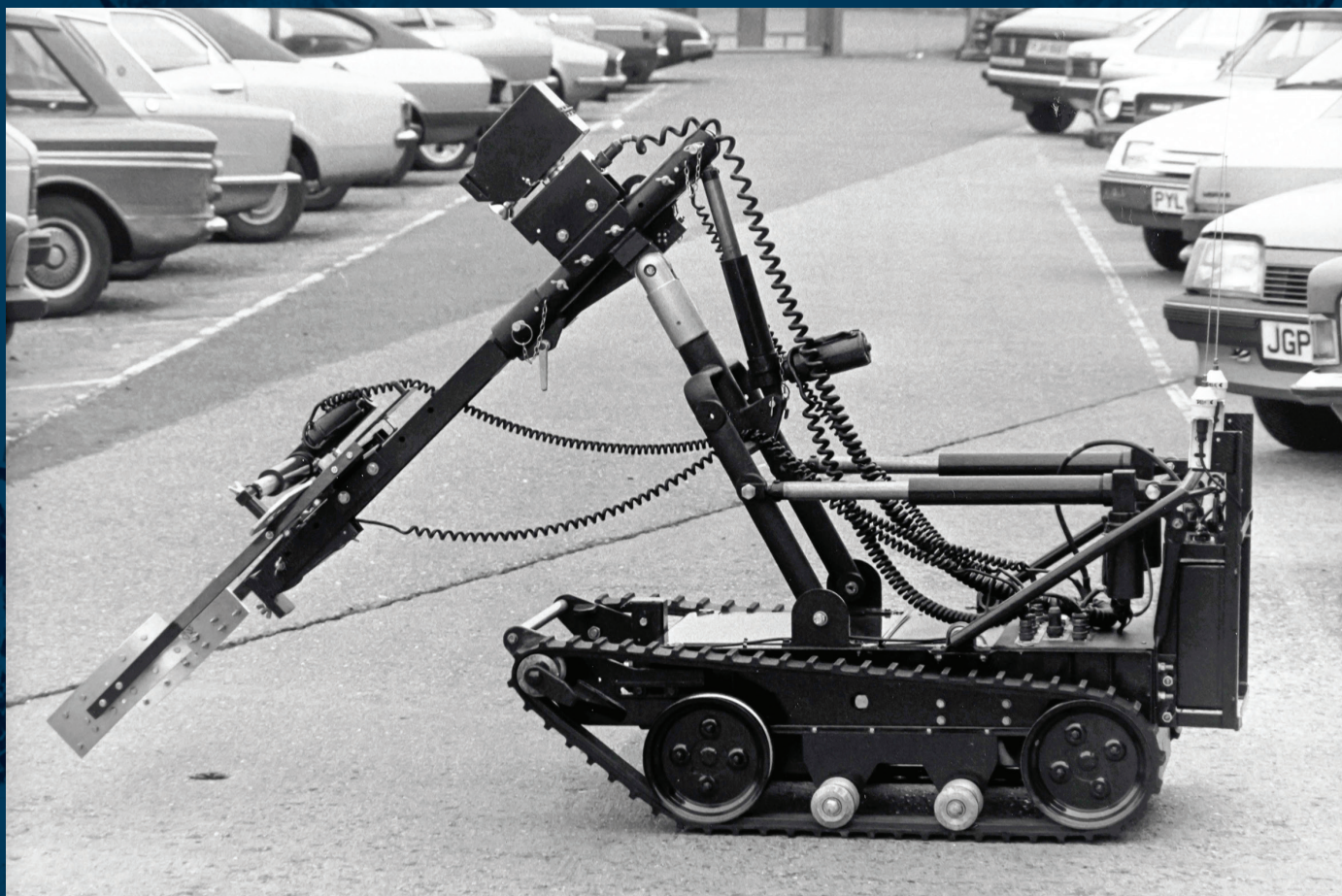
Johnson, then 38, knew he had to deal with the vehicle at the scene, rather than risk moving it. The nearby locations of houses, a hospital and a barracks meant time was short. He knew he had to look for the firing mechanism – a timer in a small wooden box – and disable it with a remote-controlled ‘wheelbarrow’ device on caterpillar tracks. The device had a camera, disruptor and shotgun.

Once the vehicle was disabled, the six barrels had to be dismantled – but this was

PRINCE CHARLES AND CAMILLA DUCHESS OF CORNWALL HOSTED A REUNION FOR HOLDERS OF THE VC AND GC IN 2009. BARRY JOHNSON GC STANDS IN THE MIDDLE ROW, FAR LEFT  
TIM GRAHAM PHOTO LIBRARY/GETTY







THE WHEELBARROW MK.7 WAS A REMOTE-CONTROL ROBOT USED BY EOD TEAMS IN NORTHERN IRELAND PA ARCHIVE/TOPIFOTO

a manual, not a mechanical, task. With his assistant, he first lifted the device from the van and placed it on the ground. Then he placed the firing tubes so they faced away from buildings in case they detonated unexpectedly. Johnson then ensured his colleagues were well away in case of an accident.

In the dark and in bitterly cold drizzle, Johnson had successfully tackled five of the mortars, but the sixth detonated, without warning, with a huge blast. At his Devon home, Johnson recalled that day for me in astonishing detail when interviewed for my book *George Cross Heroes*. “You can’t imagine the sound of an explosion when you are that close to it. It is a violent detonation. I saw a boiling cloud of flame engulf me with red-hot sand being blown past my face.

“That’s a vivid memory that will stay with me for ever.”

### Breathless

“I found myself on the ground in a ditch. I was in a world of silence and darkness. I was so disorientated I didn’t know whether I was still alive or not. Eventually, realising I was there, thinking quite logically, I must still be alive and it was probably best if I exited the area pretty sharpish and got to safety. But

before the sound [of the blast] had died away, I knew I was in a situation that was life-changing – where I would never be quite the same again because of the gravity of it all.

“I went to stand up, but I toppled over. It was then that I realised I had some other injuries that I couldn’t really identify.

“Everything was hurting – face, hands, legs, but what dawned on me was that I hadn’t taken a breath since the explosion. The actual explosion had clasped my chest so I couldn’t breathe and that was more worrying than anything else. I started to feel dizzy and it took a while to restart my breathing. It took real concentration – the only way I could do it was to breathe out slightly and then breathe back in slightly more. I gradually increased it through short breaths and managed to get my breathing going. I was on my own and I couldn’t see a thing.

“But then I heard army boots running towards me and so I knew someone was coming to assist. Two lads picked me up and took me back to the ICP [Incident Command Post]. I was probably in a mess. I could hear my number two shouting over the radio for an ambulance, which turned up pretty promptly. Then we took a hectic drive to the hospital in Londonderry which was almost as

frightening as everything else that had happened. I was on a stretcher in the back of the vehicle and we were screaming around corners. At that point, once I had arrived at the hospital, I started to drift in and out of consciousness.”

After a night or two, he was transferred to Musgrave Park Hospital, Belfast. His worst injuries were to both eyes. Both his legs were broken and in plaster, and he had 41 stitches holding together a mass of facial injuries. Yet Johnson was largely oblivious to such injuries: instead he repeatedly asked the doctors to make saving his eyesight their priority.

He underwent several operations on his eyes and stayed in hospital in Belfast for more than two months. His wife, Maria, occasionally flew over to be with him, but she had mainly to look after their school-age children. His eyes, which were sealed shut for days, remained his greatest problem. To start with, it seemed his left eye was less badly damaged: “All the surgical effort went into saving that eye, but right at the end of the process – and after a number of operations – my retina detached and so I went blind [for good] in that eye.

“Then the priority switched to trying to save my right eye. I had operations on that and eventually I got partial vision back in



transplants – I had eight operations on my two eyes. That was ample because the anaesthetic wears you down after a while. But I was young and fit and so they used to wheel me down [to the operating theatre] from time to time to have another go [at saving his eyesight].

“In Musgrave Park Hospital, I used to take phone calls from people in a small room. Sat there, I could see a pink sign on the wall, which over the days was getting clearer and clearer. And after a few weeks I could read what it said, ‘No smoking’. That was a marvellous moment. But mainly I had audiobooks, or my wife would read books and newspapers to me – she did a marvellous job.”

### Home by Christmas

Johnson's aim was always to be back in Britain for Christmas Day. He met the deadline and was moved to Woolwich military hospital in southeast London. He was soon on crutches and was discharged to Didcot, Oxfordshire, days before Christmas Day.

His family had been based in Germany, but had moved back to Britain after the blast. Johnson recalled: “I had a great determination to get back to work. It was one of my guiding aims – to get fit enough to be able to work again. It was something I focused on. It was good – had I not had something to focus on I may have given up a bit. And I did get back that next year, 1990. It was an office job on research and development. I wasn't physically well enough to have tackled another device and it wouldn't have been fair on me to ask me to try. But I did a year's good work before I finally retired, aged 40.”

He had found out on November 5, 1990, after he was back at work developing EOD equipment, that he was to receive the GC and that it would be announced the next day. It had not crossed his mind that

he would receive a gallantry award and when he was asked to see his commanding officer, Brigadier Derek Baughan OBE, Director of Land Service Ammunition, Johnson was convinced he was in trouble.

In his CO's office at Didcot, the Brigadier told Johnson he had “great pleasure in informing” him that he had been awarded the GC. He said the previous GC for the ‘trade’ had been for George Styles in 1972. Johnson said: “I went home and told the wife and she said, ‘That's nice. Have a cup of tea.’ The following day it was arranged for me to go to London and meet the press. It was quite big news for a couple of days. I remember travelling on the train down to London and this chap opposite me had a paper with a huge picture of me on the front page, but he didn't recognise me. “That amused me.”

His lengthy citation ended with a tribute to his sense of duty and dedication as he lay critically injured after the blast: “Such was his courage and determination to ensure that the task was completed safely that, although in great pain, he refused to be evacuated until he had carefully briefed

his assistant on the precise details of the device so that the operation could be safely completed by a replacement operator.”

Johnson's investiture was on December 11, 1990 at Buckingham Palace – he received his award from the Queen. He was given permission to have not just the usual one guest, but three: his wife Maria and their two children, Bevan and Adele.

Barry Johnson moved to Devon in 1992 and, despite having the physical and mental scars from the day he almost died, he has enjoyed walking, cycling, fishing and photography. Barry – now aged 70 – and Maria celebrated their golden wedding anniversary last year. They have four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. ●



REPLICAS OF BARRY JOHNSON'S MEDAL GROUP AT THE ROYAL LOGISTICS CORPS MUSEUM. BARRY STILL HAS THE ORIGINALS AND WILL NOW RECEIVE THE PLATINUM JUBILEE MEDAL ALONGSIDE ALL VC AND GC RECIPIENTS  
THE ROYAL LOGISTIC CORPS MUSEUM

### GEORGE CROSS HEROES

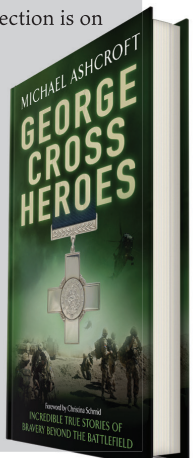


Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *George Cross Heroes* was published in 2010 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more

details, visit: [www.georgecrossheroes.com](http://www.georgecrossheroes.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 about his VC collection may be found at:

[www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com)  
For more about Lord Ashcroft's work, go to: [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com) and for Lord Ashcroft's work on gallantry, visit: [www.lordashcroftonbravery.com](http://www.lordashcroftonbravery.com)  
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A BRITISH ARMY EOD TEAM GRAPPLES WITH A SUSPECT DEVICE IN BELFAST, 1980 ALAIN LE GARSMEUR/ALAMY