

Major Sir  
Ambrose Joseph  
McGonigal KBE,  
MC & Bar



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



THE ROYAL NAVY'S MTBS, HEAVILY ARMED FAST ATTACK CRAFT, FREQUENTLY SUPPORTED SMALL RAIDING OPERATIONS TOPFOTO

*“Ambrose joined 12 Commando, looking for revenge over his brother’s death... One of his comrades later recalled that Ambrose had ‘an insatiable thirst’ for adventure and was ‘totally without fear’”*

In war and peace, Ambrose McGonigal lived an extraordinary life, with conflict never far away. During World War Two, he served as a Commando and in the SBS, while after it he served in Belfast as the most senior Catholic judge during the height of the Troubles.

I first came across the bravery of Ambrose McGonigal and that of his younger brother, Eoin, two years ago while researching the life of the legendary SAS officer, Lieutenant Colonel Blair ‘Paddy’ Mayne, DSO & three Bars. Mayne is arguably the bravest man never to be awarded the Victoria Cross and, had he enjoyed a more conventional career, that decoration might well have been bestowed upon him... but that’s another story for another day.

My research into Mayne’s life and career brought me into contact with Patric McGonigal, Ambrose’s eldest grandson whose new book on the brothers, *Special Forces Brothers in Arms, Eoin and Ambrose McGonigal: War in the SAS and SBS*, is published in April 2022. Much of the information in this article comes from that book, reproduced with the author’s blessing. I should declare an interest – at Patric’s request, I wrote the foreword to his book, congratulating him for “a diligently-researched work that is beautifully illustrated”.

### The Eton of Ireland

Ambrose Joseph McGonigal was born in Dublin on November 22, 1917, just a year after the Easter Rebellion that saw armed

resistance to British rule in Ireland. Eoin was born three years later in 1920, the same year the Government of Ireland Act was passed, resulting in partition of the country a year later. Ambrose also had an older brother, Richard, 15 years his senior, and four sisters.

Their father was John McGonigal KC (King’s Counsel), a senior barrister in Dublin. Unusually, John came from a ‘mixed’ religious background, with his father a Catholic and his mother from a well-known Presbyterian family in Belfast. In 1922, the year that the Irish Free State came into existence, the family moved to Belfast, the home city of John McGonigal – who was one of no less than 17 siblings.

Such a move had its challenges, but John went on to become the chief crown prosecutor for Belfast and, in time, was elected the “father” of the Northern Irish Bar and appointed to the bench as a judge in Tyrone.

Home for the family in Belfast was a substantial seven-bedroom property in Malone Road. By the time the younger brothers were at secondary school, the oldest, known as ‘Dick’, was already one of the leading young lawyers at the Irish Bar and would later go on to become Ireland’s first judge at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Both younger boys attended boarding schools south of the border, for much of the time being pupils at Clongowes Wood College in County Kildare, the so-called Eton of Ireland. They were academically bright, but also sporty (both representing

Leinster at rugby) and adventurous. After leaving school, both also seemed set on law careers. Ambrose initially attended Queen’s University in Belfast where in his own words, he spent “two inglorious years” studying for an arts degree – before enrolling at King’s Inns in Dublin with the aim of becoming a barrister. In fact, the two brothers only managed to complete a year’s legal study before war broke out in September 1939, when Ambrose was 21.

### Looking for revenge

Both brothers enlisted within days of the outbreak of war, both resolving to tackle the evils of Nazi Germany. On September 6, 1939, Ambrose enlisted with the TA, Royal Ulster Rifles. On September 7, Eoin was sent to the RUR’s Infantry Training Centre and commissioned as a junior officer. They were posted to the RUR’s ITC at St Patrick’s barracks in Ballymena where they forged a strong friendship with Paddy Mayne, a protestant who Ambrose already knew from his time playing rugby back at Queen’s.

During training, Ambrose broke his leg in a motorcycle accident while Eoin and Mayne soon joined up as members of the newly formed 11 Commando and, later, the nascent SAS.

However, Eoin died in November 1941, aged 20, from wounds received during the SAS’s earliest mission, Operation Squatter, in Libya. Within days of officially being informed that Eoin was missing, on December 19, 1940 Ambrose married Patricia ‘Paddy’ Taylor, whom he had met

## HERO OF THE MONTH

while training in Ballymena. Having served with the RUR, Ambrose joined 12 Commando on May 21, 1943, looking for revenge over his brother's death. The unit was often simply known as the 'Irish Commando', as so many of its members were Irish.

One of his comrades, Ian Smith, later recalled that Ambrose had "an insatiable thirst" for adventure and was "totally without fear".

With the disbandment of 12 Commando, Ambrose's next posting was to Layforce II – a group of small-scale raiding forces brought together to conduct high-risk, hit-and-run raids in Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) along the French coast and Channel Islands. During December 1943, reconnaissance operations were stepped up for Operation Overlord – the eventual invasion of Normandy.

However, during one mission on the Channel Island of Sark, codenamed Operation Hardtack 7, Ambrose was wounded by an anti-personnel mine while going to the aid of an injured comrade. For this action, he was

recommended for the Military Cross by Lieutenant Colonel Peter Laycock, officer commanding Layforce II, who wrote: "On the night of December 27, 1943, the above-named officer [Ambrose] was ordered to land on Sark with a small force to carry out a reconnaissance, obtain certain information and, if possible, capture a prisoner.

"Very shortly after landing, the patrol penetrated into an unsuspected minefield. Two mines went up in quick succession, killing one of the force and badly wounding another. Surprise having been lost, McGonigal ordered the patrol to withdraw to the beach with the dead and wounded men, having first examined the hole made by one of the mines and obtained the metal container left in it. Almost immediately after the patrol commenced its withdrawal a further four mines went up, killing the



ABOVE AMBROSE AND PATRICIA 'PADDY' MCGONIGAL  
PATRIC MCGONIGAL

*"His judicial role was so dangerous that he was forced to carry a gun under his robes and also to keep it at his bedside every night"*



JUDGE MCGONIGAL ON INSPECTION AT THE ASSIZES WITH THE HIGH SHERIFF IMAGE: PATRIC MCGONIGAL



MAJOR MCGONIGAL'S MEDAL GROUP, COMPRISING HIS MC & BAR, 1939-45 STAR, ITALY STAR, DEFENCE MEDAL, 1939-45 WAR MEDAL (WITH OAK LEAF, FOR A MENTION IN DESPACHES) AND GENERAL SERVICE MEDAL WITH PALESTINE CLASP PATRIC MCGONIGAL

already badly injured man and wounding McGonigal and a further two other ranks. In spite of his injuries McGonigal continued personally to direct the difficult withdrawal down the cliff and by refusing all offers of assistance allowed greater aid to be given to the other injured members of the patrol.

“This officer personally signalled in the dory [a small shallow-draft boat], superintended the embarkation of the wounded and retained his command until the MTB was reached where, for the first time, he received medical attention. McGonigal showed great powers of leadership and devotion to duty throughout all phases of the operation, and by his courage and gallantry extricated his force from its extremely hazardous position.

“He has on several previous occasions taken part in similar operations and has shown throughout a high sense of duty, disregard for personal danger and superior powers of leadership.”

**Expert navigator**

In May 1944, Ambrose became involved with what were known as the Dover ‘Tarbrush’ raids. This led to him receiving a Bar to his MC after this recommendation: “This officer was the commander of a military force which landed to the east of Calais on the north coast of France on the night of May 16/17, 1944, to carry out a reconnaissance of enemy beach obstacles.

“The operation was of the highest importance and was of an extremely hazardous nature, involving as it did a three-mile approach to a heavily defended enemy coastline, by night in an 18ft Dory, and the carrying out of a minute examination of beach mines and obstacles of unknown potentialities. During the run in, and the return passage to the parent MTB, McGonigal was forced to alter course on two occasions to avoid a single enemy vessel and a convoy of seven vessels proceeding towards Calais a mile offshore. Despite such interference he so navigated his craft as to reach the selected landing point without error thus greatly facilitating the task of the landing party.

“Throughout the entire operation his skill, courage and level headedness inspired his force to the maximum of effort and resulted in the obtaining of vital information.”

Later in May 1944, Ambrose transferred to the SBS, at the time made up of men from 1/SAS, the Small Scale Raiding Force, and other units. He was also promoted to captain and on June 2, 1944, four days before D-Day, he was urgently deployed to Yugoslavia and, later, Crete. In August and September 1944, Ambrose and his force of eight wrecked installations and ambushed German patrols in Yugoslavia. He later had other senior roles both before and after the end of the war. Ambrose was demobilised at the

**SPECIAL FORCES BROTHERS IN ARMS**

*Special Forces Brothers in Arms, Eoin and Ambrose McGonigal: War in the SAS and SBS* by Patric McGonigal is published by Pen and Sword on April 30, 2022. The book tells the stories of both McGonigal brothers – their early lives, their wartime careers, their links to Blair Mayne, the death of Eoin following a failed SAS raid and, in the case of Ambrose, his post-war career.

It can be purchased direct from pen-and-sword.co.uk with an introductory offer of £20. ISBN: 978-1-39908-219-8 | RRP:£25 |

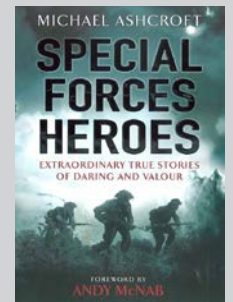


**Special Forces Heroes**



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

2008 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more information, visit [www.specialforcesheroes.com](http://www.specialforcesheroes.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) and details about his VC collection may be found at [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft’s work, visit [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com). Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft



rank of major, completing his law studies and being called to the Bar in 1948.

He became senior crown prosecutor for County Down in 1964, before being appointed a judge of the High Court in March 1968 – at the beginning of some of the worst times during the Troubles in the north of Ireland.

In 1975 he was appointed to the Court of Appeal and the Privy Council, when he was also knighted.

His judicial role was so dangerous that he was forced to carry a gun under his robes and also to keep it at his bedside every night. Ambrose continued as a judge until his death from cancer on September 22, 1979, aged 61. He left a widow and four children. ●