

Staff Sergeant
Olaf Sean George
Schmid GC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

“Few bomb disposal officers have been confronted with such an arduous tour as that faced by Staff Sergeant Schmid in 2009”

For decades, I have admired what I call the ‘cold courage’ of bomb disposal experts. They face incredible dangers, having to make life-or-death decisions as they deal with bombs and other explosive devices not only designed to kill and maim, but that may also be constructed with anti-handling features to bring harm to those striving to make them safe.

Few bomb disposal officers have ever been confronted with such an arduous tour of duty as that faced by Staff Sergeant Olaf ‘Oz’ Schmid in Afghanistan in 2009, and the levels of gallantry that he displayed – day in and day out – defy belief.

I am the proud custodian of the Schmid medal group, having purchased it privately a few years ago.

Olaf Sean George Schmid was born in Truro, Cornwall, on June 11, 1979. The elder of two sons and with an older stepbrother, he was the son of a German mother and a Swedish father who had moved to Cornwall to own and run a hotel. Young Schmid attended Polwhele School and Penair School, both in Truro, and became head chorister at Truro Cathedral in 1993.

He left school at 16 and first worked as a chef with the Royal Logistic Corps. However, he later took an interest in bomb disposal and was posted to 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Regiment, RLC. He was deployed to Northern Ireland, Bosnia and the Falklands, working his way up from an ammunition technician. In addition, he became commando- and paratrooper-trained.

Married in 2007 and with a young stepson, he passed his high-threat improvised explosive device disposal (IEDD) course in 2008, was promoted to Staff Sergeant and joined 11 EOD Regiment, RLC. During his subsequent deployment to Afghanistan, he served with 821 Squadron Alpha Troop, which provided bomb disposal capability for special forces operations.

The Pharmacy Road job

Schmid was posted to Helmand in June 2009 at the time when Taliban activity against British forces was at a peak. The threat of IEDs had increased by some 400% compared with 18 months earlier. Schmid deployed during Operation Panther’s Claw and immediately went

into the fray in what the British Army described as one of “the most physically draining, mentally intense and hazardous jobs in Helmand.”

Schmid usually had to deploy on foot, meaning he rarely had the luxury of using remotely operated vehicles, while the intense heat meant that he often decided against wearing specialist protective clothing. He spent long periods in close proximity to victim-operated improvised explosive devices (VOIEDs), meaning he was constantly in great personal danger. During his five months in Helmand, Schmid responded to 42 IED alerts and dealt with 70 confirmed IEDs.

On numerous occasions, Schmid showed exceptional courage when helping his comrades, but three incidents perhaps stand out from the rest. An infantry company based in Wishtan Province became isolated by a substantial minefield and the infamous Pharmacy Road, the only resupply route, was blocked by two vehicles that had been blown up by IEDs.

Intelligence, first-hand experience and unexplained explosions indicated the whole area was laced with IEDs. Schmid started work at 8am on August 9, 2009, in



SEARCHERS AND EOD EXPERTS SOMETIMES OPTED TO NOT WEAR SPECIALIST PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT DUE TO THE INTENSE HEAT IN AFGHANISTAN DAVE HUSBANDS/MOD



CHRISTINA SCHMID AND MOURNERS APPLAUD AND SALUTE HER HUSBAND'S COFFIN AS HIS CASKET PASSES THROUGH WOOTTON BASSETT MATT CARDY/GETTY

temperatures of 45°C. Within 100 metres, he found and cleared the first IED. Then, when he was within 100 metres of the two vehicles, he decided to use a remote-controlled vehicle (RCV) and remote explosive clearance devices. The RCV hit an IED and was destroyed, yet Schmid pressed forward well inside the lethal arc of the device and manually placed explosive charges, clearing a route to within five metres of the abandoned vehicles.

Schmid's team then moved to clear a compound adjacent to the vehicles in order to drag them off the road. After a second IED was found, he made another manual approach and quickly disposed of the device. A fresh approach was made – using explosives – so that the two vehicles could be dragged clear. It was Schmid who painstakingly cleared the route up to both vehicles during a one-hour stint in which he used only his eyesight and his knowledge of insurgent tactics. He decided against explosive clearance and instead put heavy chains on the stricken vehicles – which were likely to be booby-trapped – to drag them clear.

As the light faded, Schmid led a high-risk clearance of the road where the vehicles had been, manually disposing of two further IEDs. The entire clearance took 11 physically, mentally and emotionally draining hours, but the road was finally reopened and the company resupplied. The success of the operation was largely due to one courageous man: Olaf Schmid.

Bazaar bomber

On October 8, 2009, Schmid was dispatched to the bazaar at Sangin District Centre to deal with an unexploded artillery shell that had been reported by Afghan National Army troops. On arrival, Schmid was led directly to the device, only to realise that he, the soldiers and civilians in the bustling bazaar were all in extreme peril. The danger only intensified once he assessed that the device was actually a radio-controlled IED, meaning there was a strong likelihood that the enemy was watching events from nearby, waiting for the optimum moment to detonate the explosive.

“He decided against explosive clearance and put heavy chains on the stricken, likely booby-trapped, vehicles to drag them clear”

Schmid immediately decided to neutralise the bomb manually – a tactic only employed in the gravest circumstances and at huge risk to the operator. Schmid, whose action was a success, had put his own life on the line again to save the lives of numerous Afghan civilians.

By the end of October, Schmid was involved in an operation near Forward

Operating Base Jackson, which was in Battle Group North's area. On October 31, 2009, he had already dealt with three IEDs when a searcher discovered a command wire running down the alleyway they were using. Schmid and his team were trapped in the alleyway, not knowing in which direction the IED had been placed. Schmid seized the initiative and eventually traced the wire to a complex command wire IED which incorporated three linked and buried main charges. As he dealt with the device, it exploded, killing him. He had sacrificed his life – aged 30 – for the sake of his comrades.

Perhaps the most moving of the many tributes to Schmid was delivered by Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Thomson, the CO of 2 Rifles Battle Group, who said: “Staff Sergeant Oz Schmid was simply the bravest and most courageous man I have ever met. Under relentless IED and small arms attacks he stood taller than the tallest...”

“Every single company in 2 Rifles adored working with him. I adored working with him. No matter how difficult or lethal the task which lay in front of us, he was the man who only saw solutions. He saved lives in 2 Rifles time after time, and for that he will retain a very special place in every heart of every rifleman in our extraordinary Battle Group. Superlatives do not do the man justice. Better than the best. Better than the best of the best.”

“I am so proud”

Christina Schmid, the fallen soldier's widow and the mother of his five-year-old stepson Laird, said after her husband's death: “Oz was a phenomenal husband and loving father who was cruelly murdered on his last day of a relentless five-month tour. He was my best friend and soulmate. The pain of losing him is overwhelming. I take comfort knowing he saved countless lives with his hard work. I am so proud of him.”

Christina became hugely respected nationwide with her show of defiance when Olaf's remains were flown back to Britain and his coffin was paraded through Wootton Bassett – now Royal Wootton Bassett – in Wiltshire. She stood proudly in the High Street as the hearse carrying his coffin passed the war memorial.

On November 24, 2009, more than 1,000 family members, friends, comrades and admirers attended the funeral service for Schmid at Truro Cathedral. Christina said that her husband had believed in “traditional warrior values” and had wanted to protect the country he loved: “Olaf lived and stood for something he believed in. And, in the end, he paid the ultimate sacrifice for those beliefs.”

His GC was announced on March 18, 2010 – one day ahead of it being formally published in the *London Gazette*. The citation ended: “His selfless gallantry, his devotion to duty, and his indefatigable courage displayed time and time again saved countless military and civilian lives and is worthy of the highest recognition.”

In May 2010, Christina Schmid presented a BBC *Panorama* television programme, *A Very British Hero*, which questioned whether the army had failed in its duty of care to her late husband. In the programme, she revealed the contents of a letter from her husband written shortly before he died. In it he had written: “Staying alive is like a lottery and patrolling the Afghan badlands is playing Russian roulette with your feet.”



S/SGT OLAF 'OZ' SCHMID'S GEORGE CROSS AND MEDAL GROUP, COMPRISING HIS NATO MEDAL FOR THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA, HIS GSM WITH NORTHERN IRELAND CLASP, THE OSM FOR AFGHANISTAN, A NATO NON-ARTICLE 5 MEDAL FOR ISAF SERVICE IN AFGHANISTAN, AND THE GOLDEN JUBILEE MEDAL COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

“Superlatives do not do the man justice. Better than the best. Better than the best of the best”

Endurance and sacrifice

In June 2010, Christina received her husband's GC from the Queen at Buckingham Palace. She was accompanied to the private ceremony by her then six-year-old son and her parents. Afterwards, she released a statement quoting Thucydides, the Greek historian: “The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it.”

She then added: “The George Cross serves as a reminder of all the endurance and sacrifice of all our servicemen and women out there on the ground now. In heralding and awarding Oz, one soldier, I hope it serves to raise the status of each and every one of them.”

In an interview with me for my book *George Cross Heroes*, conducted after she had received her husband's posthumous award, Christina described how she was so determined to show pride and defiance – rather than break down in tears – when her husband's body was repatriated: “It was an absolute promise to Oz. He had told me numerous times during his last tour that the likelihood was he was not coming back.

“When we moved house during the tour, he even said: ‘Don't unpack my stuff. The likelihood is that I am not coming back.’ He also said: ‘Will you go to Wootton Bassett if I come in [dead]? I want you to stand there and be bloody proud that I am your husband and that you supported me in all the adversity. Even if I am blown up, I want you to show that our love has not been blown up.’ And I said: ‘Yes. I will be there.’”

She said the passing of time made it harder, not easier, to come to terms with Olaf's death. The couple had been planning a new life in Schmid's home county of Cornwall before he was killed. She said of her late husband: “He told me, ‘Men walk away with medals but I just want to walk away with my life – and my legs – from this tour.’ But it was not to be.” ●

GEORGE CROSS HEROES

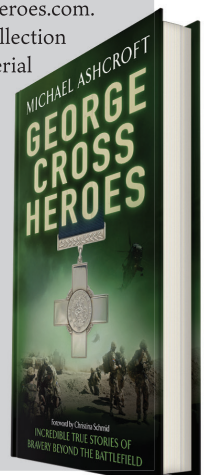


Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *George Cross Heroes* was published in 2010 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more

information, visit georgecrossheroes.com.

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial

War Museum, London. For more information, visit iwm.org.uk/heroes and details about his VC collection may be found at lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit lordashcroft.com. For Lord Ashcroft's work on gallantry, visit lordashcroftonbravery.com. Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.



S/SGT SCHMID'S FIRST AFGHAN 'ALERTS' CAME DURING OPERATION PANTHER'S CLAW, A BRITISH-LED MULTI-PHASE ISAF OFFENSIVE TO SECURE WATERWAY CROSSINGS IN HELMAND PROVINCE DAN BARDSLEY/MODHELMAND

