



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: CHARLES UPHAM
VC & BAR, AS A SECOND
LIEUTENANT IN OCTOBER
1941 TOPFOTO

In the 166-year history of Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious gallantry medal, there has only been one combat soldier who has received the Victoria Cross twice. His so-called 'VC and Bar' entitles Captain Charles Upham to be regarded as the greatest frontline soldier of modern times.

Like so many of the bravest men, Upham's gallantry was matched by extraordinary modesty. He felt deeply uncomfortable in the spotlight and when praise was heaped upon him. This year marks the 80th anniversary of Upham's second VC action, although, due to unusual circumstances, it would be another three years before that gallantry in North Africa was officially recognised.

Charles Hazlitt Upham was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, on September 21, 1908. One of three children and the son of a lawyer, John, and his wife, Agatha, he boarded for ten years until 1927 – first at Waihi School, Winchester, South Canterbury, then later at Christ's College, Christchurch. After leaving school and until the outbreak of war, he studied and pursued a career in farming. Upham enlisted in the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force in September 1939, just days after the outbreak of World War Two. Of medium height, wiry and as tough as teak from his years as a farmer, he was eager to become the best soldier possible.

His discipline and skills saw him gain three promotions in 14 months, being commissioned as a second lieutenant on November 2, 1940, and being given command of a platoon in the 20th Otago-Canterbury Battalion. Having already served in Egypt, his next destination in March 1941 was Greece, only to be evacuated to Crete as the Allies were forced off the mainland.

In the thick of it

On May 20, the Germans launched an attack on Crete, which they saw as being strategically important. The initial airborne assault, Operation Mercury, saw fierce fighting along the north coast, where Upham was, typically, quickly in the thick of the action.

The lengthy citation for his first VC begins: "During operations in Crete this officer performed a series of remarkable exploits, showing outstanding leadership, tactical skill and utter indifference to danger." His daring exploits, when he was aged 32, began in earnest on May 22, when he led a counter-attack on Maleme airstrip, which had fallen into enemy hands.

He and his platoon pushed forward for nearly two miles with Upham up in front, taking out at least three machine gun positions using his pistol and hand grenades. The grenade became his weapon of choice, but it carried dangers too as



UPHAM (LEFT), HOWARD KIPPENBERGER AND RAYMOND LYNCH STAND READY TO RECEIVE AWARDS FROM GENERAL CLAUDE AUCHINLECK, NOVEMBER 1941
OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

"Of medium height, wiry and as tough as teak, he was eager to become the best soldier possible"

he liked to get to as close to his target as 15 yards to get a perfect aim. When his company was forced to withdraw, Upham carried a wounded comrade back under fire. A witness later said: "Bullets and shrapnel were flying about. A chap walked out of olive trees and across open country. No shirt, shorts blood-smeared, carrying a badly wounded man. I said to my Company Sergeant Major, 'He'll either get a wooden cross or a Victoria Cross.'"

Next, Upham and a corporal ran 600 yards under fire to alert another company that it had become isolated. Killing two Germans on the way, he brought the company back before it was cut off.

For his actions that day alone, he deserved the VC. However, his citation detailed further acts of outstanding gallantry. By this point, Upham had been wounded, having come under heavy fire in a forward position on May 23-24. He



CHOW TIME FOR MEN OF THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION IN THE WESTERN DESERT. IN THE CENTRE, SPOON-TO-MOUTH, IS SECOND LIEUTENANT CHARLES UPHAM WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE/TOPIFOTO

HERO OF THE MONTH

was blown over by one mortar shell and injured by shrapnel behind his left shoulder from another. He also took a bullet in a foot, which he was unable to get removed for the next fortnight.

On May 25, his platoon was forced to seek cover under a ridge due to relentless machine gun and mortar fire, but Upham decided the best defence was to mount an attack. Launching an assault with gunfire and grenades, he and his men killed 40 of the enemy soldiers and forced other units to retreat.

Next, Upham went to warn other troops that they were in danger of being cut off, but he was spotted by two Germans, who fired on him as he ran off. He crawled for cover but was unable to return fire properly as he had been wounded in one arm. When the Germans came looking to confirm the kill, Upham's injury meant he had to rest his rifle in the fork of a tree to fire. As the two men emerged, he shot them both dead despite having to cycle the rifle with one arm. The second soldier was at such close-range that he hit the muzzle as he fell.

Rearguard patrol

It soon became clear that the Allies – mainly British, New Zealand, Australian and local Cretan troops – would have to retreat from their positions. Upham and

his men prepared to be evacuated by boat from the south of the island.

However, before they could get off Crete, they were ordered to confront an enemy unit that had advanced along a ravine. By this point exhausted and demoralised, Upham took a Bren and two riflemen to the top of the ridge. Using clever tactics to encourage the enemy to expose themselves, he shot 22 of them dead at long range and the remainder dispersed.

Incredibly, during these nine days of battle – and on top of being wounded several times – Upham had been suffering from acute dysentery, which left him virtually unable to eat.

“I said to my Company Sergeant Major, ‘He’ll either get a wooden cross or a Victoria Cross’”

However, he was soon back on frontline operations, joining the New Zealand Division in the Western Desert, where he learned on October 14, 1941, that he had been awarded the VC for his courage on Crete. He was only prepared to accept it on the basis that it was on behalf of all of his men too. He was promoted to lieutenant in November and to captain in May 1942.

On June 27, 1942, German forces attacked the division's positions at Minqâr Qaim. Upham spent much of the day moving in the open under heavy fire, checking on his men. The next night he again led from the front during the famous break-out. During intense fighting, he and his men used grenades to destroy a lorry full of Germans, with Upham wounded by the explosions.

On the night of July 14/15, the New Zealand Division attacked Ruweisat Ridge with disastrous consequences. Despite his earlier wounds and being initially part of the reserve battalion, Upham was soon on the frontline at what became the First Battle of El Alamein.

Just before dawn on July 15, he led a successful attack on two well-defended positions, personally destroying a tank, several guns and a number of vehicles. However, he was shot through the elbow, breaking his arm. Undeterred, he fought on, pushing forward to bring back comrades who had become isolated before helping fight off yet another attack.

Exhausted and weak from blood loss, he was briefly treated at a regimental aid post before returning to battle. Under relentless artillery and mortar fire, he was wounded yet again, this time with serious shrapnel wounds to one leg. Unable to retreat, he was captured.



UPHAM COOLLY LIGHTING A CIGARETTE AFTER BEING CONFRONTED BY A GUARD WHILE ATTEMPTING TO ESCAPE AND BECOMING TANGLED IN WIRE
NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM



CHARLES UPHAM'S VC AND BAR, 1939-1945 STAR, AFRICA STAR, DEFENCE MEDAL, WAR MEDAL 1939-45 (WITH MID OAK LEAF), NEW ZEALAND WAR SERVICE MEDAL, QUEEN ELIZABETH II CORONATION MEDAL, QUEEN ELIZABETH II SILVER JUBILEE MEDAL, AND NEW ZEALAND 1990 COMMEMORATION MEDAL NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM

Smoking defiance

Upham refused to allow Axis doctors to amputate his badly injured arm without anaesthetic, aware of how many comrades had died in agony under similar conditions. As soon as he was on the road to recovery, he plotted and attempted a series of daring escapes.

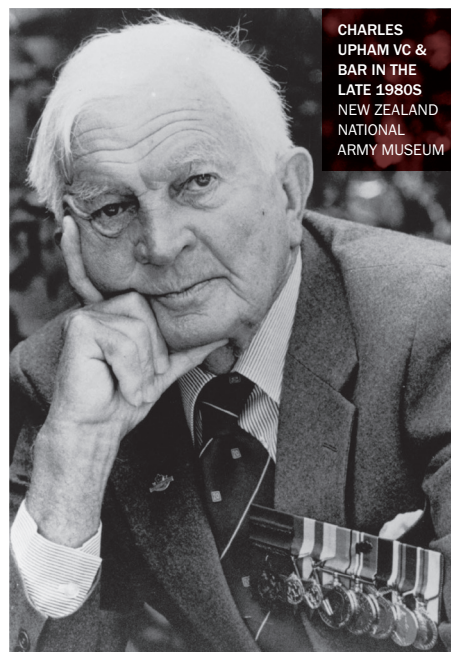
Over two years, he spent much of his incarceration in solitary confinement for endless breaches of prison rules. Once he tried to escape a camp in broad daylight by scaling its fences. He became entangled and then fell between the two fences. When a guard pointed a gun at his head, Upham calmly ignored him and sparked up, which a German photographer caught on camera.

In October 1944, he became one of very few New Zealanders to be sent to Colditz, the notorious castle prison for habitual escapees. It was here that the Americans liberated him and others close to the end of the war. Upham, however, insisted on fighting, but was transported to Britain where his New Zealand girlfriend, Molly McTamney, worked as a nurse. Reunited, the couple married in Hampshire on June 20, 1945.

Upham returned to his homeland in September and his bride followed two months later. Evidence soon mounted that he deserved a second VC for his gallantry in North Africa. King George VI, who had invested Upham with his first VC at Buckingham Palace on May 11, 1945, questioned Major-General Howard Kippenberger whether the second VC was really deserved.

The Kiwi general, affectionately known as 'Kip', replied: "In my respectful opinion, Sir, Upham won the VC several times over." The Bar to his VC was announced on September 26. To this day, the VC and Bar has only been awarded to two other men, both of them medics.

When a grateful nation raised £10,000 to buy Upham a large farm in late 1945, he politely declined, uncomfortable at being



singled out for preferential treatment. Instead, at his request, the money was used to create a charity enabling the children of servicemen to study at college or university.

However, with the help of a government rehabilitation loan, Upham did eventually buy his own farm north of Christchurch. He and Molly had three daughters, including twins, and for most of their

childhood his daughters grew up unaware their father was a decorated war hero, only learning about his exploits when they attended boarding school.

In 1994, frail and still suffering from his wartime injuries, Upham left the farm that he had been his pride and joy for 47 years. He and Molly settled into a new life in a retirement village in Christchurch. Just seven months later, on November 22, Upham died surrounded by his family. He was 86. His state funeral at Christchurch Cathedral saw 5,000 people line the streets and his ashes were buried in a modest family plot at St Paul's Church, Papanui, a Christchurch suburb.

In November 2006, Upham's daughters sold their father's medal group to the Imperial War Museum in London. However, his gallantry and service medals are on permanent loan to the National Army Museum at Waiouru on New Zealand's North Island.

Of all the numerous tributes made to Upham over the years, my favourite is this short note that accompanied his portrait in a book about the prisoners of Colditz. It read simply: "Captain C H Upham, VC & Bar. New Zealand Military Forces. An officer and a gentleman – determination and singleness of purpose personified – loyal, constructive, quiet, unassuming and friendly." •



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II* was published in 2016 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more information, visit www.victoriacrossheroes2.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War

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