

Brigadier
The Rt Hon
Sir John George
Smyth,
1st Baronet,
VC, MC,
PC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: SIR JOHN SMYTH VC, MC NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM

Brigadier the Rt Hon Sir John Smyth crammed an awful lot into his 89 years. He was a highly decorated British Indian Army officer, a long-serving Conservative MP and co-founder of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association. He was also the last VC recipient to sit in the House of Commons. I have immense admiration for the bravery and rich life led by this remarkable man.

I do not own his gallantry and service medals as these were bequeathed to the Imperial War Museum, but Smyth's medal group is on display at the Lord Ashcroft Gallery inside the museum. In fact, his VC is a replacement decoration after the original was stolen and never recovered.

Smyth, who was usually known by friends as 'Jackie', was born in Teignmouth, Devon, on October 24, 1893. He was the eldest of three sons born to William and Lilian Smyth and his father worked for the Indian Civil Service in Burma.

From 1901, he was educated at Lynam School (now Dragon Preparatory School), Oxford. While a pupil there, he contracted a serious illness from which he was thought unlikely to survive. Despite being desperately ill for two years, he recovered and returned to Lynam, where he received a scholarship, aged 14, to attend Repton School in Derbyshire.

As a teenager, Smyth wanted to embark on a military career, ideally with the Indian Army. In 1911, he attended the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, where he later passed out as ninth in his class. On August 24, 1912, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant on the unattached list for the British Indian Army.

Cut down by fire

The following month, he sailed from England to India for a one-year attachment with the Green Howards (Yorkshire Regiment). On November 5, 1913, he joined the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, becoming a full lieutenant a year later. By the time of this promotion, Smyth was in France, where he had served with the Lahore Division since September 1914.

In the final week of October 1914, the battalion suffered nearly 400 casualties in heavy fighting near Rue Tilleloy. For the winter of 1914-15, Smyth spent most of his time near Festubert and Givenchy. In March, the 15th Sikhs again suffered heavy



"The British had control of some 200 yards of the captured trench... however, the enemy assault was relentless and they were in danger of running out of ammunition"

losses, this time in fighting northeast of Ypres, Belgium. However, it was for his outstanding gallantry in spring 1915 that Smyth, then only 21, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The Allies had captured a trench, known as the 'Glory Hole', near Richebourg L'Avoué, France. Early on the morning of May 18, 1915, during the Battle of Festubert, the Germans tried to recapture it. At the time, the British had control of some 200 yards of the captured trench, 500 yards southeast of Rue du Bois. However, the enemy assault was relentless and the Allied soldiers were in danger of running out of ammunition.

Efforts were made to supply two forward companies – one from the

ARTIST'S DEPICTION (WHICH ORIGINALLY RAN IN 'THE WAR ILLUSTRATED') OF THE MAY 18, 1915 ACTION, IN WHICH SMYTH EARNED THE VC AND HIS INDIAN COMRADES THEIR DECORATIONS THE WAR ILLUSTRATED

15th Ludhiana Sikhs and the other from the 1st Highland Light Infantry – that had moved in under cover of darkness to relieve the men in the trench. However, those attempting to bring the supplies to the trench were shot down before they had covered half the distance. The groups sent back to collect supplies by both of the forward companies suffered the same fate.

In this desperate situation, Smyth asked for volunteers from his Sikhs and every man in the company stepped forward. He chose the ten he considered to be the strongest. This little party gathered up bandoliers of ammunition and two boxes, each containing 48 bombs. After sneaking



over the parapet, they quickly lost three men to shell fire.

Encouraged to disobey

Using smoke from the German shelling as cover, Smyth's party continued to creep along a trench barely two feet deep and full of British, Indian and German dead. They were only a third of the way to their objective when they were spotted, and enemy machine guns and riflemen inflicted additional casualties. Further along, they had to

wade through a chest-deep stream. Only Smyth and one other man, Sepoy Lal Singh, reached a shell hole close to their objective with one of the boxes of bombs.

As they dashed over the last few yards, Singh was mortally wounded. Smyth was uninjured, although his tunic and cap had been pierced by bullets. All the Sikhs in his party had been killed or seriously wounded.

It later emerged too that Smyth had been encouraged by a fellow officer to disobey the order – from Brigade



SMYTH'S VC GROUPING, INCLUDING HIS MC, 1914/15 STAR (WITH CLASP), WAR MEDAL, VICTORY MEDAL, INDIA GSM (WITH FIVE CLASPS), BRITISH GSM (WITH CLASP), 1939-45 STAR, BURMA STAR, DEFENCE MEDAL, WAR MEDAL 1939-45 (WITH MID OAK LEAF), KING GEORGE V SILVER JUBILEE MEDAL, KING GEORGE VI CORONATION MEDAL, QUEEN ELIZABETH II CORONATION MEDAL, QUEEN ELIZABETH II SILVER JUBILEE MEDAL AND HIS RUSSIAN ORDER OF ST GEORGE IVM

HQ – to embark on the mission, on the grounds it was considered too dangerous, but the young lieutenant insisted on carrying it out.

Smyth's VC was announced in *The London Gazette* on June 29, 1915. His citation stated: "For most conspicuous bravery near Richebourg L'Avoué on May 18, 1915.

"With a bombing party of ten men, who voluntarily undertook this duty, he conveyed a supply of 96 bombs to within 20 yards of the enemy's position over exceptionally dangerous ground, after the attempt of two other parties had failed.

"Lieutenant Smyth succeeded in taking the bombs to the desired position with the aid of two of his men (the other eight having been killed or wounded), and to effect his purpose he had to swim a stream, being exposed the whole time to howitzer, shrapnel, machine gun and rifle fire."

Nine of the men who accompanied Smyth on his mission were posthumously decorated with the Indian Distinguished Service Medal and another the 2nd Class of the Indian Order of Merit.

When Smyth received his VC at Buckingham Palace on July 12, 1915, he was the only man from a large group of recipients who could walk unaided. At that point, it was the largest investiture of the war. He was also awarded the Russian Order of St George, 4th Class.

After his investiture and following his promotion to captain, Smyth rejoined his battalion and sailed

to Egypt in August 1915. From November 1915 to February 1916, he took part in the Senussi Campaign, during which his battalion suffered 200 casualties.

After returning to India, Smyth served on the North West Frontier for nearly three years, being promoted to brigade major. In May 1919, two frontier tribes, the Wazirs and Mahsuds, rose up against the British. On May 31, Smyth helped to save a convoy of supplies seized in an ambush by the Mahsuds. For his bravery, he was recommended for a Bar to his VC but he was eventually awarded the Military Cross instead.

Smyth was presented with his MC by the Duke of York at Buckingham Palace on July 21, 1920, before getting married the very next day at Brompton Oratory, London to Margaret Dundas. The couple went on to have three sons and a daughter.

Thereafter, Smyth remained in the army and continued his illustrious career. He was Mentioned in Dispatches at least three times including for his efforts in Mesopotamia, quelling a riot in the Indian city of Peshawar and in World War Two, when he was involved in fighting prior to Dunkirk. Later, he served in Burma and took part in several battles against the Japanese.

By this point, Smyth's first marriage had been dissolved and he was married to Frances Read, the daughter of an army officer. The couple had married in Southsea, Hampshire, on April 12, 1940.

Burma controversy

However, there was also a controversial incident during his service in Burma. During heavy fighting, the 17th Division lost almost two brigades in confused fighting at the Sittang river. Smyth was blamed for poor leadership and deprived of his rank of temporary major-general, reverting instead to that of substantive colonel and acting brigadier. He finally retired from the army on medical grounds on November 7, 1942, at the rank of honorary brigadier.

One of his sons, Captain John Lawrence Smyth of the 1st Battalion, Queen's Royal (West Surrey) Regiment, was killed on May 7, 1944, during the first attack on Jail Hill at the Battle of Kohima.

After the war, Smyth unsuccessfully contested the seat of Wandsworth Central, London, against Ernest Bevin in the 1945 general election.



SMYTH, WEARING HIS MEDAL GROUP, AT A 1968 REUNION OF MEMBERS OF THE VC & GC ASSOCIATION
KEystone/Alamy

Instead, he became the military correspondent for several national newspapers and, from 1946, was the tennis correspondent for *The Sunday Times*.

In 1950, he was elected as the Conservative MP for Norwood in south London, and five years later he was created a baronet. In the same

“Who can say whether it takes more courage to attack an angry bull elephant with a spear, than to disarm a very sensitive mine, or to have your toenails pulled out and still disclose nothing”

SIR JOHN SMYTH, LIFE PRESIDENT OF THE VC & GC ASSOCIATION

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES Volume II



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 victoriacrossheroes2.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War

year, 1955, he was made a Freeman of the City of London.

He was also a co-founder of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association and its first chairman from 1956 to 1971. From 1971 until his death, he was a life president of the association, which represents the interests of all living recipients of the VC and GC, Britain and the Commonwealth's two most prestigious gallantry awards.

Smyth was also the author of a staggering 36 books which included *The Story of the Victoria Cross 1856-1963*, first published in 1963, and *The Story of the George Cross*, first published in 1968. He was also a cat lover, writing three books on the subject of his favourite pet. Furthermore, he published two volumes of his autobiography.

Both from his own experiences on the battlefield and his own research, Smyth became something of an expert on the subject of gallantry. With typical wisdom, he wrote: “Who can say whether it takes more courage to attack an angry bull elephant with a spear, than to disarm a very sensitive mine, or to have your toenails pulled out and still disclose nothing, or to dive into a burning aircraft to try to pull out members of the crew when the rescuer was well aware that the plane was carrying bombs which might explode at any moment.”

Smyth was made a privy councillor in 1962 and he retired from parliament in 1966. He died at home in Dolphin Square, central London, on April 26, 1983 and was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium, northwest London.

Smyth's name is on the Memorial Gates at Hyde Park Corner, London, along with other recipients of the Victoria Cross from the Indian Army. **BW**

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

