Temporary Lieutenant Jack Maynard Cholmondeley Easton GC

HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Few bomb disposal experts survive the detonation of an explosive they are trying to defuse. Fewer still write vividly about their experience, including providing precise details on what was so nearly the final moments of their life. Jack Easton achieved both feats and furthermore recovered so well from the horrendous injuries that he received in the blast that he eventually lived until he was nearly 90 years old.

Jack Maynard Cholmondeley Easton was born on May 28, 1906, in Maidenhead, Berkshire. He was the son of Percy Easton, a solicitor and hotelier, and his wife Kathleen. After being educated at Pangbourne College in Berkshire, Jack, like his father before him, worked as a solicitor.

In September 1940, a year into World War Two, he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, initially at the rank of Probationary Temporary Sub Lieutenant at HMS *Vernon*, the naval shore establishment in Portsmouth. During the war, *Vernon* had taken on responsibility for mine disposal and developing mine countermeasures, while Easton himself trained in naval ordnance disposal. At the height of the Blitz, the Luftwaffe's parachute mines were dropped in increasingly large numbers. Being higher capacity devices with thinner cases, the mines had a greater blast effect than an equivalent-sized bomb.

A huge tonnage of bombs and mines fell on the East End of London, one of the latter falling on a street in Hoxton on October 17, 1940. Amid fears the device would explode, local residents were evacuated.

Hoxton call-out

By this point serving in the rank of sub lieutenant, Jack and his assistant, Ordinary Seaman Bennett Southwell, were called to deal with the Hoxton parachute mine. They walked through empty, slate-strewn streets to the place where the mine had crashed through the roof of a house and was hanging suspended from a hole in the ceiling. It was in a precarious position, with the nose of the device only some six inches off the floor.

Having assessed the situation, Easton realised it was too risky to try to move the device and instead decided to tackle the bomb where it was positioned. He asked Southwell to stay in the passage outside and hand him the necessary tools. However, Easton had only been working on the bomb for a minute, when it slipped and there was the sound of falling brickwork. Easton then heard the whirring of the bomb mechanism and he knew he only had some 12 seconds to get clear.

He shouted for Southwell to run and both men fled in different directions. Easton had just managed to reach a nearby surface air raid shelter, behind which he took cover, when the device detonated with incredible force. He was immediately knocked unconscious and, when he came to, was buried beneath rubble.

Rescuers eventually found him, dug him out of the debris and took him to hospital, where he was treated for a fractured spine,

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Winston Churchill visiting London's bomb-damaged East End in September 1940 OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

skull and pelvis, as well as two broken legs. Bennett Southwell, the son of a railway porter who had worked as a gardener before the war, was killed in the blast. Aged 27, he was married with a young son.

Easton, who was also married with a daughter at the time of the incident, later wrote vividly about the incident in a chapter for the 1950 publication, *Wavy Navy*. In it, he captured the sense of loneliness and anticipation that all bomb disposal personnel face as they take what they term "the long walk" to deal with a device: "The tenant of the house, a bit excited and self-important, described what he believed to be the position and size of the mine. Then, supplied with all available information, the rating and I set off down the drab street.

"Those solitary walks towards the location of a mine always reminded me of the last scenes in the pictures of Charlie Chaplin. I had the feeling that a vast audience was watching the way I walked. It has been the last scene for several men I knew, though such morbid thoughts were absent that day. I was looking for the house described."

A Heinkel over the East End. The Borough of Hackney lies out of shot just off the top left-hand corner, so had this bomber maintained the track shown, it may well have overflown Hoxton ULLSTEINBILD/TOPFOTO

He 111 bombers could carry two 1,000kg parachute mines, designed for blast effect – they were more damaging than an equivalent-sized bomb CHRIS GOSS

"Exactly 12 seconds to live"

Easton also described the tense minute or so as he struggled to defuse the mine, and provided a moving first-hand account of how it felt to be buried alive: "The fuze was clear of obstructions, but when I attempted to fit the misnamed safety horns, I discovered that the fuze had been damaged, probably as the bomb [mine] crashed through the house.

"The horns would not go into their place. I handed the attachment back to the rating as useless and took the tools for unscrewing the keep ring. The damage to this had jammed it, and although I exerted as much effort as I could, it would not turn. I had been working to detach the ring for perhaps a minute when the bomb slipped in front of me. There was a sound of falling brickwork as the chimney pot overhead collapsed, and I heard the whirr of the bomb mechanism. Unless I got clear, I had exactly 12 seconds to live.

"On such work, one had to plan ahead. When I discovered that the door could not be opened without disturbing the mine, I had decided on a sequence of movements if the mechanism did become active. Now, to the stimulant of the whirring sound, I grasped and pulled open the door against the weight of the planks, for now it no longer mattered if the mine were disturbed and I ran.

"I was through the hall in two leaps. As I emerged from the doorway, I saw my rating running down the street to what he, poor devil, thought was safety. I had no time to use distance for safety and ran across the roadway to a surface air raid shelter opposite where I was. It was a red brick and concrete-roofed structure. I reached it and flung myself on its far side, its bulk between me and the house I had just left. I flung myself tight against it, face down to the ground.

"I had no time to use distance for safety and ran across the roadway to a surface air raid shelter... I flung myself tight against it, face down to the ground"

"I heard no explosion. It has since been explained to me that if you are near enough to an explosion of such force, unconsciousness is upon you before any sound it makes reaches you, which is a merciful thing. I was blinded by the flash that comes split seconds before the explosion, but that was all I experienced. I do not know what time passed before I became conscious. When I did, I knew I was buried deep beneath bricks and mortar and was being suffocated. My head was between my legs, and I guessed my back was broken, but could not move an inch. I was held, imbedded.

"Men dug me out eventually. To this day I do not know how long I spent in my grave. Most of the time I was unconscious. The conscious moments are of horror and utter helplessness. Being buried alive is certainly a good example of a living hell, and in the war years to come after 1940 the brave men, women and children of London and all of the other cities and towns, and villages of Britain not only have my sympathies, but some – those who had been buried alive – had my prayers. I really knew the physical and mental torture they endured.

"My rating [Southwell] was killed. He was beheaded by the blast. The mine destroyed six streets of working-class homes, and it was six weeks before his

body was found among the rubble. He was a brave man and left behind a brave widow."

Identical awards

On January 23, 1941, while lying in hospital and recovering from his injuries, the nurses told Easton that they should all listen to the 6pm news. Easton's GC and Southwell's posthumous identical award were announced for "great gallantry and undaunted devotion to duty." Hospital staff then proceeded to produce two cases of champagne that they had stored under his bed and the celebrations went on long into the evening.

Jack Easton spent a year with his back in plaster, but, eventually made a good recovery and returned to work. He received his decoration from King George VI at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on September 23, 1941. Southwell's widow, Marion, received her husband's posthumous award on the same day.

In another incident, Easton successfully defused a parachute mine that had fallen through the roof of the Russell Hotel in central London. The owner was so thrilled that his business had been saved that he wrote Easton a cheque for £140 – a huge amount at that time – and said that he and his family could have Sunday lunch at the hotel for life. But when Easton repeated the story to his commanding officer, he tore up the cheque and refused to allow him to take up the lunch offer. "We do this for honour, not for money," Easton was told firmly.

By the latter stages of the war, Easton, by then a Temporary Lieutenant, skippered minesweepers. During the D-Day landings, he was leading a flotilla when a sea mine exploded under his ship. However, he once again survived and went on to lead a long and full life after the war.

Devastation came to Hoxton at least once more, when the Paint Factory on Downham Road and the surrounding area were hit by a V2 in January 1945 MIRRORPIX/ALAMY

Easton returned to work as a solicitor in his grandfather's law firm of William Easton & Sons. Together with his second wife, Joan Bartman, he lived for many years in Hampshire. He died on December 1, 1994, in Chichester, West Sussex, aged 88. He was cremated and his ashes were scattered in the Garden of Remembrance at Chichester Crematorium.

I am the proud custodian of the Southwell GC. But I chose Easton as the subject of this month's *Hero of the Month* because he had left such a vivid account of events on that day in October 1940. In no way does this detract from my admiration of the rating's equal gallantry displayed on the same occasion.

My respect for what I refer to as the "cold courage" of bomb disposal experts is immense, all the more so after attending a full day's training course in the spring of 2010 with 621 EOD Squadron, part of 11 EOD Regiment, at Merville Barracks, near Colchester, Essex. Experienced bomb disposal officers provided me with a fascinating insight into the pressures that they and their men work under when trying to detonate bombs and IEDs. It was a day that I shall never forget, being exciting and terrifying in equal measure. It certainly made me appreciate the courage of men like Jack Easton and Bennett Southwell all the more. BW

'Luftmines' presented a challenge to bomb disposal teams, such as this example dropped on Glasgow in March 1941 OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

GEORGE CROSS HEROES

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