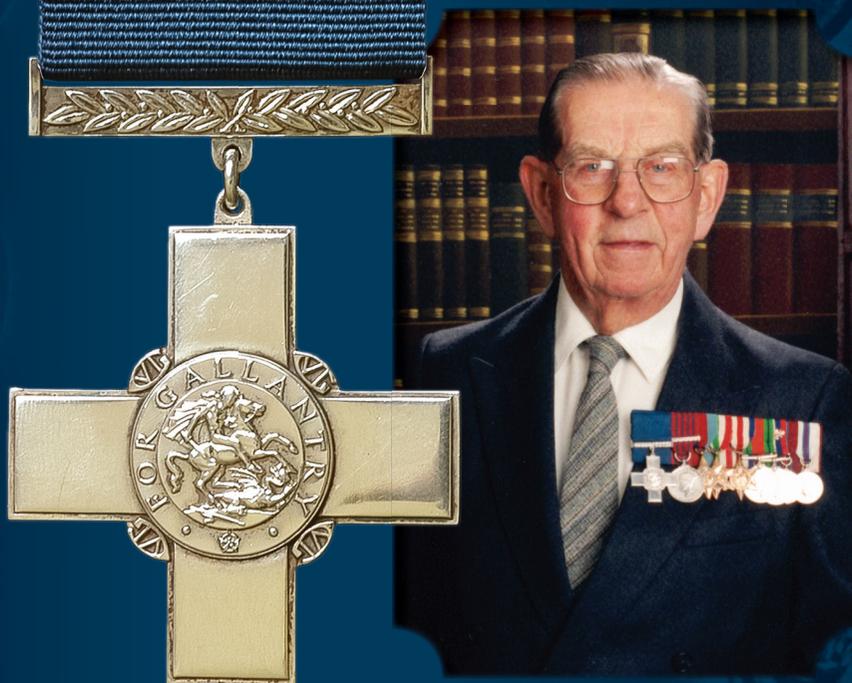


Lieutenant-
Commander
John Bridge
GC, GM
& Bar



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: Portrait of John Bridge GC, GM & Bar IWM OMD 6377.2

John Bridge began World War Two as a physics teacher, but finished it as the recipient of an almost unique set of gallantry medals: the George Cross, together with the George Medal and Bar. Each of these decorations was awarded for bravery in his highly dangerous role as a bomb and mine disposal expert.

Bridge was born in Culcheth, near Warrington in Lancashire, on February 5, 1915. His father, Joseph Bridge, was a farmer and his mother Mary (née Taylor) had her hands full looking after John's two brothers and four sisters. John attended Leigh Grammar School in what is now Greater Manchester and subsequently obtained a special honours degree in physics from King's College London in 1937, then was awarded a teaching diploma the following year. After sending out more than 100 job applications, he finally landed a teaching job at a secondary modern school near his home.

Bridge later moved to Leighton Park Quaker School in Reading, Berkshire. During his second term at the school, he was praised by the headmaster for his teaching ability, but then was told that he was not going to be offered a full-time

role as he did not have an Oxford or Cambridge University education. Bridge's next job was at Frith Park Grammar School in Sheffield, accepting at first a temporary role that later became a permanent position.

The 'First 8'

Early in World War Two, Bridge put his teaching career on hold to join the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR). He became a member of an eight-man bomb disposal team known as the 'First 8'.

Incredibly, Bridge was called out to deal with his first bomb just five weeks after leaving his teaching job, and he was to play a major role in bomb disposal operations for the rest of the war. He was commissioned as a temporary sub lieutenant in the RNVR on June 4, 1940, and was soon working as a bomb safety officer in Plymouth, Devon.

Bridge was the first armed forces recipient of the George Medal and Bar. He was given his first award for disarming a bomb with a delayed action fuze in Devonport docks, Plymouth, on September 7, 1940. This decoration was announced in *The London Gazette*

on December 27 1940. He received the Bar to his GM for raising and defusing a bomb that had fallen between two docks at Falmouth in Cornwall on May 17, 1941. Bridge climbed down and found the bomb at the bottom of a chamber, sitting in six feet of water. However, he noticed that there was a hole in the casing that enabled a rope to be threaded through, so the bomb could be hoisted to the surface and made safe. His second GM was announced in *The London Gazette* on October 24, 1941.

In April 1942, after a minesweeping appointment, Bridge embarked for South Africa, where he taught others how to carry out mine/bomb disposal work. He and his students dealt with about 12 German mines that had washed up on beaches east and north of Cape Town. It was at Simon's Town that Bridge learned to dive, thereby acquiring a useful new skill for his future work.

After South Africa, Bridge was posted to the Mediterranean theatre, then briefly to Malta and Algiers. In August 1943, he was given a particularly difficult and dangerous task: to clear Messina harbour in Sicily of depth charges. All but two

“Bridge was given a particularly dangerous task: to clear Messina harbour of depth charges. All but two of the previous members of a bomb disposal team had been killed or wounded”



During World War Two, Simon's Town in South Africa was where Bridge learned to dive. It remains a significant naval base today ALAMY



A Royal Navy clearance diver re-enters the water, 1945. It was a demanding job that often required heavy equipment
MIRRORPIX/GETTY

of the previous members of a bomb disposal team had been killed (five of them) or wounded (two of them) by explosions in this role when Bridge took over the task.

Grappling with the unknown

On August 26, Bridge began a four-day reconnaissance of the Messina dockyard and harbour. He and his team discovered that there were scores of depth charges scattered around the quays, in pumphouses and substations. There were also 40 positioned in the harbour itself. Having located all of them, he was able to begin diving on August 30, while intermittent shelling continued from enemy guns on the other side of the strait.

At times, visibility underwater was nil and everything had to be done by touch. Ever resourceful, Bridge was able to neutralise depth charges that had no external mechanisms attached but, along the coaling wharf, he identified two groups of the type that had wiped out the previous disposal party.

It was Bridge's idea to use a small explosive charge to sever the steel ropes that held the depth charges together. Having separated them with the controlled explosion, he was then able to attach hooks to the associated devices. Next, using an improvised pulley and block system, the charges were lifted

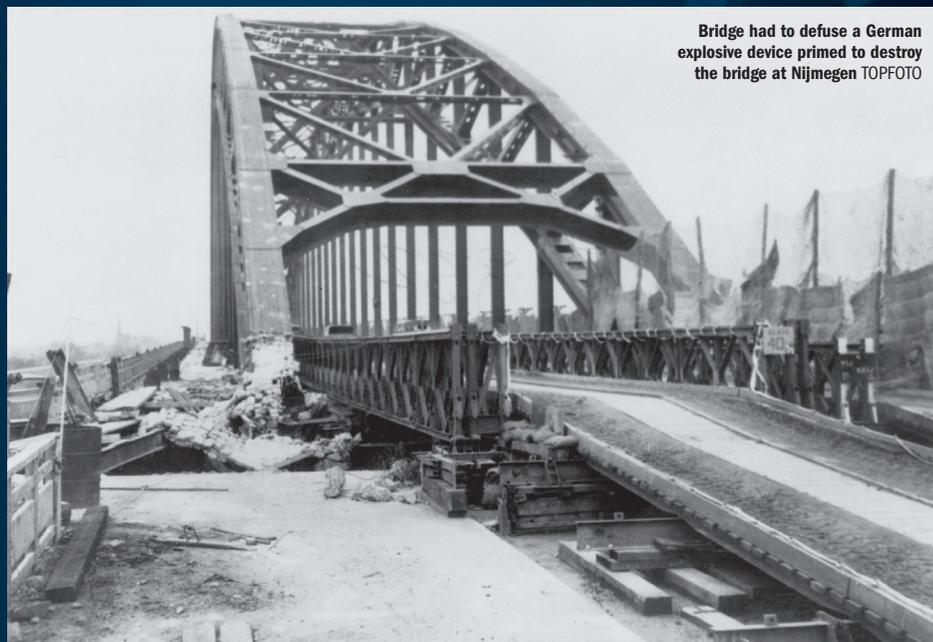
out of the water and laid on the wharf. Inspection of the cylinders revealed a clockwork device, a detonator, primer and a large main charge, but the bombs were made safe.

Bridge made no fewer than 28 dives to clear the harbour. In total, 207 devices were dismantled or 'discredited' from on or below the surface. The devices had a variety of firing mechanisms, including two with previously unknown systems. Thanks to the bravery, skill and ingenuity

of Bridge and his men, Messina harbour was declared open on September 3, the day the main assault on Italy began.

"I was the only one diving," Bridge said later. "I had an assistant and several men working above water. My longest spell was one of 20 hours. I did not suffer any particular discomfort and never got tired. I left that to afterwards."

Bridge's GC was announced on June 20, 1944. His recommendation read: "For the most conspicuous and



Bridge had to defuse a German explosive device primed to destroy the bridge at Nijmegen TOPFOTO

prolonged bravery and contempt of death in clearing Messina harbour of depth charges. The recommending officer stated that he had never before had the fortune to be associated with such cool and sustained bravery as Lieutenant Bridge displayed during the ten days of the operation."

By the time that his GC was announced, Bridge had been back in action once again. On D-Day+1 – June 7, 1944 – he was sent to Normandy to supervise the clearing of the beach at Arromanches of mines and a mass of other explosive devices.

Breakfast and a show

In September 1944, Bridge displayed still more heroics when 12 crack German swimmers swam a dozen miles upriver to place torpedo-shaped mines under the hard-won Nijmegen Bridge in the Netherlands. It was an incredible feat made all the more notable after some of the captured swimmers revealed that the timing devices had been set for four hours, but no one knew the precise start time.

After the war, Bridge recalled how he was just turning in for the night on September 29 when he received orders to go to Brussels on an urgent mission. He was instructed to take the minimum of bomb disposal tools and fly on to Nijmegen. At 0800hrs, Bridge took off from Brussels in an Avro Anson. "It was an unforgettable experience. We flew at under 100ft almost the whole length of the corridor. The tops of the church spires seemed higher than us," he said.

Bridge landed at Grave, where General Horrocks, the commander of XXX Corps, had sent a staff car to pick him up. The bomb disposal expert was taken to Horrock's HQ, which was a tent under a tree. The general shook his hand and, after inquiring whether he had had any breakfast, said: "Sergeant, get this officer some sandwiches. He will require them while he is working under that bridge."

Bridge was shown where one of the charges had exploded, blowing a 60ft hole in the roadway, but leaving the main structure of the bridge intact. He borrowed an assault boat and rowed out to a support. All that he could find was a float, part of which was showing through the water. He tried to lift this into the boat but could not do so because there were cables attached. These became taut, indicating that they were snagged or attached to an explosive charge. Bridge said: "There was only one way to find out: get into the water and explore."

He stripped to his underpants and dived in. The water was not clear, and he had to feel his way with his hands and feet. He located a cylindrical object and used his feet to learn as much as possible about it.



Bridge's medal group, comprising his GC, GM & Bar, 1939-45 Star, Italy Star, France and Germany Star, Defence Medal, War Medal (with MID oak leaf), 1953 Coronation Medal, 1977 Silver Jubilee Medal and 2002 Golden Jubilee Medal IWM OMD 6377.4

he explained: "By going down until the water touched my chin and having a wire strop between my big toe and the next, I was able to get this round the thing."

Royal Engineers rigged up a pulley, put a halftrack on the bridge and passed a long wire rope down to him. Bridge attached it to the strop and returned to the bank, where he could signal to the engineers and control the lift. He then rowed back again and supervised the lowering of the charge into the assault boat, where he disarmed it.

"There was only one way to find out [what the device was]: get into the water and explore"

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER JOHN BRIDGE

In the final year of the war, Bridge considered he had landed a 'safe' job: a posting dismantling unexploded bombs in Liverpool rather than overseas.

A great record

Thanks to his huge skills and calm demeanour, Bridge survived the war, by which point he held the rank of acting lieutenant-commander. He took enormous pride in the decorations awarded to other

members of his team and in the fact that he had never lost any of them to death or injury. In March 1945, Bridge received his GC from King George VI at an investiture at Buckingham Palace. Around the same time, he married his long-term girlfriend, Frances Patterson, and the couple went on to have three daughters.

After he was demobbed in 1946, Bridge returned to his teaching role. He then became assistant education officer for Southport in 1947 and served as director of education for Sunderland Borough Council from 1963 to 1976.

In retirement, Bridge lived at Roker in Sunderland, where his recreations were gardening, fell-walking, fishing, photography and travel. He also published a memoir, *Trip to Nijmegen*. Bridge died in Sunderland on December 14, 2006, aged 91. The headquarters of the Fleet Diving Squadron of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth is named the Bridge Building in his honour.

I do not own Bridge's gallantry and service medals, but they are on display at the gallery bearing my name at the Imperial War Museum, London. There has only been one other holder of the GC, GM and Bar: Lieutenant Hugh Syme, an Australian who also defused unexploded bombs and mines during World War Two. **BW**

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.

