

Lieutenant Commander  
William Christopher  
O'Brien DFM



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

William O'Brien as a sergeant  
after receiving his unique DFM  
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OTHERWISE

William ‘Uncle Bill’ O’Brien, whose lengthy military career spanned 38 remarkable years, is the only Royal Marine ever to have been awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. No other Marine will in future receive the decoration because it is no longer awarded.

Furthermore, O’Brien has the distinction of being awarded the only DFM of the 1982 Falklands Conflict. He enjoyed a long and varied military career that included, as well as his Falklands exploits, serving on the streets of Belfast, in the mountains of northern Iraq and in Afghanistan. During a tour in the latter from 2009 to 2010, O’Brien became both the only reservist pilot to fly frontline combat missions and the oldest Apache pilot to fly on operations, celebrating his 55th birthday in Helmand – hence his affectionate nickname of ‘Uncle Bill’.

William Christopher O’Brien was born in Romford, Essex, on November 16, 1954. He was the son of two Irish car factory workers living in Coventry, where he attended Caludon Castle School, Wyken. He left school at 16 and, after a brief period working in the same factory as his parents, enlisted in the Royal Marines in 1972, aged 17.

On completion of his basic training, he was awarded the ‘King’s Badge’ as the best all-round member of his recruit troop, 29 King’s Squad. He was initially posted to 41 Commando, based in Malta, and then volunteered to join 42 Commando on a tour of Northern Ireland. He was promoted to corporal and, after completing an Arctic survival instructors’ course, became part of the cadre set up to train 42 Commando in Arctic warfare techniques for the first time.

### Vital sorties

Between 1974 and 1978, and at the height of ‘the Troubles’, O’Brien completed three tours of Northern Ireland. In 1978

he qualified as an air gunner with the 3 Commando Brigade Air Squadron and then completed his fourth tour of Northern Ireland.

His career changed direction after he applied for pilot training as a result of the mentoring and guidance he received from many members of the squadron. O’Brien gained his pilot ‘wings’ in 1981 and was awarded the Bob Bowles Trophy for best student on his course. After being posted to Montfortabeek Flight, 45 Commando Group, Royal Marines, he completed his fifth and final tour of Northern Ireland.

After the Argentine invasion of the Falklands in 1982, it was with this unit that O’Brien found himself deployed to the South Atlantic to play his part in helping to regain the British territory as part of Operation Corporate. In the war

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zone, O’Brien flew one of Montfortabeek Flight’s three Aérospatiale Gazelle helicopters in direct support of the 2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, at Goose Green and then, at one time or another, most of the other units involved in the conflict.

His DFM for courage was announced on October 8, 1982, when his citation stated: “During the attack on Darwin and Goose Green, Sergeant O’Brien piloted a Gazelle AH.1 helicopter of ‘M’ Flight, 3 Commando Brigade Air Squadron. For two days his helicopter conducted supply

and casualty evacuation operations, often under enemy fire.”

The citation also explained that, together with his flight commander, O’Brien took part in no fewer than 17 vital night-flying sorties to evacuate wounded personnel and resupply ammunition. It continued: “At times these sorties necessitated flying forward to company lines in the heat of battle and in appalling weather.

“The conspicuous gallantry and cool professionalism displayed on all these occasions was superb and Sergeant O’Brien made an outstanding contribution. His expertise and competence as a pilot has been widely admired and recognised.”

### Personal obligation

In an interview at his home in Somerset for my book *Falklands War Heroes*, O’Brien said he felt a strong sense of responsibility for the troops on the ground, regardless of the threats posed by Argentinian air and land forces. A number of Royal Marine and Army helicopters were shot down, but O’Brien felt “a huge obligation to the infantry.

“I knew what it was like to be running short of ammunition, to be wet, dirty, bone-tired, hungry and thoroughly frightened. These were the same men with whom, up until just a few years earlier, I would have been sharing the trenches. So, I felt a huge affinity towards them and felt I had to go the extra mile.”

O’Brien added: “I landed one time at Goose Green during a mortar barrage. I could see the plumes of smoke and explosions and could feel a slight concussion through the airframe, but I felt detached in my own space – because the helicopter was so noisy, you couldn’t hear the battle unfolding. I really thrived on the intensity of it, the test if you like.”

O’Brien heard the news of his gallantry medal when back in Britain and was “very pleased” to discover he was being awarded



Scout and Gazelle helicopters of the 3 Commando Brigade Air Squadron in 1978 BYEFORNOW



Army Air Corps Apache AH.1s at Camp Bastion, Afghanistan, 2011  
POA(PHOT) MEZ MERRILL/ MOD

the DFM. Soon after, along with his wife, Helen, and their two daughters, he found himself at an investiture at Buckingham Palace. O'Brien received his medal from Queen Elizabeth II, who mentioned during their brief chat that her son Prince Andrew (now the Duke of York) had also flown helicopters during the conflict. As O'Brien left Buckingham Palace, Lieutenant General Sir Steuart Pringle – then Commandant General of Royal Marines – stopped his staff car at the gates to shake him by the hand.

O'Brien was at pains to tell me that he had done no more than many other courageous helicopter pilots from the squadron who were doing "very much the same thing and I want to acknowledge that". He also noted that there was a general citation for 3 Commando Brigade Air Squadron, for their contribution to the war effort.

### Apaches and Afghanistan

Next, O'Brien qualified on the Westland Lynx helicopter and in 1984 became a qualified helicopter instructor, being awarded the Westland Trophy as the best student on his course. O'Brien was commissioned into the Royal Marines the next year.

Still serving with 3 Commando Brigade Air Squadron, he took part in Operation Haven in southern Turkey and northern Iraq at the time of the First Gulf War – his first experience of working with and observing US Army Apache attack helicopters in action.

He became the Lynx flight commander of 3 Commando Brigade Air Squadron and then served as the first Royal Marines officer on Army Flying

Standards, the group responsible for maintaining the highest standards of flying in the army. In 1999, he had another change of career direction, transferring with the rank of major to the Army Air Corps (AAC) to fly Apaches. "I had wanted to fly attack helicopters for as long as I could remember and so I took the opportunity when it was offered," he said.

O'Brien was posted to the United States where he became a qualified Apache pilot at Fort Rucker, Alabama, in 1999. On his return to Britain, he was posted to the Attack Helicopter Training Unit (which later became 673 Squadron, Army School of Aviation).

In 2003, O'Brien became the senior flying instructor of the newly formed

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Former Royal Marines and Army Air Corps helicopter pilot William O'Brien DFM

Air Manoeuvre Training Advisory Team (AMTAT), responsible for delivering Conversion to Role (CTR) – effectively combat skills training – to the field army enabling its first combat-ready Apache AH.1 unit, 9 Regiment AAC, at Dishforth in Yorkshire. In 2005, at the age of 50, O'Brien retired from the military but was then employed by a private company as the AAC's first civilian qualified helicopter instructor, flying with 673 Squadron. In 2008, O'Brien was commissioned into the Royal Naval Reserve and volunteered for service in Afghanistan.

Although his wife suggested it might have been a "mid-life crisis", O'Brien insists his reasons for wanting to serve there were straightforward: "I had never been on operations in an Apache. I was training pilots to fly them but I was also a gunnery instructor involved in pre-deployment training for Afghanistan. In order to better understand their requirements, I thought I should experience operations in Afghanistan for myself. Once I was there, I again felt a huge, almost parental, responsibility to the troops on the ground."

### Exceptional and loyal

O'Brien was deployed with 663 Squadron, based at Camp Bastion, on September 4, 2009. Christened "Uncle Bill" by his more youthful comrades, O'Brien found himself alongside many of the pilots he had trained – none of whom had even been born when he was awarded his Green Beret.

O'Brien's operational duties ended in January 2010, when he was 55, and he then briefly returned to his duties as a flying instructor with 673 Squadron. He finally retired in 2010. That July, he received a personal commendation from the-then Commander Joint Helicopter Command, Rear Admiral (later Sir) Tony Johnstone-Burt.

The lengthy citation was an affectionate testimonial to an extraordinary career: "Mr O'Brien is a civilian qualified helicopter instructor currently serving in 673 (Attack Helicopter Training) Squadron in Middle Wallop and is ultimately responsible for the training of future Apache pilots during a period of surge to meet expanding operational output. A former officer in the Royal Marines, Mr O'Brien is a quiet and unassuming man whose faithful service, tireless dedication and devotion to duty is an inspiration to everyone with whom he comes into contact.

"After a service flying career that spanned service on Operation Corporate in the Falklands to early conversion onto the Apache, Mr O'Brien retired and joined Aviation Training International Limited in late 2005 as a civilian flying instructor. Since that time, he has trained many students on conversion to type courses.



O'Brien's DFM, GSM (with N Iraq & S Turkey and Northern Ireland clasps), South Atlantic Medal (with rosette), OSM (with Afghanistan clasp), Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal, and Long Service & Good Conduct Medal (Naval)



LEFT: Sergeant O'Brien having received his DFM at an investiture at Buckingham Palace

aviation and imparting knowledge to his students who, in turn, hold him in high regard. He is a gentle giant of a man who has given much to the benefit of others. For his exceptional and loyal service, and the totality of his commitment, Mr O'Brien is awarded the Commander Joint Helicopter Command's Personal Commendation."

A married man with three children and five grandchildren, William O'Brien is enjoying his retirement at his home in Somerset and will celebrate his 70th birthday in November. **EW**

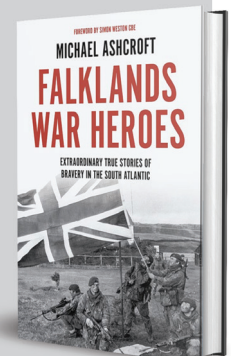
### FALKLANDS WAR HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Falklands War Heroes* was published in hardback in 2021. For more information, visit [falklandswarheroes.com](http://falklandswarheroes.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](http://iwm.org.uk/heroes) and details about his VC collection may be found at [lordashcroftmedals.com](http://lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook: @LordAshcroft



Not satisfied with this, he recently volunteered to reinstate his commission as a reservist in the Fleet Air Arm and then deploy on a four-month tour to Afghanistan as an Apache Aircraft Commander in the rank of Lieutenant Commander – this despite being aged 55 and a grandfather to boot!

"During this tour he served in support of numerous high intensity operations, overcoming adversity in the face of many challenging aviation situations. His sustained commitment and self-sacrifice in a highly charged operational environment proved legendary. Although his deployment attracted considerable media attention Mr O'Brien remained humble and modest throughout. His commanding officer described him as an 'exceptional officer, aviator and role model'. He does not seek any public recognition for his contribution and would be highly embarrassed by any award.

"Mr O'Brien remains passionate about