

Major-General  
Daniel Marcus  
William Beak  
VC, DSO, MC  
& Bar



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Daniel Beak received the VC during  
World War One and climbed the ranks  
to generalship COURTESY OF THE LORD  
ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION

**D**aniel Beak received no less than four bravery awards during the last two years of World War One. His decorations were a testimony to his leadership and relentless courage, meaning that even before he was awarded the Victoria Cross, he was already the recipient of the Military Cross and Bar and, later, the Distinguished Service Order. He was also mentioned in despatches three times during a distinguished career that spanned both world wars.

Daniel Marcus William Beak was born in Kent Road, St Denys, Southampton, on January 27, 1891. He was the son of William Beak, a master dairyman, and his wife Sarah (née Mullin). He attended Denys School and, later, Taunton's School, both in his home city of Southampton. After leaving school, Beak had originally trained to be a teacher, working at St Mary's School in Southampton. However, after changing his mind on his desired career, he became the private secretary to a clergyman in Bristol.

After the outbreak of World War One, Beak joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in February 1915 as an ordinary seaman, but he was soon promoted, first to petty officer, then later to temporary sub-lieutenant. He spent most of his

wartime career serving with the 1st (Drake) Battalion, 1st (Royal Naval) Brigade, 63rd Royal Naval Division.

The eight Royal Navy battalions – formed to undertake operations ashore and comprising sailors and naval reservists – were named after prominent and historic Royal Navy commanders: Drake, Benbow, Hawke, Collingwood, Nelson, Howe, Hood and Anson.

Beak served briefly during the Gallipoli campaign against the Ottomans, which had begun in February 1915, and took part in the evacuation from the peninsula in early 1916. In May the same year, he embarked for Mudros, Greece, but his stay there was short-lived.

### Soon in the thick of it

In June 1916, Beak arrived in France and was soon in the thick of the fighting. It was not long, too, before he was awarded the first of his gallantry decorations.

*The London Gazette* of January 26, 1917, announced Beak's MC, stating: "He led his men in the attack with great courage and initiative and materially assisted in the capture of the enemy line. He set a fine example throughout."

On July 18 the same year, it was announced that he had been awarded a

Bar to his MC: "For conspicuous gallantry during operations, when he continually dashed forward, under heavy fire, to reorganise the men, and led them on with great bravery through the enemy barrage and machine gun fire."

In October 1917, Beak left France to attend a senior officers' course in Aldershot, Hampshire. By this point in the war, Beak was the acting commander of the Drake Battalion and later the same year he commanded the Howe Battalion. However, this was disbanded in February 1918 and, the following month, he was given permanent command of his original unit.

On July 26, 1918, *The London Gazette* announced that he had been awarded the DSO. This award came for both a night assault and defending the Ytres-Bus Road. His citation stated: "During a night attack by the enemy the right flank of his division was left in a dangerous position. He arranged for a flank to be formed in that direction, and subsequently covered the retirement of two brigades with a composite rearguard which he organised and commanded.

"His initiative and presence of mind greatly assisted in extricating these brigades from a very difficult situation. Throughout, the skilful handling of his battalion was particularly noticeable."

***"He continually dashed forward, under heavy fire, to reorganise the men, and led them on with great bravery through the enemy barrage"***

CITATION FOR THE BAR TO BEAK'S MC



Men of the Royal Naval Division training at Imbros before deploying to Gallipoli, June 1915  
ERNEST BROOKS/MIRRORPIX/GETTY

## Bravery at Baupume

In July 1918, the Germans renewed their attack on the French lines across a 100-mile front in the vicinity of Rheims. To start with, the Germans did well, crossing the River Marne for the first time since 1914. However, their assault soon stalled, in part because they came up against the Royal Naval Division – including Beak's Drake Battalion – which had arrived in the Hamel-Aveluy sector in May for a planned Allied offensive.

Beak took part in the Battle of Albert, which began on August 21, 1918. One of the main aims of the Allied assault was to gain control of the Albert-Bapaume Road and thereby stop the Germans attacking from the northwest. Beak and his comrades were involved in the fighting for control of Longeast Wood, between Ablainzeville and Achiet-le-Grand, lying northwest of Bapaume. On August 22, the second day of the battle, the Germans counter-attacked, but by the following day they had been pushed back.

By August 25, the Royal Naval Division was assisting the New Zealand Division in the attack on Grévillers, west of Bapaume. Four days later, Bapaume itself fell to the British. On September 2, the British attacked a line to the east of Arras and, yet again, Beak and his men were at the heart of the operation. In short, Beak showed such outstanding courage and leadership that he surpassed even his earlier exploits.

*The London Gazette* later – on November 15, 1918 – detailed the repeated acts that led to the award of his VC: “For most conspicuous bravery, courageous leadership and devotion to duty during a prolonged period of operations.

“He led his men in attack and, despite heavy machine gun fire, four enemy positions were captured. His skilful and fearless leadership resulted in the complete success of this operation and enabled other battalions to reach their objectives.

“Four days later, though dazed by a shell fragment, in the absence of the brigade commander, he reorganised the whole brigade under extremely heavy fire and led his men with splendid courage to their objective. An attack having been held up, he rushed forward, accompanied by only one runner, and succeeded in breaking up a nest of machine guns, personally bringing back nine or ten prisoners. His fearless example instilled courage and confidence into his men, who then quickly resumed the advance under his leadership.

“On a subsequent occasion he displayed great courage and powers of leadership in attack, and his initiative, coupled with the confidence with which he inspired all ranks, not only enabled his own and a neighbouring unit to advance, but



ABOVE: Beak receiving his VC from King George V at Valenciennes in France D MCLELLAN/IWM/GETTY

BELOW: Beak, shown as a post-war captain in the Royal Scots Fusiliers IWM VC67



contributed very materially to the success of the Naval Division in these operations.”

## The blue and the red

During World War One, it was fairly rare for a VC to be awarded for prolonged actions. Yet Beak's decoration was awarded for some four days of fighting at Grévillers from August 21-25 and for additional combat on September 2 at Pronville, southeast of Quéant.

Another member of the Drake Battalion, Chief Petty Officer George Prowse, was also awarded the VC for his bravery at Pronville. Among his deeds that day, Prowse charged a machine gun with a small group and captured it together with 25 prisoners and five machine guns. The published citation for Prowse's Victoria Cross ended: “Throughout the whole

operations his magnificent example and leadership were an inspiration to all, and his courage was superb.”

Prowse also received the Distinguished Conduct Medal, which is unusual for a sailor, but he was fighting as an infantryman. He was killed on September 27, 1918, less than a month after his VC action. His posthumous VC was presented to his widow, Sarah, by King George V at Buckingham Palace on July 17, 1919. As an aside, his medal was the last one to have been awarded with the blue naval ribbon.

Beak also received his VC from George V, but at an investiture at the Vincent Barracks Valenciennes, France, on December 6, 1918. Coincidentally, he was the first naval VC recipient of the war to receive the decoration with red ribbon – generally for Army recipients – rather than blue ribbon, generally for Royal Navy recipients.

In April 1919, Beak was given the Freedom of the Borough of Southampton by his home city. He was demobbed from the Royal Naval Division in June 1919 and in the same month he was in charge of the Drake Battalion in a ceremony attended by the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII, held at Horse Guards Parade in London.

Beak found it difficult to settle back into civilian life, so re-joined the military. He served as a captain in a battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers from March 1921, which brought service in Ireland during the Irish War of Independence.

Beak married Frances Wallace, the only daughter of a decorated lieutenant-colonel, in Kirkport, Ayr, in September 1923 and the couple went on to have two sons. However, his wife died just seven years after their wedding, leaving him to bring up their young sons alone.

## Soldiering on

In 1929, Beak was given a brevet promotion to major, the rank confirmed three years later. In 1932, he was transferred to the King's Regiment at the rank of major and during this time served in India. Shortly before the outbreak of World War Two, from late 1938 to 1940, he led the 1st Battalion, South Lancashire Regiment as a lieutenant-colonel.

In July 1940, he was promoted to acting brigadier and saw service in France, where he was once again mentioned in despatches. Having led the 12th Infantry Brigade, Beak was subsequently promoted to acting major-general at the end of 1941 and was made GOC Malta Command between January and July 1942. This was at a time when the strategically important island of Malta, then still a British colony and a key – arguably, *the* key – Royal Navy base, was under a relentless air bombardment from Italian and German forces.

Famously, the island nation – bombed more heavily than London at the height of the Blitz – was awarded the George Cross by King George VI on April 15, 1942.

In February 1945, Beak finally retired from the army following an apparent fall-out with Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, having served for the



Beak's medal group, comprising his VC, DSO, MC & Bar, 1914-15 Star, War Medal (1914-19), (with MiD oakleaf), 1939-45 Star, Africa Star (with 8th Army clasp), War Medal (1939-45; missing its MiD oakleaf), King George V Silver Jubilee Medal, King George VI Coronation Medal and Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal COURTESY OF THE LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION

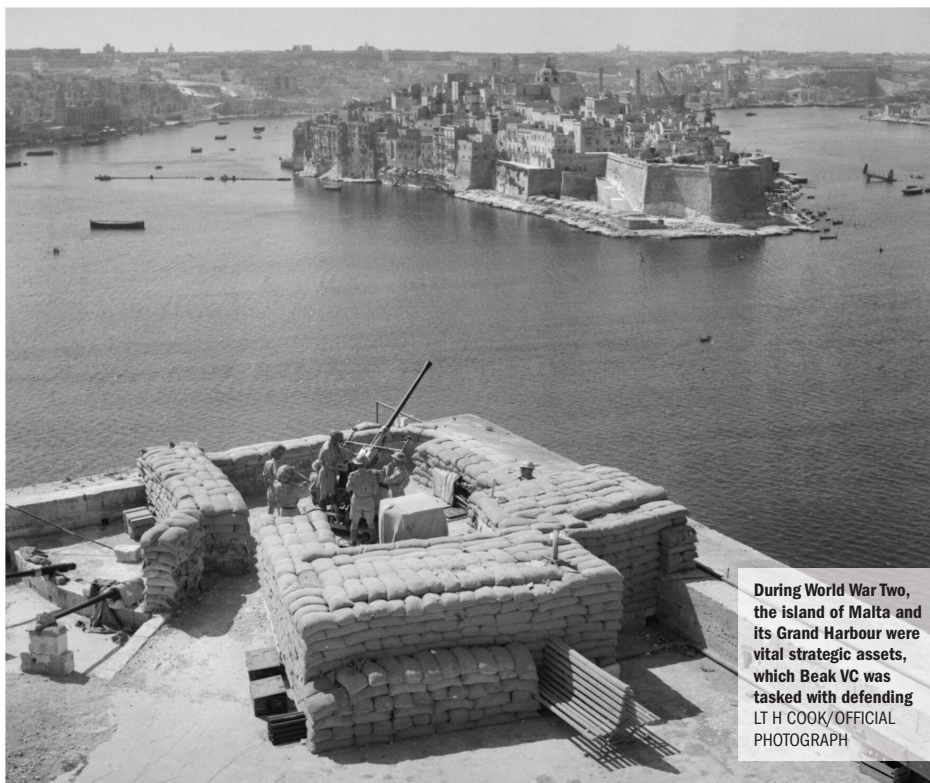
majority of both world wars. The friction appears to have originated during Operation Pugilist in Tunisia during March 1943, where Beak led the 151st Infantry Brigade, and after which he held no field command. In his retirement, he lived in Lambourn, Berkshire, home to many racehorse stables. At one point, Beak was secretary of the local branch of the YMCA.

Major-General Daniel Beak, VC, DSO, MC & Bar, died at the Princess Margaret Hospital, in Swindon, Wiltshire, on May 3, 1967, aged 76. Six days later, he was buried at Brookwood Cemetery in Woking, Surrey. I purchased Beak's medal group at auction

in November 2003 and I am delighted to be the custodian of this courageous man's gallantry and service medals. As the recipient of such a large and varied group of gallantry medals, Beak had a legendary status as a sailor and soldier and as a leader among his comrades.

In 2006, a bronze plaque was erected in Beak's memory at the Borough War Memorial in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. It was sponsored by *This England* magazine and is all the more important as his grave has no headstone. Beak's name is also on a memorial tablet to his wife, Frances, at the New Cemetery in Ayr. [BW](#)

*“As the recipient of such a large and varied group of gallantry medals, Beak had a legendary status as a soldier and as a leader”*



During World War Two, the island of Malta and its Grand Harbour were vital strategic assets, which Beak VC was tasked with defending  
LT H COOK/OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes*, was published in hardback in 2006 and, later, in paperback. For more information, visit

[victoriacrossheroes.com](http://victoriacrossheroes.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 and Facebook: @LordAshcroft

