

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft
in Palermo, Italy

VC BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT

Pinning a gallantry medal on Peter Wright's chest for single-handedly destroying three German machine gun nests, King George decided it wasn't reward enough for the soldier's awesome bravery, so he lobbied for it to be upgraded to a Victoria Cross... and succeeded. Lord Ashcroft shares the extraordinary story



ART IMITATES LIFE: Peter Wright, above, with the painting commemorating his VC action, main



NEVER FORGET: Lord Ashcroft at the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Salerno, Italy

took charge and crawled forward by himself to see what the opposition was. He returned with the information that three spandau posts were holding them up.
"He collected a section and put it into a position where it could give covering fire. Single-handed he then attacked each post in turn with hand grenades and bayonet and silenced each one.
"He then led the company on to the crest but realised that the enemy fire made this position untenable. C.S.M. Wright therefore led them a short way down the hill and up on to the objective from a different direction."

He subsequently reorganised what was left of the company and positioned them to defend against a likely enemy counter-attack. When that came it was successfully beaten off. The citation continues: "Later, with complete disregard of heavy enemy shell-fire on the area of company headquarters and the reverse slopes of the hill and of machine-gun fire from the commanding slopes on the left flank of the position, he brought up extra ammunition and distributed it to the company."
It concluded: "It is due to this Warrant Officer's superb disregard of the enemy's fire, his magnificent leadership and his outstanding heroism throughout the action that his battal-

ion succeeded in capturing and maintaining its hold on this very important objective."
Wright originally received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry in the field from the King but when George VI heard the full details, he considered the DCM insufficient reward for Wright's courage. "If ever a man deserved the VC, it is this man to whom I have awarded the DCM," the King told General Harold Alexander, Commander of the 15th Army Group in Italy, when he visited Italy to bestow gallantry

awards. Adamant that the Army had erred, the King asked for a re-think. The General eventually adhered to the Monarch's wishes and, as a result, the DCM was upgraded to the VC.
This required a short, additional paragraph being inserted in The London Gazette as Wright's VC was announced on September 7 1944. It read: "The King having been graciously pleased to approve the award of the Victoria Cross to C.S.M. Wright, the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal for the same acts of gallantry,

'Wright, who was over six feet tall and very modest, greeted news of his VC with utter surprise'



STUNNING: Wright's medals, including the VC, far left, are now part of Lord Ashcroft's collection

and got a chap to give me covering fire. And I then got sort of up the hill a bit, they [the enemy] were on the slope.
"I then wiped out the first one [machine-gun post] with grenades, then wiped out the second one with grenades and [with the help] of the boy who was giving me covering fire with his rifle.
"Then the third one - they ran away. I grabbed my rifle and bayonet and chased them but they got away. I regrouped the company and made sure they were in position in case the Germans counter-attacked. I then sent a message back to the Commanding Officer that we had captured the hill and were consolidating our position."
Wright, who was affectionately known as "Old Misty", died in Ipswich Hospital, Suffolk, on April 5, 1990, aged 73. He is buried at All Saints Churchyard, Ashbocking, Suffolk, a church that is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086.
His regiment commissioned a painting of his VC action by the artist Peter Archer and this can be seen at Wellington Barracks, central London. I purchased his VC medal group privately in 2015.

BEFORE travelling to Salerno, I interviewed Wright's two surviving children, daughters Margaret Cherry and Anne Douglas, about their father.
Margaret, 77, who runs a fruit farm with her husband, told me: "He was a very good father. He was always a generous man. When he went to Buckingham Palace for the first time [to receive his DCM], the King immediately said, 'This man deserves the VC'. And he [George VI] took it from there."
Anne, 73, a retired teacher, said of her father: "When he went to Buckingham Palace for the second time to receive his VC, he had the DCM in his pocket because he thought they would ask for it back. But they didn't so he sent it to the Coldstream Guards and they still have it. We were always very proud of him and we are to this day."
Having studied the circumstances of Wright's bravery in Italy, I am in no doubt that George VI was absolutely correct to encourage the Army commanders to award this brave soldier Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious gallantry decoration.
The VC is awarded for "extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy" and Company Sergeant Major Peter Wright's valour more than 80 years ago deserved to be fully recognised.
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ON SEPTEMBER 9, the American 5th Army landed south of Salerno as part of Operation Avalanche. Among the invasion force was 56 Division, a British unit in which Wright was serving.
By September 25, the 56th Division sought to advance north of Salerno as part of the breakthrough from the original bridgehead.
As Wright's citation for his award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) of September 7 1944 makes clear, he showed outstanding courage. On September 25, the 3rd Battalion, Coldstream Guards, attacked enemy positions along a steep wooded hill near Salerno. Before it reached the crest, Wright's company was held up by heavy German machine gun and mortar fire and all the officers were killed or injured.
As the citation reads: "C.S.M. Wright, seeing that his company was held up, went forward to see what could be done. Finding that there were no officers left he immediately