## EXCLUSIVE **By Lord Ashcroft** in Palermo, Italy

HE immaculately-kept war cemetery on the outskirts of Salerno is the final resting place of more than 1,800 Allied servicemen. They all sacrificed their lives fighting for King, country and wider freedom during the Second World War.

Yet given the bravery of his actions eight decades ago, it's remarkable one of the white headstones in neat rows in this ancient city in south-west Italy is not inscribed with the name of Company Sergeant Major Peter Harold Wright of the Coldstream Guards.

For Wright single-handedly attacked no less than three German machine-gun posts in one day - yet, incredibly, lived to enjoy a long and fulfilling life after the Second World War.

Wright's place in the history books is guar-anteed for two reasons: his was the first and only Salerno VC and, more significantly, 80 years ago this week it was uniquely upgraded from a lesser gallantry medal to the Victoria Cross at the request of the King.

With the help of Wright's surviving children, two daughters both in their 70s, I am today able to tell his remarkable story.

Born in Mettingham, near Bungay, Suffolk, on August 10, 1916, Wright was one of 14 siblings. After leaving school, he worked on his father's farm while planning a career in the police force. But after a change of heart, he enlisted into the Coldstream Guards on October 7, 1936, and, after basic training, joined the 3rd Battalion, serving in Egypt and

Palestine from 1937-9 as a Lance Corporal. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he returned to Egypt and was based in Alexandria. In May 1942, Wright, by this point a Sergeant, was wounded above the eye during fighting in Tobruk, Libya, and was evacuated for hospital treatment. After nearly two months of recuperation,

he rejoined his battalion.

His VC action took place on September 25, 1943, when, after yet another promotion, Wright was in the rank of Warrant Officer Class 2 – and appointed Company Sergeant Major – aged 27. The Allies had invaded Sicily on the night of July 9/10, 1943, and it formally fell to the Allies on August 17.

The following month marked the start of the long campaign to gain control of Italy, Hitler's ally during the early years of the war.

The first landings on the Italian mainland took place in Calabria on September 3. Italy's own armistice with the Allies was signed five days later on September 8, but Germany still controlled most of the country and the situation was confused and



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 break-out 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

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





charge and crawled forward by himself to see what the opposition was. He returned with the information that three spandau posts were cessfully beaten off. The citation continues: 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 and of machine-gun fire from the commandturn 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 there were no officers left he immediately to the objective from a different direction.

He subsequently reorganised what was left of the company and positioned them to

counter-attack. When that came it was suc-"Later, with complete disregard of heavy enemy shell-fire on the area of company headquarters and the reverse slopes of the hill ing 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-

defend against a likely enemy

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

very modest, greeted news of his VC with utter surprise'

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tional

VC BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT

ion succeeded in capturing and maintaining 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, addi-Gazette as Wright's VC was announced on September 7 ing been graciously pleased Victoria Cross to C.S.M.

Wright, the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal for the same acts of gallantry,

announced in the London Gazette of the 27th January, 1944 (No. 36349), is cancelled."

Wright, who was over six feet tall and extremely modest, greeted the news of his VC a son and two daughters. with utter surprise: "VC? Can't be me - some tional paragraph being told the reason, he still insisted: ' inserted in The London mistake. I got the DCM for that." told the reason, he still insisted: "There's some

By this point he had been sent back to the UK where he was given a role training the bat-1944. It read: "The King hav- talion personally guarding Winston Churchill at the Prime Minister's country residence at to approve the award of the Chequers in Buckinghamshire.

He finally received his VC from George VI at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on September 21, 1944.

After the end of the war, Wright was dis-

charged to the Reserve and he went to work as a farmer in Suffolk. In June 1946, he married Mollie Hurren and the couple went on to have

In 1989, Wright gave an interview to BBC other Sergeant Major Wright maybe?" When Radio Cambridge about his Army career. prestigious gallantry decoration. During the interview, he provided a rare insight into his VC action in the heat of battle after his senior officers had been killed or wounded.

"I then went to see what was happening on the right flank of this hill and, as I was looking for this other platoon. I ran into these German machine-gun posts," he recalled.

think they had seen me. I collected some gre- his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him nades from some of the dead and wounded, on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

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 privatelv in 2015.

EFORE 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

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

• Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, "I ducked down and crawled back. I don't author and pollster. For more information on