

A personal tribute to Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Wilson, VC

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IT says everything about Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Wilson that he was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously—yet after his award was announced he went on to live for another 68 years.

I was fortunate enough to meet this courageous soldier in the twilight of his remarkable life. We met at various events through my support of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association.

Like so many brave men, this quietly-spoken man was unbelievably modest about the circumstances that led to him receiving Britain's premier bravery award early in World War II. I found him self-effacing, mild-mannered and utterly charming—a true English gentleman in every way.

I felt honoured to have spent time in the company of Eric Charles Twelves Wilson, who was awarded the VC posthumously in October 1940, two months after it was believed that he had died in battle. In fact, he had been taken Prisoner of War and, nearly seven decades later, he was Britain's oldest holder of the VC until his death on December 23, 2008, aged 96.

Wilson epitomised everything that is best about the British soldier. Once described by his mother as "such a dear boy and so timid", he was fearless when put in a uniform to fight for king and country.

Wilson, the son of the rector of Hunsdon, Hertfordshire, was born on October 2, 1912, at Sandown on the Isle of Wight. He attended Marlborough, where he proved a fine athlete, and it was here that he decided on a military career. He passed the Sandhurst entrance exam while still at school and, in 1933, was commissioned into the East Surrey Regiment.

By the summer of 1940, when Wilson was 27, World War II had spread to the Mediterranean, North Africa, Greece and Crete. There was also fighting in the Horn of Africa, in Somaliland, where Wilson was attached to the Somaliland Camel Corps with the rank of Acting Captain.

The *London Gazette* of October 14, 1940 may have been inaccurate in announcing his "posthumous" VC, but, other than that, it gave an accurate account of his bravery.

"Captain Wilson was in command of machine-gun posts manned by Somali soldiers in the key position of Observation Hill, a defended post in the defensive organisation of the Tug Argan Gap in British Somaliland. The enemy attacked Observation Hill on 11th August, 1940. Captain Wilson and the Somali soldiers under his command beat off the attack and opened fire on the enemy troops attacking Mill Hill, another post within his range. He inflicted such heavy casualties that the enemy, determined to put his guns out of action, brought up a pack battery to within seven hundred yards, and scored two direct hits through the loopholes of his defences, which, bursting within the post, wounded Captain Wilson severely in the right shoulder and in the left eye, several of his team being also wounded. His guns were blown off their stands but he repaired and replaced them and, regardless of his wounds, carried on, whilst his Somali sergeant was killed beside him. On 12th and 14th August, the enemy again concentrated field artillery on Captain Wilson's guns, but he continued, with his wounds untended, to man them. On 15th August two of his machine-gun posts were blown to pieces, yet Captain Wilson, now suffering from malaria in addition to his wounds, still kept his own post in action. The enemy finally over-ran the post at 5 pm on 15th August, when Captain Wilson, fighting to the last, was killed."

In fact, Wilson's company had been sent an order to withdraw on August 13, but it never received it. On August 15, Wilson was rendered unconscious during the last of the fighting. When he came round, he was surrounded by dead comrades, as well as the body of his pet terrier, Vicky. After stumbling away from his position, he was captured by the Italians.

Wilson was put in a prison camp at Adi Ugru in Eritrea where, four months

later, a captured RAF officer was surprised to meet the "late" Captain Wilson—and he informed the PoW of his award. Weeks later, just as Wilson and his fellow prisoners were planning a mass escape, their captors fled shortly before being overwhelmed by advancing British troops.

Wilson was now able to receive his VC from King George VI at Buckingham Palace, typically dedicating his medal to all those who had fought beside him at Tug Argan Gap.

He returned to front-line operations, eventually retiring from the Army in 1949 to become a colonial officer in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). He retained his affection for Africa, in general, and Somaliland, in particular. In fact, he was honorary secretary of the Anglo-Somali Society from 1972–77.

Wilson, who had three sons by his two wives, spent his retirement years in Dorset. He had known for some years that I had already built the world's largest collection of VCs—currently more than 150 in number.

In 2005, Wilson needed funds for family reasons. This meant that the trust, which had been set up to care for and protect the VC collection that I had started, reached an agreement with him whereby it purchased his medal. However, under the terms of the deal, the VC itself remained with this wonderful man until his death.

Next year, along with the other VCs in the trust's collection, Wilson's award will go on display in the new Lord Ashcroft Gallery in the Imperial War Museum, which I am funding with a £5 million donation. Few medals will generate more interest than the VC of a true British hero: one of just two men in the VC's 153-year history to come "back from the dead".

* Lord Ashcroft is a recognised expert on bravery. He is the author of *Victoria Cross Heroes*, first published in 2006, and *Special Forces Heroes*, which was published in November, 2008. The Lord Ashcroft Gallery will open in the autumn of 2010.

