

Charles Upham

Captain **Charles Hazlitt Upham** VC & Bar (21 September 1908 – 22 November 1994) was a New Zealand soldier who earned the Victoria Cross twice during the Second World War: in Crete in May 1941, and at Ruweisat Ridge, Egypt, in July 1942. He was only the third person to receive the VC twice, the only person to receive two VCs during the Second World War and the only combat soldier to receive the award twice. As a result, Upham is often described as the most highly decorated Commonwealth soldier of that war, as the VC is the Commonwealth's highest award for extreme gallantry in the face of the enemy.

Early life

Upham was born at 32 Gloucester Street in Central Christchurch on 21 September 1908, the son of John Hazlitt Upham, a lawyer, and his wife, Agatha Mary Coates. He boarded at Waihi School, Winchester, South Canterbury, between 1917 and 1922 and at Christ's College, Christchurch, from 1923-27. He attended Canterbury Agricultural College (presently known as Lincoln University) where he earned a diploma in agriculture in 1930.

He worked first as a sheep farmer, later as manager, and then valuing farms for the New Zealand government. In 1937 he joined the Valuation Department as assistant district valuer in Timaru, and the following year he became engaged to Mary (Molly) Eileen McTamney (a distant relative of Noel Chavasse, VC and Bar). In 1939 he returned to Lincoln to complete a diploma in valuation and farm management.

Upham enlisted in the 2nd NZ Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) at the age of 30 in September 1939 and was posted to the 20th Canterbury–Otago Battalion. Despite the fact that he already had five years experience in New Zealand's Territorial Army, in which he held the rank of sergeant, he signed on as a private. He was soon promoted to temporary lance corporal, but initially declined a place in an Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU). In December he was promoted to sergeant and a week later sailed for Egypt. In July 1940 he was finally persuaded to join an OCTU.

First VC



The Victoria Cross of which Upham received two

In March 1941 Upham's battalion left for Greece and then withdrew to Crete, and it was here that he was wounded in the action—from 22 to 30 May 1941—that gained him his first VC. When informed of the award, his first response was: "It's meant for the men."

Citation

War Office, 14th October, 1941.

The KING has been graciously pleased to approve of awards of the VICTORIA CROSS to the undermentioned: —

Second Lieutenant Charles Hazlitt Upham (8077), New Zealand Military Forces.

During the operations in Crete this officer performed a series of remarkable exploits, showing outstanding leadership, tactical skill and utter indifference to danger.

He commanded a forward platoon in the attack on MALEME on 22nd May and fought his way forward for over 3,000 yards unsupported by any other arms and against a defense strongly organized in depth. During this operation his platoon destroyed numerous enemy posts but on three occasions sections were temporarily held up.

In the first case, under a heavy fire from a machine gun nest he advanced to close quarters with pistol and grenades, so demoralizing the occupants that his section was able to "mop up" with ease.

Another of his sections was then held up by two machine guns in a house. He went in and placed a grenade through a window, destroying the crew of one machine gun and several others, the other machine gun being silenced by the fire of his sections.

In the third case he crawled to within 15 yards of an M.G. post and killed the gunners with a grenade.

When his Company withdrew from MALEME he helped to carry a wounded man out under fire, and together with another officer rallied more men together to carry other wounded men out.

He was then sent to bring in a company which had become isolated. With a Corporal he went through enemy territory over 600 yards, killing two Germans on the way, found the company, and brought it back to the Battalion's new position. But for this action it would have been completely cut off.

During the following two days his platoon occupied an exposed position on forward slopes and was continuously under fire. Second Lieutenant Upham was blown over by one mortar shell, and painfully wounded by a piece of shrapnel behind the left shoulder, by another. He disregarded this wound and remained on duty. He also received a bullet in the foot which he later removed in Egypt.

At GALATOS on 25th May his platoon was heavily engaged and came under severe mortar and machine-gun fire. While his platoon stopped under cover of a ridge Second-Lieutenant Upham went forward, observed the enemy and brought the platoon forward when the Germans advanced. They killed over 40 with fire and grenades and forced the remainder to fall back.

When his platoon was ordered to retire he sent it back under the platoon Sergeant and he went back to warn other troops that they were being cut off. When he came out himself he was fired on by two Germans. He fell and shammed dead, then crawled into a position and having the use of only one arm rested his rifle in the fork of a tree and as the Germans came forward he killed them both. The second to fall actually hit the muzzle of the rifle as he fell.

On 30th May at SPHAKIA his platoon was ordered to deal with a party of the enemy which had advanced down a ravine to near Force Headquarters. Though in an exhausted condition he climbed the steep hill to the west of the ravine, placed his men in positions on the slope overlooking the ravine and himself went to the top with a Bren Gun and two riflemen. By clever tactics he induced the enemy party to expose itself and then at a range of 500 yards shot 22 and caused the remainder to disperse in panic.

During the whole of the operations he suffered from dysentery and was able to eat very little, in addition to being wounded and bruised.

He showed superb coolness, great skill and dash and complete disregard of danger. His conduct and leadership inspired his whole platoon to fight magnificently throughout, and in fact was an inspiration to the Battalion.

Bar to VC

Upham was evacuated to Egypt, now promoted to captain. He received a Bar to his VC for his actions on 14–15 July 1942, during the First Battle of El Alamein.

Citation

War Office, 26th September, 1945.

The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the award of a Bar to the VICTORIA CROSS to: —

Captain Charles Hazlitt UPHAM, V.C. (8077), New Zealand Military Forces.

Captain C. H. Upham, V.C., was commanding a Company of New Zealand troops in the Western Desert during the operations which culminated in the attack on El Ruweisat Ridge on the night of 14th-15th July, 1942.

In spite of being twice wounded, once when crossing open ground swept by enemy fire to inspect his forward sections guarding our mine-fields and again when he completely destroyed an entire truck load of German soldiers with hand grenades, Captain Upham insisted on remaining with his men to take part in the final assault.

During the opening stages of the attack on the ridge Captain Upham's Company formed part of the reserve battalion, but, when communications with the forward troops broke down and he was instructed to send up an officer to report on the progress of the attack, he went out himself armed with a Spandau gun and, after several sharp encounters with enemy machine gun posts, succeeded in bringing back the required information.

Just before dawn the reserve battalion was ordered forward, but, when it had almost reached its objective, very heavy fire was encountered from a strongly defended enemy locality, consisting of four machine gun posts and a number of tanks.

Captain Upham, without hesitation, at once led his Company in a determined attack on the two nearest strong points on the left flank of the sector. His voice could be heard above the din of battle cheering on his men and, in spite of the fierce resistance of the enemy and the heavy casualties on both sides, the objective was captured.

Captain Upham, during the engagement, himself destroyed a German tank and several guns and vehicles with grenades and although he was shot through the elbow by a machine gun bullet and had his arm broken, he went on again to a forward position and brought back some of his men who had become isolated. He continued to dominate the situation until his men had beaten off a violent enemy counter-attack and consolidated the vital position which they had won under his inspiring leadership.

Exhausted by pain from his wound and weak from loss of blood Captain Upham was then removed to the Regimental Aid Post but immediately his wound had been dressed he returned to his men, remaining with them all day long under heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire, until he was again severely wounded and being now unable to move fell into the hands of the enemy when, his gallant Company having been reduced to only six survivors, his position was finally over-run by superior enemy forces, in spite of the outstanding gallantry and magnificent leadership shown by Captain Upham.

The Victoria Cross was conferred on Captain Upham for conspicuous bravery during the operations in Crete in May, 1941, and the award was announced in the London Gazette dated 14th October, 1941.

With this award Upham became the third man to be awarded a Bar to the VC. The previous recipients were Captain Arthur Martin-Leake and Captain Noel Godfrey Chavasse, both doctors serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Martin-Leake received his VC for rescuing wounded under fire in the Second Boer War, and the Bar for similar actions in the First World War. Chavasse was similarly decorated for two such actions in the First World War, subsequently dying of wounds received during his second action. Neither of these men were combatants, so Upham remains the only fighting soldier to have been decorated with the VC and Bar.

POW in Colditz Castle

Having been taken prisoner of war (POW), he was sent to an Italian hospital to recuperate but attempted to escape numerous times before being branded "dangerous" by the Germans and incarcerated in the infamous Oflag IV-C (Colditz) on 14 October 1944.



A group of 11 NZ VC Holders. From left: **Back Row:** Col L.W. Andrew, Maj R.S. Judson, Pte J.D. Crichton, Lt H.J. Laurent, Lt C.R.G. Bassett. **Front row:** Sgt J.D. Hinton, Lt K. Elliott, Capt C.H. Upham, Sgt A.C. Hulme, Capt S. Frickleton, Lt J.G. Grant. From the QEII Army Memorial Museum

One attempt to escape occurred when a group of POWs were being transported in open trucks through Italy. Upham jumped from the truck at a bend and managed to get 400 yards (370 m) away before being recaptured. He had broken an ankle in jumping from the moving truck.

Aftermath

When Colditz Castle was liberated by American forces, most of the inmates made their own way home immediately. Upham broke into a German armory, helped himself to weaponry, and went out hunting Germans. Upham was keen to see action again, but was instead sent to Britain where he was reunited with Molly McTamney, who was then serving as a nurse. They were married at New Milton, Hampshire, on 20 June 1945. He returned to NZ in early September, and Molly followed him in December.

King George VI had invested Upham with his first Victoria Cross at Buckingham Palace on 11 May 1945. When the recommendation was made for a second VC, the King remarked to Major-General Howard Kippenberger that a bar to the cross would be "very unusual indeed" and inquired firmly, "Does he deserve it?"

Kippenberger replied, "In my respectful opinion, sir, Upham won the VC several times over."

Upham was also Mentioned in Dispatches on 14 November 1946.

Post war



Charles Upham's gravestone

After the war Upham returned to NZ, and the community raised £10,000 to buy him a farm. However, he declined and the money went into the C. H. Upham Scholarship for children of ex-servicemen to study at Lincoln College or the University of Canterbury.

He obtained a war rehabilitation loan and bought a farm on Conway Flat, Hundalee, North Canterbury. It is said that for the remainder of his life, Upham would allow no German car on to his property.

Although somewhat hampered by his injuries, he became a successful farmer and served on the board of governors of Christ's College for nearly 20 years. He and Molly had three daughters, and lived on their farm until January 1994, when Upham's poor health forced them to retire to Christchurch. In 1992 he was presented with the Order of Honour by the Government of Greece, in recognition of his service in the Battles of Greece and Crete.

He died in Canterbury on 22 November 1994, surrounded by Molly and his daughters. His funeral in Christchurch Cathedral was conducted with full military honors, the streets of Christchurch were lined by over 5,000 people and he was buried in the graveyard of St Paul's Church Papanui. His death was also marked by a memorial service on 5 May 1995 in London's St Martin-in-the-Fields church, attended by representatives for the Royal Family, senior New Zealand government and political figures, senior members of the British and New Zealand armed forces, Valerian Freyberg, 3rd Baron Freyberg, grandson of the commander of the Allied forces in Crete and 7th Governor General of New Zealand, representatives of veterans' organizations and other VC and George Cross holders.

A bronze statue stands outside the Hurunui District Council buildings in Amberley, North Canterbury, depicting Charles Upham "the observer".

His VC and Bar was on display at the QEII Army Memorial Museum, Waiouru until its theft in December 2007. In November 2006 the medals had been sold by Upham's daughters to the Imperial War Museum for an undisclosed sum. However, as NZ legislation prohibits the export of such historic items, the Imperial War Museum agreed to a permanent loan of the medals to the Waiouru Army Museum. On 2 December 2007, Upham's VC was among nine stolen from locked, reinforced glass cabinets at the Museum. On 16 February 2008 New Zealand Police announced all the medals had been recovered as a result of a NZ\$300,000 reward offered by Michael Ashcroft and Tom Sturgess.