

# For valour's sake, these heroes must not go unsung

## Michael Ashcroft backs a call to award Victoria Crosses to two SAS soldiers killed in a secret war

**N**early 40 years after one of the greatest battles ever fought by the SAS, there has been a call to right a wrong: to award posthumous Victoria Crosses to two unsung heroes who sacrificed their lives fighting a largely forgotten battle during a secret war in Oman in the 1970s.

Sergeant Talaiasi Labalaba, 30, and Trooper Thomas Tobin, 24, were killed at the battle of Mirbat in 1972, when nine SAS soldiers confronted an enemy force estimated to be between 250 and 400 strong.

I fully support the calls, revealed by *The Sunday Times* last week, for posthumous VCs to be awarded to Labalaba, a formidable Fijian soldier, and Tobin, a young medic of Irish descent. Indeed, I was so concerned that the courage of the two men had been overlooked that, in 2008, I sponsored the Battle of Mirbat Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire.

In fact, there is a third name on the memorial. Major Mike Kealy commanded the SAS team on the day of the battle. Kealy, who in 1972 was still a captain, survived the battle but died from exposure during an SAS training exercise on the Brecon Beacons in 1979.

It was dawn on July 19, 1972, when the Adoo, a group of highly trained, heavily armed communist guerrillas, tried to seize the port of Mirbat on the Arabian Sea.

After a series of setbacks, they were looking for a big military victory in their battle with the Sultan of Oman's troops and their SAS allies.

The attack came during the monsoon season, on a day when it was raining lightly and with low cloud cover. The guerrillas' initial aim was to target a small detachment of gendarmerie, occupying a watch-point on the edge of the port.

However, things did not go to plan and an exchange of gunfire was heard by the nine SAS men staying in a nearby British Army Training Team house. As Kealy saw the waves of enemy rebels advancing, he was soon barking orders to his men.

Labalaba, known affectionately to his comrades as "Laba", ran some 500 yards to a gun-pit to fire a 25-pounder gun single-handedly, even though, for maximum effect, it needed to be manned by five men.

Labalaba knew that if the gun fell into enemy hands, they would

sweep through the port and so he kept up a relentless fire. As the enemy closed in on the sole soldier, Labalaba was eventually seriously wounded by a round from a Kalashnikov rifle.

"I've been chinned but I am okay," he said over his walkie-talkie, his jaw in tatters. Trooper Sekonaia Takavesi, a fellow Fijian and close friend, responded by grabbing his self-loading rifle and running to the gun-pit under a hail of fire.

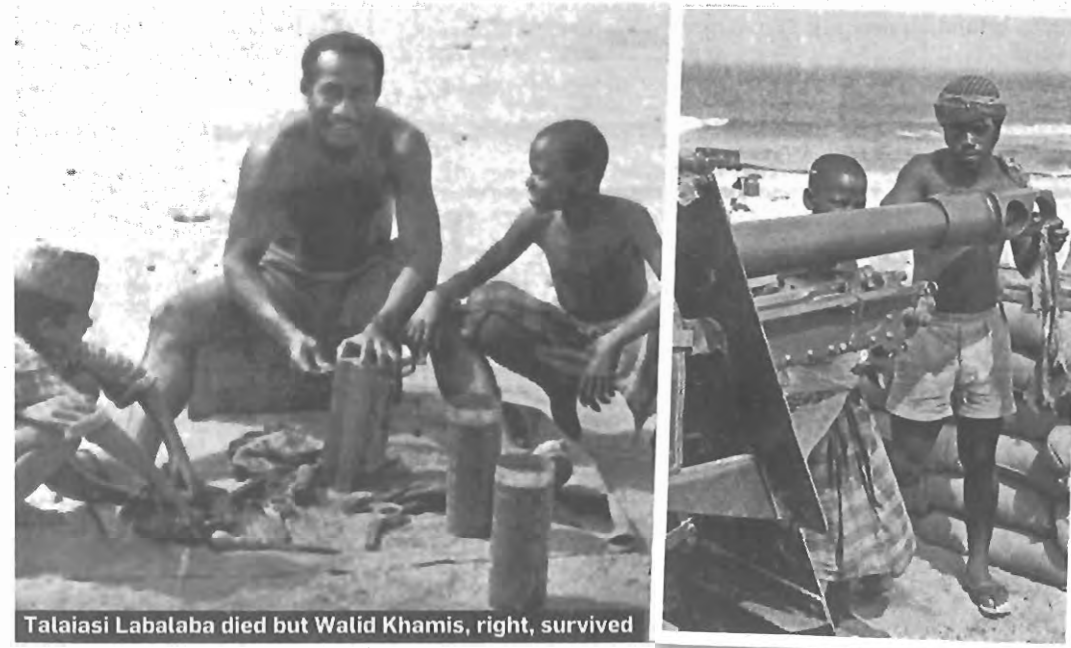
The two Fijians held off the advancing enemy for several minutes but Takavesi realised they needed more support, so he ran back to the small fort to get help, returning with Walid Khamis, an Omani gunner.

Khamis was the next man to be hit, falling to the floor and writhing in agony after being shot in the stomach. Shortly afterwards Takavesi was shot in the shoulder, meaning there were only two seriously injured Fijians to hold off the enemy from the gun-pit.

Labalaba realised he was almost out of ammunition and so he tried to reach a 60mm mortar nearby to continue his assault on the enemy. However, he was shot fatally in the neck as he reached for the weapon.

When the 25-pounder gun fell silent, Kealy and a volunteer, Tobin, ran to the gun-pit, again dodging enemy bullets. As Tobin tried to tend the wounded, he was shot in the face and fell to the ground.

Yet just as the situation appeared hopeless, the SAS had two strokes of luck. The first was that the cloud



Talaiasi Labalaba died but Walid Khamis, right, survived

lifted and two jets from the Sultan's air force were able to fly low over the scene, strafing the guerrillas with cannon fire.

Second, unknown to Kealy, other members of the SAS based at Um al-Quarif had learnt of the battle and had been ordered to travel the 35 miles to Mirbat to help their comrades. After the cloud lifted and the SAS reinforcements were helicoptered to the edge of Mirbat, the guerrillas were soon on the retreat.

After four hours of ferocious and continuous fighting, the enemy had

been defeated, leaving behind some 40 fighters who were dead or seriously wounded. The SAS lost two men — Labalaba and Tobin — but Takavesi survived and was later awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, while Kealy was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

However, Labalaba was simply mentioned in dispatches and Tobin's bravery received no official recognition. The reason given for the small number of gallantry awards was that the SAS were involved in a secret war and that to

have awarded posthumous VCs would have drawn unwanted attention to their activities.

The failure of the authorities adequately to recognise the gallantry of Labalaba and Tobin rankles with the SAS servicemen past and present.

Peter Winner, a former SAS sergeant (whose name has been changed for security reasons), is one of the many aggrieved that Labalaba, in particular, has never received a posthumous VC.

Winner, who fought at Mirbat and later took part in the Iranian

embassy siege, has said: "So to keep the war secret, all they gave him [was] MID [mentioned in dispatches]. You can get that for walking up the Falls Road [in Belfast]. The guy deserved a VC for what he did."

A new book, *SAS Operation Storm*, co-authored by Roger Cole, who took part in the battle as an SAS corporal, has also championed the cause of both men.

Helen Tobin, a solicitor and one of the dead medic's three sisters, wants justice for her brother too. "It was a battle in which a real band of brothers faced overwhelming odds and we do not believe their heroism, and that of their comrades, was ever given the recognition due. We hope... that will be forthcoming," she said.

The Victoria Cross was instituted by royal warrant in 1856 for what Queen Victoria said ought to be "for most conspicuous bravery or some daring pre-eminence of valour or self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy".

Surely these emotive words accurately describe the circumstances in which Labalaba and Tobin lost their lives. And surely, too, the time is now right for their bravery, at long last, to be properly recognised.

*Lord Ashcroft, KCMG, is an international businessman and author.*

*He has amassed the world's largest collection of VCs, currently on display at the Lord Ashcroft Gallery in the Imperial War Museum, and has written three books on gallantry.*