

Why this man's bravery deserves the highest honour

An expert on the Victoria Cross, **Michael Ashcroft** believes we should show our gratitude to Lance Corporal Matthew Croucher for his actions in Afghanistan

It is widely accepted that to be awarded the Victoria Cross a serviceman needs to show such astonishing courage that nine times out of 10 he would die carrying out the action.

If that is the case, Lance Corporal Matthew Croucher is absolutely entitled to be awarded Britain's most prestigious bravery award.

With only a few seconds to make a decision, the 24-year-old Royal Marine threw himself onto a live grenade in order to save the lives of three comrades. Showing intelligence as well as valour, the soldier twisted onto his back to allow his rucksack to take the full force of the inevitable blast during a raid

on a Taliban compound in Afghanistan.

Yet, even then, perhaps 99 times out of 100 L/Cpl Croucher would have been killed or horribly injured. Instead, he was simply left stunned, bleeding from the nose and temporarily deaf, having been hurled across the compound, while his rucksack was shredded.

The Victoria Cross, inscribed with the words "For valour", is the highest medal that can be won for courage in action, and is awarded for "conspicuous bravery... in the presence of the enemy". The decoration was established by a Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria



on January 29, 1856. As someone with a lifelong interest in bravery in general and the Victoria Cross in particular, I would argue there is a precedent for awarding L/Cpl Croucher the medal.

Two years ago, to mark the 150th anniversary of the VC, my book *Victoria Cross Heroes* was published. As part of my research for the book - which was also turned into a three-part television series - I came across the moving story of a young private in the First World War who displayed the same instinctive bravery as L/Cpl Croucher in similar circumstances.

William "Billy" McFadzean, from Lurgan, County Armagh, was just 20 years old and serving in the 14th Battalion, the Royal Irish Rifles, when he was involved in preparations for the Battle of the Somme.

It was July 1, 1916, in Thiepval Wood, France, when a box of hand grenades

slipped down in a trench crowded with soldiers who were at readiness to attack. The safety pins from two of the grenades came out and Pte McFadzean realised immediately that the inevitable explosion would almost certainly kill several of his comrades.

Like L/Cpl Croucher, Pte McFadzean had only seconds to decide what to do. In that time, he flung himself on top of the two grenades to smother the explosion.

Without any protection, it meant certain death and he was duly blown to pieces in front of his comrades. Yet, because of his selfless action, only one other British soldier was slightly wounded by the blast.

Pte McFadzean's VC was announced, as is traditional, in *The London Gazette*. His father, also William, went to Buckingham Palace to collect his son's posthumous VC from King George V on February 28, 1917.

I have no doubt that Pte McFadzean's VC was thoroughly deserved - but if he was entitled to the medal



then, surely, so too is L/Cpl Croucher. The young Royal Marine, from Birmingham, even turned the incident, in February, to the military advantage of his patrol.

After the explosion, he was soon back on his feet and, knowing the Taliban would come to investigate the

to assemble the world's biggest collection of VCs. Today the trust that was established to protect the medals owns 151 VCs - more than 10 per cent of those awarded.

My knowledge of the VC suggests that the case for awarding L/Cpl Croucher the medal is supported by the way in which the first VC ever awarded was won - by the formidable bearded figure of Charles Lucas, then a Mate

the VC will be considered by the influential honours and awards committee later this year. I share the belief of his comrades that he should become just the third serviceman to receive the VC since the Falklands War, 26 years ago - and the first surviving recipient from the war in Afghanistan.

One thing, however, is certain: L/Cpl Croucher shares the modesty that so many of the 1,352 men who have been awarded the VC possessed in abundance. He said of triggering the booby trap when his foot brushed a hidden trip wire: "I thought, 'I've set the bloody thing off and I'm going to do whatever it takes to save the others'."

Britain should be proud of L/Cpl Croucher - and we should show our gratitude by awarding him our much-treasured highest award for valour.

Lord Ashcroft is a deputy chairman of the Conservative party. Victoria Cross Heroes is available in bookshops and through www.victoriacrossheroes.com

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He shares the modesty of those who have been awarded the VC

explosion, he and his comrades set up an ambush during which L/Cpl Croucher shot dead an armed insurgent during a firefight.

Twenty-two years ago, I fulfilled a lifelong ambition to own a VC. At a Sotheby's auction in London I bought the VC that had been awarded to Leading Seaman James Magennis, a submariner serving off Malaysia in 1945.

Since then, I have helped

but later a Rear Admiral in the Royal Navy.

On June 21, 1854, during the Crimean War, a live shell landed on HMS Hecla's upper deck with its fuse still hissing. Lucas picked up the shell and hurled it into the sea. It exploded before it reached the water, but his actions ensured that no one was killed or seriously wounded.

A proposal that L/Cpl Croucher should be awarded



Extreme valour: L/Cpl Matthew Croucher threw himself onto a live grenade