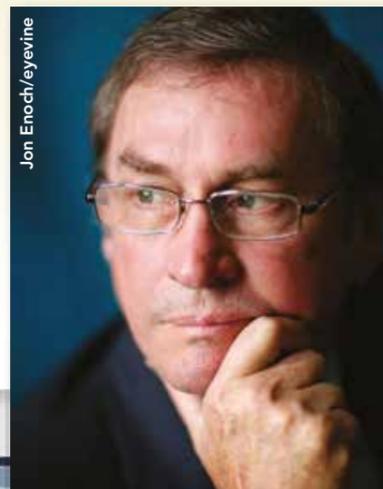




LANCE CORPORAL MATTHEW CROUCHER GC

In May 2007 Lance Corporal Matthew Croucher was mobilised by the Royal Marines Reserve and attached as a Reconnaissance Operator and Heavy Weapons specialist to 40 Commando. In September that year 40 Commando was deployed to Afghanistan. In the latest in his series, Lord Ashcroft examines how, five months later, Lance Corporal Croucher faced down death by diving on a trip wired grenade to save the lives of his men.



Jon Enoch/eyevine

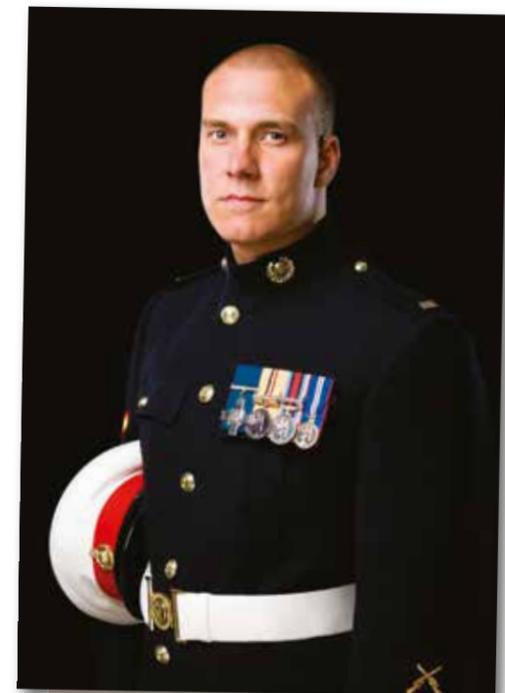
Matt Croucher was on tour with the Royal Marines in Afghanistan when he was involved in an episode of high drama in 2008 that captured my imagination. Indeed, I was so won over by his selfless, spur-of-the-moment bravery that I wrote a newspaper article arguing why he should be awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious gallantry award.

Croucher was born in Solihull, near Birmingham, on 14 December 1983. The older of two children and the son of two teachers, he had wanted to be a Royal Marine Commando – and pull on the famous green beret – since he was thirteen.

After completing the nine-month Royal Marines training course, which Croucher described as “thirty weeks of sheer hell”, he was awarded his green beret, aged just seventeen.

In March 2003, Croucher found himself aboard HMS *Ark Royal* bound for Iraq, with Delta Company Royal Marines. His unit was part of the British spearhead for the invasion of Iraq as part of the Second Gulf War and, alongside US Navy Seals, he was one of the first 200 western troops into Iraq.

It was here too, in battle, that the young Marine got his first “kill” before seeing plenty more action as the Allies quickly overthrew Saddam Hussein's



TOP: A Royal Marine Commando in action at Forward Operating Base Inkerman, to where Lance Corporal Matt Croucher was deployed in September 2007 as part of Operation Herrick VII. (© Crown Copyright/Mod 2013)

ABOVE: Lance Corporal Matt Croucher GC. (The Lord Ashcroft Collection)

Lord Ashcroft's "Hero of the Month"



ABOVE and ABOVE RIGHT: Lance Corporal Matt Croucher holds up the day sack that he used to help smother the blast from the grenade on Saturday, 9 February 2008. (The Lord Ashcroft Collection)

BELOW: Compounds in the Sangin Valley – images which give an impression of the environment in which Lance Corporal Matt Croucher and his colleagues were operating on 9 February 2008. On the right of this picture is the so-called Green Zone; the Helmand river is just out of view to the right. (© Crown Copyright/MoD 2013)



the Royal Marines' Reserve.

This transfer to the Reserve allowed him to take up lucrative private security work, where he became part of "The Circuit", a new world of professional bodyguards and security guards. However, after being seriously injured in a motorcycle accident back in Britain, Croucher decided to turn his back on "The Circuit" to redeploy as a lance corporal reservist in the Marines.

However, Croucher had first to undertake an OPTAG (Operational Training and Advisory Group) course with 40 Commando before deployment to Helmand province as part of Operation Herrick VII. By mid-September 2007, he found himself at FOB (Forward Operating Base) Inkerman in the Sangin Valley. Conditions were spartan and it was dangerous too – British servicemen had dubbed it "FOB Incoming" because it attracted so much Taliban fire.

It was a physically and mentally demanding assignment. His first patrol, for example, had been due to last four or

five hours but, in fact, lasted for fifteen hours, whilst through November, there were numerous battles with the enemy.

By February 2008, Croucher was based in the Sangin Valley at Forward Operating Base Robinson – known as "Fob Rob" to one and all. It was situated at the edge of Helmand's so-called "Green Zone", where the Taliban were hiding out in large numbers on both sides of the Helmand River.

Like FOB Inkerman, FOB Robinson was at the "sharp end" and those based there knew they would see plenty of action. Furthermore, it was winter and night-time temperatures constantly plunged well below freezing.

One day Croucher was informed that he would be part of a mission involving forty men. He was to be a member of a four-man Commando Reconnaissance force CTR (Close Target Reconnaissance) team tasked with searching a Taliban compound. It was intended to be a quick "in and out job", gaining intelligence on a suspected bomb-making factory so that it



could be targeted at a later date.

By 01.00 hours on the day of the mission – 9 February 2008 – the men on the patrol had received their final briefing in which, if their mission was compromised, they were ordered to make a fighting retreat with "no heroics". With full battle kit, including Night Vision Goggles (NVGs), the group then left the base, leaving some fifteen metres between each man so as not to present a group target to any hidden Taliban forces.

As they ventured out into the night, they wanted to be close enough not to lose contact with those in front – but far enough apart to survive if the man in front stepped on a landmine or triggered a booby-trapped grenade.

When they reached the enemy compound, the four-man team split in half. Croucher and his comrade checked out a stable block where they found some 200kgs of bomb-making fertiliser, along with batteries, circuitry and wires. After gathering evidence of the bomb-making facilities during their forty-five minute recce at the compound, the four men regrouped outside and prepared to return to FOB Robinson.

In an interview for my book *George Cross Heroes*, Croucher vividly recalled the incident that came so close to claiming his life. "Our job that night had been reconnaissance. We wanted to get in and out with as little noise as possible but with as much evidence as we could gather. But after our stay in the compound I went off at a slight tangent.

"I had NVGs but it was still relatively hard to see. Suddenly I felt a tension just below my knee. Then I heard the distinctive noise of a fly-off lever ejecting from a hand grenade.

"I looked down and saw the grenade on the floor. I realised that meant I probably had a three to five second delay before the grenade exploded. In the darkness, I had walked through a four-metre tripwire that led to an old pineapple-style Russian grenade.

"This had been attached around a stake and driven into the ground. I was, to say the least, a little bit worried and I had to decide, in a split second, what to do. There was nowhere to take cover. Everything seemed to go into slow

motion. Ads [his comrade] was now directly behind me, just feet away. He was followed by Scottie."

Croucher shouted "Grenade! Take cover!" even though he knew his comrades barely had time to react. "Ads hit the deck behind me while Dave, last in the patrol, darted back behind the building wall for cover," continued Croucher.

"So I thought my best option was to throw my day sack on the grenade and lie on it with my back towards the grenade, hoping my day sack would provide some protection.

"I threw my day sack off one shoulder on to the grenade and at the same time dropped to the ground. Then, pulling my legs up, I tucked my head back so my body armour and helmet would make a shield against the inevitable blast.

"I counted to about six or seven seconds and I began to wonder whether the grenade would ever go bang or not. I gritted my teeth and thought about what might happen. Then it eventually did explode.

"I saw a plume of orange sparks go shooting to the sky. The next thing I knew I had been flung through the air – not



TOP: Royal Marine Commandos pictured clearing a compound in the Sangin Valley. (© Crown Copyright/MoD 2013)

ABOVE: A jacket which was inside Matt Croucher's day sack and which clearly displays the effects of the explosion. (The Lord Ashcroft Collection)

BELOW: Lance Corporal Matt Croucher's medals – which are currently on display in the Imperial War Museum. From left to right are the George Cross, the Iraq Medal (with "19 Mar to 28 Apr 2003" clasp), Operational Service Medal for Afghanistan (with the "Afghanistan" Clasp, which is awarded for service specifically in Afghanistan), and the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal. (The Lord Ashcroft Collection)



far, only a metre or so. I was lying face down in the dirt. It was total confusion and I was covered in dust. My ears were ringing, my head was spinning and I had blood coming out of my ears and nose. I checked that my arms and legs were still attached and worried about everything else after that.

"I immediately smelt the cordite from the grenade – there was a distinctive burning smell. I wasn't sure who it was, but I could feel someone frantically patting me down. Later Scottie and Dave told me they had run their hands under my armour to check for injuries, searching for holes in my combats that would signify a shrapnel entry point. My face and eyes were caked in dust and I struggled to breathe. But they [Ads, Dave and Scottie] helped me up and I found my feet."

As he surveyed the scene in the near darkness, Croucher could see that his day sack had been blown fully ten metres away from him

after the shoulder strap had been sliced through by shrapnel.

Croucher was in no doubt that the badly damaged day sack had saved his life. Although his helmet and body armour were peppered with grenade fragments, his equipment had prevented potentially lethal shards of metal from penetrating his body and, like his comrades, he had suffered only relatively minor injuries.

Later on, the back-up team arrested seven suspected Taliban who had returned to the compound. They also retrieved Croucher's day sack, which had been severely damaged in the explosion. Miraculously, a thorough check-up back

at the base revealed that Croucher had nothing worse than mild concussion, perforated ear drums, and cuts and bruises.

I was deeply impressed by Croucher's

unselfish actions and I wrote an article for *The Sunday Telegraph* on 6 April 2008, calling for him to be awarded the VC. Croucher refers to this in his book *Bulletproof*. I wrote: "It is widely accepted that to be awarded the Victoria Cross a serviceman needs to show such astonishing courage that nine times out of ten 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."

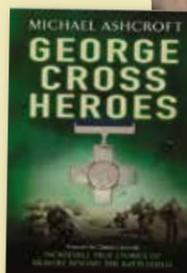
However, the authorities ruled that Croucher should instead receive the GC – on the grounds that he was not "in the face of the enemy" when the incident occurred – and his gallantry award was announced on 24 July 2008. Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, the First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, said of Croucher: "His action epitomises the ethos of selfless devotion to duty, courage and comradeship in the Marines."

Croucher was presented with his award by the Queen on 30 October 2008, when his citation was read out. He was accompanied by his parents, sister and his maternal grandparents. His citation ended: "Lance Corporal Croucher is an exceptional and inspirational individual. His magnificent displays of selflessness and gallantry are truly humbling and are the embodiment of the finest traditions of the service."

After the 2007-8 tour, Croucher transferred back into the Royal Marines' Reserve and helped set up a security company, Pinnacle Risk Management, that now operates all around the world. His remarkable GC, along with his day sack, are on display in the Imperial War Museum in London. ■

GEORGE CROSS HEROES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story behind Matt Croucher's GC appears in his book *George Cross Heroes*. For more information visit: www.georgecrossheroes.com Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft.



MAIN PICTURE: A grenade explodes in a compound in the Sangin Valley, an image that was taken during another patrol in 2008. (© Crown Copyright/MoD 2013)