



# A Few Near Misses

Aged 95, Eric Garland is one of only a few Britons alive to have served throughout the entire Second World War. In his first ever interview, given to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war ending, he tells **LORD ASHCROFT** how he amassed three gallantry awards.

**MAIN IMAGE:** Eric Garland's medal group, now in the Lord Ashcroft Collection.

**I**HAVE certainly had a few near misses," says Eric Garland, with a mischievous chuckle after detailing one life-or-death experience after another. With relentless modesty and understatement, he tells of six remarkable years of Second World War service that few, if any, men alive today can match. Garland was initially decorated with the Military Cross (MC) for rescuing three men during the retreat to Dunkirk in the spring of 1940. His courage was publicly recognised again, with a Bar to his MC, less than a year later for his part in the famous Litani River Raid, during which he fought a "duel" with a sniper and was the first man to cross the river. Not content with his efforts on land, he joined the RAF to satisfy his desire to be a fighter pilot,

but his Spitfire was shot down, with him narrowly escaping from his burning aircraft over enemy-controlled Italy in May 1944. For lesser men, being seriously wounded and a Prisoner of War (PoW) would have been a respectable end to their part in the war. Garland, however, simply saw it as a new challenge: he escaped from a hospital train bound for Germany, evaded capture for six months, fought with the Italian partisans and, eventually, returned to Allied lines in early 1945. For this gallantry, he was awarded the MBE.

#### FIRST INTERVIEW

To mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the 1939-45 conflict, Garland, now 95, agreed to provide his first – and he insists his last – public interview about his wartime experiences. Unsurprisingly, the

years have taken their toll and he speaks slowly, yet with great enthusiasm, about his exploits. Today his hair is grey, his pale skin is thin and his frail legs are swollen, making walking difficult. However, dressed in a purple check shirt, a light grey short-sleeved pullover and brown corduroy trousers, Garland gives regular sighs of delight as he recalls one "scrape" after another during his service in the Army and RAF.

The son of a businessman, Eric Francis Garland was born in south London on February 2, 1920. The middle of three children, he was educated at Whitgift School in South Croydon. After leaving school at 17, Garland worked as a trainee manager with Imperial Airways and also joined the Artists Rifles, a regiment of the Territorial Army.



After the outbreak of the Second World War in early September 1939, he resigned from his job and trained with 163 Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU). In November 1939, Garland was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant into the 6th Battalion, York and Lancaster Regiment. He served with the regiment as part of the 138th Infantry Brigade, 46th Infantry Division, British Expeditionary Force in France.

#### BUILDING ABLAZE

Garland, 6 ft tall with fair hair and blue eyes, was present during the retreat to Dunkirk and on May 27 1940 he distinguished himself at Wormhoudt, on the Dunkirk to Cassel road, and again at Watou the next day, when he rescued three men, all British military policemen, from a house that was being used as an ammunition store. The building was ablaze after it was struck during a raid by German Stuka dive bombers at around midday. Garland, just 20 years old, >>>

**LEFT:** Commando and fighter pilot veteran, Eric Garland MBE, MC & Bar.

**BELOW RIGHT:** *Medway Queen* in civilian service. Now under restoration, *Medway Queen* picked up 7,000 men from Dunkirk, including Eric Garland. (IWM FL 15150)

**TOP MIDDLE RIGHT:** Remains of the Qasmiye Bridge. The target of No.11 Commando's raid, the bridge was blown up by Vichy French forces. (AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL)

**BELOW LEFT:** Eric Garland as 2nd Lt in the York & Lancaster Regiment.

had been sheltering under a truck during the raid but ran to help the men once the building caught fire. "Ammunition was exploding but I thought I had better do something to try to get them out. I managed to help them out one by one even though the raid was still going on. One of the men was so badly wounded, and in dreadful agony, that I thought it would be humane to shoot him. I took his revolver out of his holster, and I was dithering about the ethics [of killing him], but fortunately he died. He was gone." Garland's MC for these two days of bravery was eventually announced on December 20 1940 and he later received his award from George VI during an investiture at Buckingham Palace.

**HOLD AT ALL COSTS**

However, during his final three full days on French soil, before being evacuated, Garland showed still further courage. On May 31 1940, the 6th Battalion

was tasked with holding three bridges over the Canal des Moères at Tétéghem and 2nd Lieutenants Garland, Nelson and Milne were each given a bridge to defend with the orders that they were to "be held at all costs". Garland recalled: "We defended the bridge with Bren guns, rifles and grenades. I was given 40 men against a much larger German force. We dug ourselves in but we were mortared. We lost one man who was hit in the abdomen by the splinter from a mortar bomb. He shouted out 'I am f\*\*\*ing dead' - and he was. He had a twin brother who was fighting with him." Garland himself had a near miss too: "On the bridge, something hit my right hand side - I reached down gingerly and felt a wet, sticky mess. I thought I had been hit but in fact a splinter from a mortar had struck, and split,

rifles and other arms into the water because there was no room for them on board. And off we went." Ever eager to embark on a new adventure, Garland volunteered for service with the newly formed No 11 (Scottish) Commando. This involved rigorous Special Forces training in the Scottish Highlands under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Dick Pedder who, Garland recalled, always urged his men to "train hard and fight easy". It was while he was training in Scotland that he was informed that an enemy bomb had hit his family home, in Chipstead, Surrey, killing his only sister, Joan, aged 17, and the family's pet dog. On May 31 1941, a year to the day after Garland had been in the thick of the fighting during the retreat to Dunkirk, Pedder received urgent orders to fly to Palestine to take part



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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**TOP RIGHT:** Eric Garland the Commando.

**LEFT:** A note of congratulations on award of Bar to Garland's MC.

**BELOW:** According to their official histories, Australian forces at Litani River were shelled by the *Guépard*-class destroyers *Guépard* and *Valmy*. Kept at bay by 2/4th Field Regiment's 25-Pdr guns, the ships were seen off by British destroyers and the cruiser *HMNZS Leander*. (UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY)



a tin of stew that I had kept in my haversack as a last resort against real hunger. I was unhurt." Garland and his men held their position until late into the evening of June 2, when their situation became hopeless and they were ordered to retreat. At this point, he and his men went to the Dunkirk beaches and Garland was one of the last soldiers to be evacuated on the *Medway Queen*, a paddle steamer, on June 3. In fact, one of her ship's paddles broke during the voyage and it took fully seven hours to reach Ramsgate, Kent. "When we were on the beach, after we had been bombed and mortared and shot at, a cutter took us out to the *Medway Queen* which was very crowded. We had to throw our

in the invasion of Vichy-controlled Syria and Lebanon: No. 11 (Scottish) Commando formed up with the 21st Australian Infantry Brigade for this role. At this point, the enemy was known to be holding the line of the Litani River, which runs south through Lebanon before turning west into the Mediterranean. The Allies' plan was for the Commandos, including Garland, to coordinate with the 21st Brigade's attack on the river position by carrying out an amphibious assault landing from the sea near the mouth of the river. Once ashore, the Commandos were tasked with securing the north and south banks of the Litani, and then preventing the demolition of the Qasmiye Bridge that crossed it, thereby allowing the Australian

21st Infantry Brigade to advance towards Beirut, engaging the enemy in the process.

**PINNED TO THE GROUND**

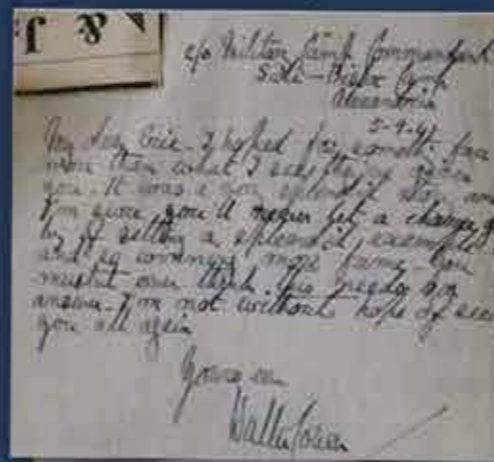
The advancing forces were to be supported by gunfire from naval vessels offshore, as well as air support. On June 6, the Commando embarked from Cyprus on HMS *Glengyle* and set sail with an escort from Port Said the following day although, due to the adverse weather, the attack was postponed until June 9. The plan was for the Commando to land from the *Glengyle* and attack the enemy position from the flank. Three parties were formed to carry out the task: 'X' Party consisted of

the forward troops, comprising Nos 2, 3 (of which Garland was a member) and 9 Troops under the command of Major Geoffrey Keyes. The landing by 'X' Party was unopposed but, as the advanced troops reached the riverbank at about 5.10 am, the entire beach came under heavy and sustained fire from 75mm guns, mortars and heavy machine guns. In his book *Litani River*, Ian McHarg wrote: "As heavy fire rained down on the party they were pinned to the ground, and several casualties were taken, mainly by accurate sniper fire from a knoll on the opposite bank and from enemy positions to the north."

**KILL OR BE KILLED**

In his diary, Keyes described a similar scene, adding that Garland and a fellow officer, Captain George Highland, were "as cool as cucumbers". According to Ian McHarg, when Keyes eventually edged forward he found Garland "engaged in a high risk method of drawing the sniper's fire, which was inflicting many casualties. Garland, exposing himself to the sniper, drew

his fire, and once located, shot him with his Bren gun." With the sniper taken care of, Garland and some other men climbed into a boat that had been brought for them. Two men then ferried the Commandos across the river, which was approximately 30 to 40 yards wide and fast flowing, enabling Garland, six of his men and two Australians to get to the opposite bank at around 10am. Within three hours, Garland's and Highland's men had cleared the enemy position on the north side. In the process of seizing the redoubt, six enemy soldiers were killed and 35 prisoners were taken, but the efforts to capture the enemy position had resulted in considerable casualties for the attacking party too. Ironically, Pedder, who had





**TOP LEFT:** Major General Sir Robert Laycock as Chief of Combined Operations, 1943. In 1941 Laycock, then a lieutenant-colonel, formed the formation of commandos known as 'Layforce', which No. 11 (Scottish) Commando was part of. (IWM TR 1425)

**TOP RIGHT:** Eric Garland the fighter pilot.

**BELOW:** HMS *Glengyle*. *Glengyle* was a fast cargo liner acquired by the Royal Navy soon after launch and commissioned as a Landing ship, infantry. (large) in 1940. (IWM FL 22266)



**ABOVE:** In 1943 Eric Garland joined 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron as a Hurricane pilot.

**MIDDLE LEFT:** Australian 7th Division commander Major General Arthur Allen (centre) stands with Lt. Colonel Murray Moten (centre right) and his men in Hammana, Lebanon, after a successful Syria-Lebanon campaign. (Frank Hurley)

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** 21st Brigade commander Jack Stawell Stevens. He directed the Australian contribution at the Litani River battle and was wounded. Awarded a DSO and mentioned in despatches, he recovered in time to lead his troops in the last Australian battle of the campaign, Damour. (AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL)

once told Garland that "officers should command not lead", was killed in battle on June 9, aged 36, leading his men from the front. Garland said of the day's fighting: "We had landed on the south side of the river not the north side so we had to cross this wide, fast-flowing river. We were taking heavy casualties from 75mm guns. We got stuck in dead ground and we couldn't move because we were being shelled and shot at by snipers. I got tired of waiting and having my men killed. I got to the riverbank and I thought I would chance it. I exposed myself to the fire a few times so that I could locate one of the snipers. I could shoot fairly accurately. I located him nearly 200 yards away on the other side of the river, and I shot and killed him using a Bren gun - we found the sniper's body later. It was quite a dangerous 'game' but by then I felt like a cornered cat: I was prepared to kill or be killed.

"Then I suggested to Keyes that I should take four or five men and cross the river. We crossed in a canvas assault boat and sent it back for more of our men but on the way back it was hit by machine gun fire and sunk. So we were stuck there on our own - myself and a small number of men. One of my men was shot dead almost immediately. We made a lot of noise and shouted and we bombed their trenches with hand-grenades. Eventually, Keyes and other men got across and, after some more fighting, the enemy surrendered."

**COOL COURAGE**

After the Litani River Raid, the 11th (Scottish) Commando returned to Cyprus, arriving in Famagusta at 7am on June 15. Of the 456 men who had assembled on the same quay 11 days earlier, 130 had been killed or wounded in just over 29 hours of fighting. However, the Commando had achieved its overall objective of seizing and holding the

enemy position long enough for the Australian Brigade to cross the river.

Garland's Bar to his MC was announced on October 21 1941, after the recommendation for his decoration - originally intended as the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and written by Colonel Robert Laycock - stated: "Lieutenant Garland displayed throughout the action cool and clear-headed leadership and complete disregard for his own personal safety...."

Both Keyes and Laycock asked Garland to stay on to take part in the proposed Rommel Raid which would cost Keyes his life and lead to the award of his posthumous VC. However, by then, Garland was determined to become a fighter pilot. He applied to join the RAF, and when his papers came through he transferred for training along with two other officers from the Commandos.



**FIGHTER PILOT**

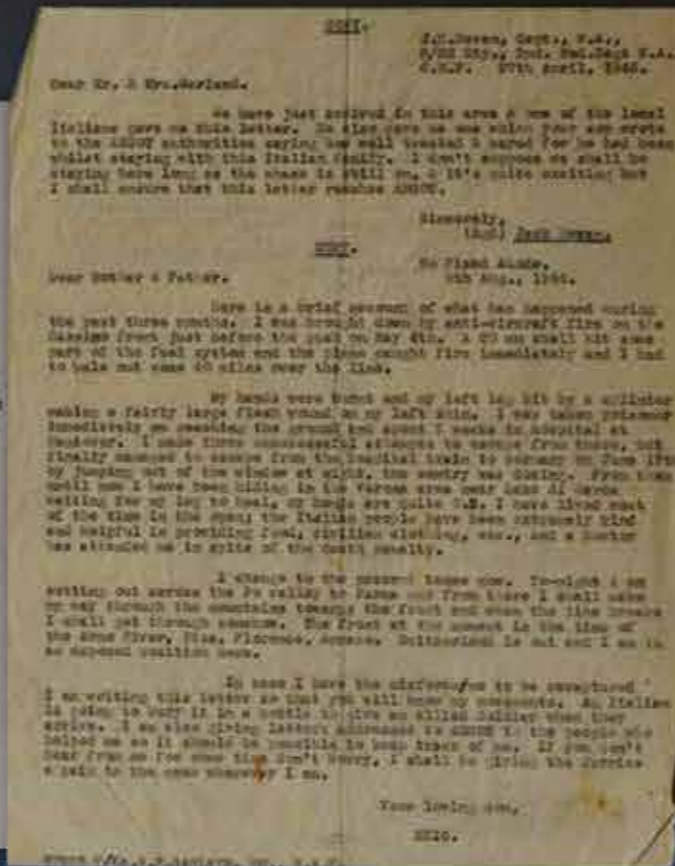
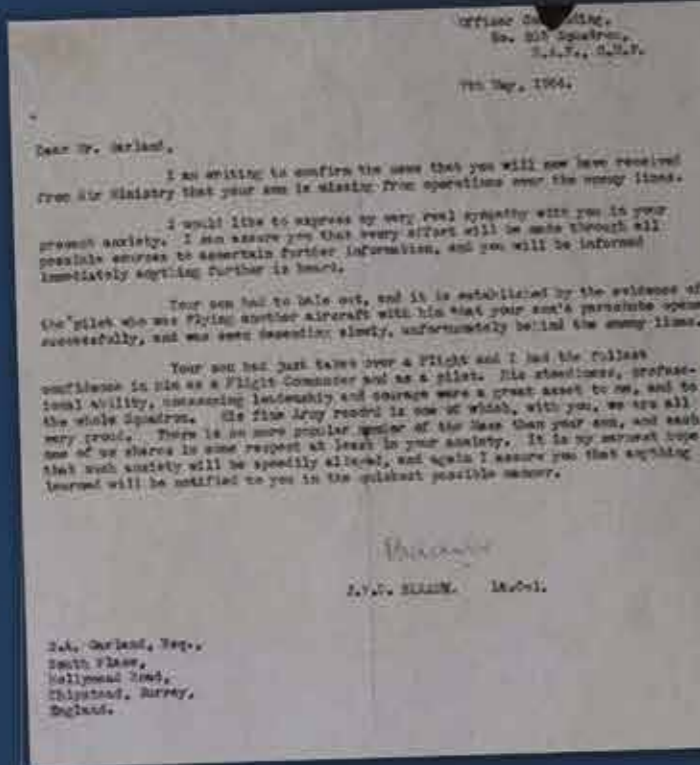
In March 1942, Garland was posted for pilot training to No 26 Elementary FTS (Flying Training School), Southern Rhodesia. At this time he trained with Ian Smith, who would later become the prime minister of Rhodesia, learning to fly in Tiger Moths. After undertaking further training, Garland gained his "wings" in August 1942. In February 1943, he was posted for conversion to Hurricanes to No 74 OTU (Operational Training Unit) in Aqir, Palestine. In April of the same year, he was posted for operational flying to 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron

(Hurricanes), which carried out operations over the Western Desert, primarily shipping patrols and interceptions. However, within the first week of flying, on April 12 1943, he had to carry out a forced landing in his Hurricane because of engine failure. "We were training over the biggest minefield in the desert. At 500 feet, I had engine failure - oil came back over the windscreen and I had no power and had to come down. I picked the roughest bit of ground I could see hoping it wouldn't be mined and, without putting down my landing gear, I hit the ground, decelerated and my head hit the reflector sight.



**RIGHT:** Letter from Garland's CO telling his father he was missing, along with the letter Garland eventually managed to get to his parents.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** A Flakvierling 38 in Italy, a four-barrelled 20mm anti-aircraft gun developed to keep the 2cm Flak viable, a weapon not unlike this was responsible for downing Garland. The Flak 38 had a phenomenal fire rate, up to 1,800rpm, and proved effective against ground targets and aircraft up to 7000ft. (BUNDESARCHIV)



Garland said: "The weather was bad, the cloud base was low but finally we flew in early evening when it was still light. I was flying at about 3,000 feet when we - two Spitfires - encountered ground fire. There was a loud bang and an immediate fire. I was hit in the left leg, in the shin. Flames came into the cockpit and I had to get out very quickly. I disconnected my RT [radio] and oxygen mask, took off my harness by pulling out the pin, and turned my aircraft upside down and rolled out. This all took less than five seconds. Then I started to fall towards the ground, with my clothing scorched and all the skin had been burned off

my hands. It was all very painful. I wondered whether to pull my rip-cord or not. I thought about ending things because we were told we would probably get rough treatment on the ground. But I suppose I had a desire to live and so I pulled the rip-cord and dropped by parachute. I landed in a barley field near the village of Frosinone, close to Rome, and there were a group of German soldiers waiting for me. I had to make a one-legged landing. The German soldiers leapt on me, frisked me - one tried to take my watch but I resisted. I had a field dressing pack which I put on my shin and that brought some relief. Then I was carried to a

farmhouse - they did not mistreat me. They took me to where my Spitfire had crashed some distance away: it was just a tangled mass having exploded in an Italian farmyard, injuring the farmer who had burns similar to mine. He was crying - and one of the German soldiers and I grinned at each other over this rather weak behaviour."

**DUTY TO ESCAPE**  
Garland was taken to a German field dressing station where surgeons operated on his left leg - a broken tibia and fibia - and treated burns to his hands and face. When he woke up, his injured leg and both arms were all in splints. Despite Garland's

serious injuries, he saw it as his duty to try to escape. Following three unsuccessful escape bids, including sliding down a laundry chute, he was deemed too much of a risk to remain at his poorly-guarded hospital and so his German captors decided to transfer him to a PoW camp in Germany. However, Garland jumped from a hospital train near Verona in June 1944 when he was being transferred.

"I was in a carriage devoted to wounded prisoners where there were about 15 men on stretchers on each side. I was still limping but, at one point, our German guard went to sleep. I managed to climb out of one of the windows and on to a running board outside. The train was going too fast for me to jump. It was a wet and misty night and I couldn't see very well. But when the guard woke up he sounded the alarm and, when the train started to



would have been executed. I was British and I had no identification discs. And the Italians who were shielding me would have been killed too," Garland said. At one point, he joined the partisans and took part in a major action at Vasto di Sotto in which 78 German soldiers were killed or captured, whereas the partisans had only three killed and two wounded.

**DEATH PRESUMED**  
After Garland had been shot down in May 1944, his Commanding Officer wrote to his parents (depicted on previous page) which offered some reassurance amongst the uncertainty, "your son's parachute opened successfully, and [he] was seen descending slowly, unfortunately behind enemy lines..."

After the allotted period of time without hearing any information about Garland, the Air Ministry informed his father that he was to be declared dead. However, Garland himself had other ideas and penned a letter to his parents on August 9, 1944 (depicted on previous page), explaining how he was downed, the extent of his injuries, and his numerous attempts to escape from his captors, "I was taken prisoner immediately... and spent 7 weeks in hospital... I made three unsuccessful attempts to escape... but finally managed to escape from the hospital train to Germany... by jumping out of the window at night, the sentry was dozing." >>>

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Garland ready for action in the cockpit of his Spitfire.

**ABOVE LEFT:** A Caterpillar Club members card, awarded to those who successfully parachuted from a stricken aircraft.

**ABOVE LEFT:** Ground crew working on the Merlin engine of one of No 237 (Rhodesian) Squadron's Hurricanes in the Middle East, circa 1942. (IWM E 11720)

slow down, I stepped off and rolled over. I cut my hands and hit my chin on a sleeper but I rolled on to soft grass. I imagine the train was going at about 20 mph. Some shots were fired, lights were flashed, but they didn't know when I had jumped or where to look for me and eventually the train set off again."

After walking for three nights and resting during the day, travelling from north to south along Lake Garda, he got close to Castelnuovo, where he knew many of the local inhabitants supported the Allies. Speaking reasonable Italian, he approached some locals, who gave him food and water and tended to his injuries. In August, he attempted

to get back to the Allied lines by walking from Lake Garda to Cremona, but the wound in his injured leg became infected and he had to abort the plan, again finding refuge with friendly Italians. At one point, he spent 60 days with the same family, hiding in a false wall at the end of a barn while his injuries started to get better.

**PARTISAN ACTION**  
When numerous German soldiers moved to the area, Garland again moved on, sleeping rough for a time before linking up with more Italians and staying on another farm, near Cremona, for several months. "If I had been found, I



## A FEW NEAR MISSES

One Man's War



**ABOVE:** Content retirement. Eric Garland reflects on a remarkable wartime career as soldier and fighter pilot (inset).

Garland was sure to show gratitude to the Italians who risked all to help him, before signing off with a humorous statement that would surely only cause more worry! "If you don't hear from me for some time don't worry, I shall be giving the Jerries a pain in the neck wherever I am."

Remarkably, this letter found its way into the hands of Captain J.H. Bevan, 8/22nd Battery, Royal Artillery, several months later, and he duly forwarded it to Garland's parents. True to his word, Garland eventually reached American lines at Solarolo in January 1945. He spent time in Naples, Rome and Venice, before finally reporting back to his unit on May 2 1945, six days before VE-Day. His family was informed of his reappearance eight days later and soon afterwards Garland returned to the UK, where he received further

hospital treatment for his injuries. After the war, he remained in the RAF for a further two years and his MBE was announced in the *London Gazette* on January 7 1947.

### FOR KING & COUNTRY

After leaving the RAF, Garland moved to Kenya in 1948 where he was a farmer and was based there at the start of the Mau Mau Rebellion in 1952. During the uprising, Garland was co-opted into the Air Wing of the Police Force, flying Rapide, Messenger, Avro Anson and Bonanza aircraft on reconnaissance missions. He met his British wife, Nadine Snelling, an air stewardess, in Kenya, and the couple married in 1952, and later had a son, Robert. For many years, before returning to Britain in 1972, Garland worked as a pilot for East African Airways. Once back in Britain, Garland lived in, first, Aberdeen, and then the Isle of Man, eventually becoming a pilot for Manx Airlines before retiring in 1985, aged sixty-five. After his first wife's death in 2003, Garland married Christine McBryde, a widow and who had been his late wife's best friend, in 2005. Today,

Christine, who is 20 years younger than her husband, lives with him in their three-bedroom bungalow in Port Erin on the Isle of Man.

As a collector of gallantry medals, I purchased Eric Garland's medal group at auction in 2013 but I was unaware at the time that he was still alive. I was put in touch with him through Gareth Maiden, his Australian-based son-in-law, who contacted me after a short write-up on Garland's exploits appeared in my book, *Special Ops Heroes*, published last year. My respect for Eric Garland and his bravery is immense: he has displayed unlimited amounts of what I call "cold", or premeditated, courage. I feel privileged that he allowed me to interview him and to tell the full story of his wartime gallantry for the first time. Not once during our six-hour interview did Garland even hint that he had been brave. Instead, he felt he was simply doing his duty: "Once the war started, I decided that I was prepared to risk my life – perhaps die – for King and country. I only survived the war through sheer luck although I guess, in a way, I thrived on a challenge." 🇬🇧

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at Imperial War Museums, London. For more information visit [www.iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's VC collection visit [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work and his five bravery books, including *Special Ops Heroes*, visit [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com). Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft