

EXCLUSIVE
From Lord Ashcroft
in Italy

Why the 'Terrible Viking' remains the only SAS man EVER to receive the VC

A dramatic action 80 years ago tonight in Italy cost Anders Lassen his life, but saw him posthumously awarded the nation's highest medal for heroism. Lord Ashcroft pays tribute to a Great Dane

THE shores of Lake Comacchio are peaceful today. Grey herons, egrets and other wading birds compete for the small fish, eels and shrimps abundant in the shallow waters in this quiet spot on Italy's north-eastern Adriatic coast. But 80 years ago things were very different.

Thousands of German troops held defensive positions nearby as British and American troops made their final drive to push them out of the country.

It was at Lake Comacchio overnight on April 8/9, 1945, that a courageous young officer, Major Anders Lassen, became the first – and, to this day, only – member of Britain's famous SAS regiment to be awarded the Victoria Cross (VC).

The Danish national, affectionately nicknamed the "Terrible Viking" by colleagues, also had the honour of being the only non-Commonwealth recipient from the Second World War to be decorated with this prestigious gallantry award.

I travelled to Lake Comacchio because I wanted to tell the story of his remarkable life and to pay my respects ahead of the 80th anniversary of his courageous death.

Anders Frederik Emil Victor Schau Lassen was born near Mern, Denmark, on September 22, 1920. His family was wealthy and he was brought up on a large country estate. His mother wrote that "all the memories of his childhood will be coloured with his enterprise, fearlessness and happiness". Even at school, he was far more interested in adventure than his academic studies.

While serving in Denmark's merchant navy, which he had joined aged 17 as a cabin boy, Lassen came to the UK shortly after the start of the Second World War in 1939. The year after, he joined the British Commandos as a private soldier because he wanted to help liberate his homeland which was under German occupation.

He served in No. 62 Commando – also known as the Small Scale Raiding Force – a unit formed under the command of the secretive Special Operations Executive.

Following a commission in the field, Lassen was awarded an immediate Military Cross (MC) for his part in "Operation Postmaster", the capture of German ships from the neutral Spanish island of Fernando Po – now known as Bioko – in the Gulf of Guinea in January 1942. After the Small Scale Raiding Force was disbanded in April 1943, Lassen was posted to the Special Boat Squadron, part of 1 SAS Regiment.

The SAS had been created two years early with the aim of using small teams to destroy specific targets behind enemy lines.



LARGER THAN LIFE: Alan Ritchson, rear, as Lassen in the Guy Ritchie film about Operation Postmaster

LASSEN served in Egypt and was promoted to Lieutenant. In 1943, he was awarded a Bar to his MC for his courage in taking part in a SBS raid on an airfield in Crete. Pretending to be a German officer, he had bluffed his way past three sentries.

After being promoted to Captain, he was awarded the second Bar to his MC for valour in a raid on Dodecanese, a group of Greek islands, later in 1943. His citation stated that: "Crippled with a badly burned leg, he stalked and killed at least three Germans at the closest range."

By this point in his career, Lassen, played on-screen by Alan Ritchson in Guy Ritchie's heavily-fictionalised 2024 film about Operation Postmaster, The Ministry of

Ungentlemanly Warfare, had a reputation as a "killing machine", and he never hesitated when it came to taking on a challenge.

Critics claimed he had a reckless streak and could be ill-disciplined, particularly after drinking. After taking part in operations in

Croatia in 1944, Lassen served in northern Italy from January 1945, by this point in the rank of Major. To put this stage of the war into context, the first Allied landings on mainland Italy – a nation that had initially been an ally of Germany – took place in early September 1943.

Even after Italy changed sides in the war later the same month, it took the Allies more than 18 months to push the German forces back to the north of the country.

After the Allies failed to take Bologna, they planned in early April 1945 to bypass the city with the British advance through a corridor of land – known as the "Argenta Gap".

Realising their troops would be vulnerable as they made their way through the narrow Argenta Gap, Allied commanders ordered a series of diversionary raids to draw the enemy troops away from their chosen route north. Major Lassen was

tasked with leading 18 men in one of these hit-and-run raids on the shores of Lake Comacchio. His mission – part of Operation Roast – was to give the impression of a major landing while also causing as many casualties as possible. Typical of the man, Lassen led his men from the front after crossing the lake and as they advanced north on a road towards the town of Comacchio.

As they moved forwards in the darkness, they were challenged and claimed to be local fishermen. Their pretence failed and, as they tried to overpower a sentry, an enemy machine-gun opened fire.

Lassen attacked with hand grenades, taking out four Germans and two heavy machine-guns. He then raced forwards alone under a heavy fire.

He silenced a second enemy position, which had two more machine-guns, and it was then overrun by his patrol. Two Germans were killed and two more captured but his force took casualties. After re-organising his men, Lassen targeted a third enemy position which soon indicated it wanted to surrender, with the shout of "Kamerad, kamerad [comrade, comrade]."

However, as he moved forward, yet

another nearby enemy position opened fire on him. Lassen was seriously wounded but not before throwing a last grenade which exploded and enabled his men to take the third position.

With their ammunition running low and with the patrol having taken several casualties, the remaining forces had to pull back. Lassen, however, refused to be evacuated with his men, saying he would hamper the withdrawal. "I am dying, leave me," he said. He succumbed to his serious injuries, aged 24, close to the shores of the lake.

He died in the early hours of April 9, 1945, appropriately enough five years to the day that his homeland was invaded by Germany: his original motivation for joining the war effort.

The citation for his posthumous VC, announced on September 4, 1945, ended: "The high sense of devotion to duty and the esteem with which he was held by the men he led, added to his own magnificent cour-

age, enabled Major Lassen to carry out all the tasks he had been given with complete success."

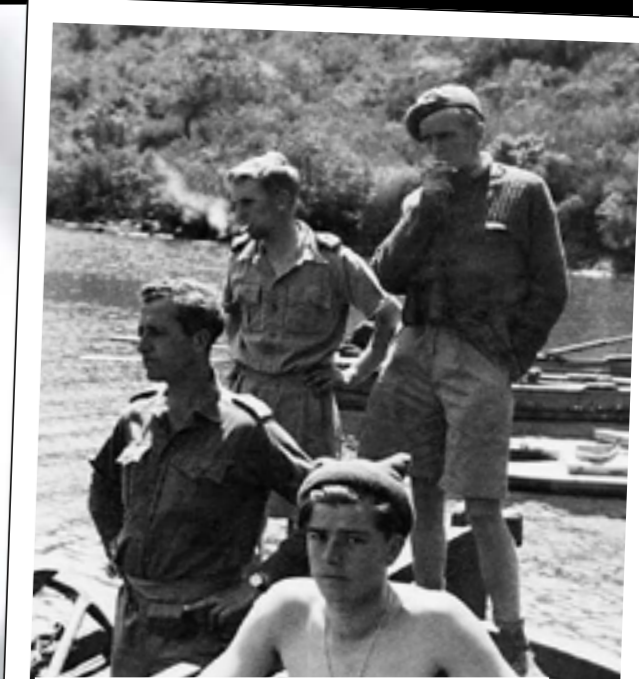
Staff Sergeant Les Stephenson, who had served alongside Lassen in the SBS, witnessed his Officer Commanding's death during the raid and provided critical testimony for the VC nomination.

Stephenson later said of Lassen: "Providing you were truthful with him and carrying out his instructions, he was marvelous. But if anyone tried to pull a fast one or not quite carry out his instructions it might be quite a different story."

Initially, Lassen and his three other fallen comrades from "M Squadron" were buried by partisans, aided by the local priest, with basic wooden crosses marking their graves in the town's old cemetery.

Lassen's parents received his VC, along with his three other decorations, from George VI at an investiture at Buckingham Palace in December 1945. The SAS had lost

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SPECIAL FORCES LEGEND: Lassen, at rear, with fellow operatives during earlier mission



POIGNANT REMEMBRANCE: Lord Ashcroft at memorial to Anders Lassen, main, and his comrades

'Lassen attacked with hand grenades, taking out four Germans and two heavy machine-guns'

one of their legendary leaders but the couple had lost a precious son. Lassen's medal group is on display at the Museum of Danish Resistance in Copenhagen. A bust of him was installed in Churchilparken (Churchill Park) outside the museum in 1987.

NEAR the site of the action where Lassen earned his VC, the Italians have erected a monument to Lassen and his men. There have been numerous tributes to Lassen since his death, including from the 2nd Earl Jellicoe, the highly-decorated officer who commanded the Special Boat Squadron during the Second World War and who went on to become a distinguished Parliamentarian.

Jellicoe, who recruited Anders into the SBS, said: "When I met Andy [as Lassen was sometimes known] in person I was, as we say, 'bowed over' by his enthusiasm, his burning patriotism, his hatred of the Nazi occupation of his beloved Denmark and by his ardent desire for action."

Colonel David Sutherland, also highly dec-

orated and who knew Lassen through his command of "S" Detachment of the SBS, said of the Danish officer: "In my opinion, Anders caused more damage and discomfort to the enemy than any other man of his rank or age."

Before leaving Italy, I visited the Argenta Gap War Cemetery where the remains of Lassen and his comrades were re-interred shortly after the end of the Second World War. As I stood head bowed next to Lassen's grave, I read the words that his parents had chosen to have engraved, in Danish, on their son's gravestone.

Translated into English, they say, "Fight for all you hold dear. Die as if it counts. Life is not so hard. Nor is death."

Major Anders Lassen VC, MC and Two Bars, was an incredibly courageous Special Forces operative who epitomised the motto of the SAS: "Who Dares Wins". His bravery must never be forgotten.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft