

Victoria Cross Hero Honoured

6846197 Rifleman John Beeley VC

The King's Royal Rifle Corps - 1941 North Africa



For some years Tom Beeley a second cousin of the late John Beeley had been trying to get recognition for John in his home town of Manchester, where he was the first Mancunian to be awarded the Victoria Cross in the Second World War. Eventually this came about when on 3rd August, 2005 a plaque was unveiled in memory of John in the newly named “John Beeley Avenue” in Openshaw’s, High Leigh Estate. Richard Frost had been contacted some time before the event was due to take place and enquired of the Waterloo Band at Oxford if it would be possible to have a Bugler available for the day. In fact Roger Betts of the Waterloo Band and Bugles of the Royal Green Jackets very kindly, and, at short notice arranged for two buglers to make the journey north for the ceremony. The icing on the cake was when Lt General Sir Christopher Wallace, the President of the KRRC Association and Chairman of the Royal

Green Jackets Museum Trustees agreed to the Hon Secretary's request to come to Manchester armed with the Beeley VC. With the Hon Secretary living in Kent and Sir Christopher in Berkshire it seemed to make sense for the buglers to be picked up in Oxford by Sir Christopher and for the Hon Secretary to meet them at a service station on the M6 Motorway. This was accomplished in true Rifleman like (not that the Hon Secretary would have been welcomed in the Recce Platoon with his map reading skills) fashion and we arrived in Manchester in good time for the ceremony in Openshaw.



What a treat when we arrived, as lots of local schoolchildren had been asked to attend and were thrilled and somewhat overawed to be allowed to hold the Beeley VC by Sir Christopher. The ceremony was led by the Reverend Michael Williams, vicar of St James and Emanuel Church, and was attended by Lt General Sir Christopher Wallace, Richard Frost, and Len Parsons and Geoff Harvey attended with their wives, along with Dave Dixon, Stuart Anderson, Peter Page and others from the RGJ, family members, old school friends and locals from Openshaw's High Leigh Estate. Sir Christopher firstly presented Tom Beeley with a certificate for later presentation to 15 year old Christopher McGowan from Wrights Robinson Sports College in Gorton, as part of an annual prize awarded in memory of John Beeley then the plaque was unveiled by Tom Beeley (see inscription) and the buglers sounded "Last Post". After lots of local press and TV interviews with some of those present, the family, and those representing the regiment retired to the local social club to partake in an excellent spread laid on for us by Tom Beeley.

Inscription on plaque:

**JOHN BEELEY VC
1918 - 1941
KING'S ROYAL RIFLE CORPS
AWARDED THE VICTORIA CROSS FOR
CONSPICUOUS BRAVERY
SIDI-REZEGH, NORTH AFRICA
NOVEMBER 21ST, 1942

UNVEILED BY TOM BEELEY
3RD AUGUST, 2005**

Date of Act of Gallantry:

21 November 1941

Place:

Sidi Rezegh, Libya

CITATION:

On the 21st November 1941, during the attack at Sidi Rezegh, North Africa, against a strong enemy position, the company to which Rifleman Beeley belonged was pinned down by heavy fire at point-blank range from the front and flank on the flat, open ground of the aerodrome. All the officers but one of the company and many of the other ranks had been either killed or wounded. On his own initiative, and when there was no sort of cover, Rifleman Beeley got to his feet carrying a Bren gun and ran forward towards a strong enemy post containing an anti-tank gun. The post was silenced and Rifleman Beeley's platoon was enabled to advance, but Rifleman Beely fell dead across his gun, hit in at least four places.

Rifleman Beeley went to certain death in a gallant and successful attempt to carry the day. His courage and self-sacrifice were a glorious example to his comrades and inspired them to further efforts to reach their objective, which was eventually captured by them, together with 700 prisoners.

Rifleman Beeley was a member of A Company, 1st Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps, one of two motor battalions in 7th Armoured Division's Support Group (30 Corps) taking part in Operation CRUSADER, General Auchinleck's offensive against the German and Italian forces in the Western Desert in November 1942. The other was 2nd Battalion, The Rifle Brigade. The objective of the offensive was to overrun the German and Italian positions in Cyrenaica (Libya) and relieve the besieged garrison at Tobruk.

Beginning their advance on 18 November, 1st Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps, under Lieutenant Colonel SCF De Salis DSO, was ordered, late on 20 November, to seize some important high ground on an escarpment to the north of Sidi Rezegh airfield, some 20 miles south of Tobruk. The attack was launched at 08-30 hours on 21 November across 2,000 yards of open airfield, due, to the circumstances at the time, very little artillery support. Furthermore, the escarpment was more strongly held by the enemy than expected. Despite being in attack against well-defended positions and outnumbered 3:1, the Battalion still managed, in fierce fighting, to achieve its objectives. It was in this fighting that Rifleman Beeley performed the act of gallantry (see the citation) that cost him his life. Three officers and a further 25 other ranks were killed, and five officers and 50 other ranks wounded, out of a total strength of about 300.

Sadly, and as a postscript to Rifleman Beeley's gallantry, on the following day (22 November), the Battalion's forward positions were overrun by a vastly superior enemy force, with many members of the Battalion taken prisoner. The remnants of the Battalion were subsequently withdrawn to Egypt, regrouped and were back in action by April 1942. Tobruk, meanwhile, was relieved after an 8-month siege on 10 December 1941.

Rifleman Beeley was the only member of The King's Royal Rifle Corps to be awarded a VC in the Second World War.

Investiture:

20 October 1942, Buckingham Palace, by King George VI to his widow

Location of VC:

The Royal Green Jackets Museum

Personal Details:

Full Name:

John Beeley

Date and Place of Birth:

8 February 1918, 9 Pendle Street, Lower Openshaw, Manchester



HRH The Duke of Gloucester and Lt General Willoughby-Norris in the foreground visiting John Beeley's grave.

Date and Place of Death:

21 November 1941, killed in action, Sidi Rezegh Airfield, Libya

Date and Place of Burial:

Date not known, Knightsbridge War Cemetery, Acroma, Libya.
Plot X, Row E, Grave 4. Headstone.

Service Record:

Enlisted: 4 August 1938
Service: Three years.
Killed in Action, aged 23.
Rank on Death: Rifleman
Other Decorations: None
Campaign Medals: Star (1939-45)
Africa Star
War Medal (1939-45)

Additional Information:

John Beeley was the son of William Beeley, who served in the Lancashire Fusiliers during the First World War. John had a twin brother, Arthur, who served in the Royal Marines during the Second World War.

Beeley attended Wheeler Street School, Openshaw. He worked as a stonemason before joining the Army. He was married to Elisabeth Davy, who served in the ATS. They lived in Openshaw. There were no children from the marriage.



Tom Beeley holding John Beeley's VC.