Heroism Remembered From
The Union Jack Club
Victoria Cross
Roll of Honour

Stanley Elton Hollis VC

B. 21/09/1912 D. 08/02/1972
Occupation of time of action: Company Sergeant-Major, The Green Howards

Stanley Elton Hollis (1912-1972) was born in North Ormesby, Middlesbrough, the son of Alfred and Edith Jane Hollis (nee White). He attended the local school until the age of 14, when his parents moved to Robin's Hood Bay, where Stan worked in his father's fish and chip shop. At the age of 17, he became an apprentice to a Whitby shipping company to learn to be a Navigation Officer. He made regular voyages to West Africa but in 1930 fell ill with Blackwater Fever which ended his merchant navy career.

Returning to North Ormesby, Stan got a job as a lorry driver and married Alice Clixby in 1933, with whom he had a son and a daughter. In 1939 he enlisted as a Territorial Army volunteer in 4th Battalion, The Green Howards. At the outbreak of World War II he was mobilised and joined the 6th Battalion, The Green Howards and went to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force in 1940, where he was employed as the Commanding Officer's dispatch rider. He was promoted from Lance Corporal to Sergeant during the evacuation from Dunkirk. At Dunkirk in 1940, a mortar shell stripped all the clothes off his back and riddled him with shrapnel, yet, naked and wounded, he managed to swim through the surf to a waiting rescue boat. He then fought from El Alamein to Tunis as part of the British 8th Army in the North African Campaign. Hollis was appointed Company Sergeant Major just before the invasion of Sicily in 1943 where he was wounded at the Battle of Primosole Bridge.

Hollis was a maverick character. Always his own man, he'd lost his stripes more than once in his Army career for stepping out of line (often for going AWOL to see his wife Alice), but his obvious leadership qualities always won them back. He was a big man in every sense, with a volcanic temper and huge fists, which he wasn't slow to use if provoked. With red hair, a 6ft 2in frame and rugged looks, he was not someone to mess with, and his comrades nicknamed him "The Man They Couldn't Kill".

During the early hours of June 6, 1944 - D-Day- lines of scared young soldiers waited in the dark for the order to board the landing craft that would take them into battle on the beaches of northern France. At the last minute they were issued with an unexpected piece of equipment — a condom each! '*What are these for?*' boomed out the voice of Sergeant-Major Stan Hollis, a hulking power-house of a man from the back streets of northern England. '*Are we going to fight the Germans, or f*** them?*'

Within minutes of the landing craft grounding to a halt, he showed himself not just fearless but the bravest of the brave and an example to all. As he and his men of the Green Howard regiment stormed up Gold Beach at the very heart of the Normandy invasion force, his deeds earned him the Victoria Cross, the supreme award for gallantry. His was, surprisingly, given the scale of the operation and the opposition the invaders had to overcome - the only one awarded on D-Day.

After wading ashore in waist-deep water through a hail of mortar fire, he and his men negotiated a minefield and crawled uphill towards their objective, a battery of German big guns which were busy laying down a barrage of shells on the Allied invasion fleet out in the Channel. As they approached, they suddenly came under fierce machine-gun fire from a pill box on their flank. '*It was very well camouflaged, but I could see guns moving around the slits*' Hollis recalled. His company was in danger of being wiped out.

Reaching the pill box, he shoved the barrel through a slit and let fly. Then he climbed on the roof and, leaning over, popped a grenade inside for good measure. The explosion was his signal to jump down and throw his considerable weight against the door and burst inside. Two German soldiers lay dead, the rest too wounded or dazed to react. Hollis then turned his attention to a neighbouring pill box, down a 100-yard communications trench. As he strode towards it, changing the magazine of his Sten gun as he went, Germans poured out of it with their hands in the air. He had single-handedly captured 20 of the enemy. More importantly, by putting the pill boxes out of action, he had saved the lives of his own men as they now pressed on towards the German gun battery and silenced it.

This action alone merited a VC. But three hours later, his face running with blood after a graze from a German sniper's bullet, Hollis followed up with another act of selfless bravery. The company's advance into the Normandy countryside was impeded by another German position, this time in an orchard. Eight British men lay dead, and two others were pinned down. Hollis charged the enemy once again, firing from the hip as he went, and held his ground, despite hostile bullets whipping around him, until the two were able to escape. His actions were witnessed by senior officers, who cited him for his valour. '*Wherever the fighting was heaviest, Sergeant Major Hollis appeared*' said the official report of his VC, '*and in the course of a magnificent day's work he displayed the utmost gallantry. On two occasions his courage and initiative prevented the enemy from holding up the advance at critical stages. His bravery saved the lives of many of his men.*' But Hollis was self-effacing about what he'd done that morning. He'd just been lucky, he insisted. '*If I hadn't done the things I did, then somebody else would have.*'

Though he was reputed to have killed 100 Germans, it wasn't that he was an ace with a gun. Indeed, he said of his ability with a rifle: '*If I fell down, I couldn't hit the floor*'. Nor was he the most efficient battlefield soldier. On one occasion on D-Day he lobbed a grenade — '*I threw it like a cricket ball; I could never do it the proper Army way*' — and forgot to take the pin out first. '*Fortunately, I'd followed it up straight away. Two Germans had seen it coming and kept their heads down. By the time they realised it wasn't going off, I was on top of them and shot them both.*' He was decorated with his Victoria Cross by King George VI on 10th October 1944.

Sadly, all this did him little good after the war. For a short while he was a celebrity, called on to open fetes and visit factories — all of which, modest man that he was, he hated. The fame was soon over. Despite his VC, he found it hard to find work in post-war Britain, a grim place of rationing and austerity. A soldier's professional skills, so valued in war, were redundant now. Men of Hollis's age and experience, the country's saviours, often found themselves passed over for younger workers.

He finally got work as the landlord of a pub in Middlesbrough, and that remained his occupation, one he enjoyed immensely, for the rest of his life. He was a hugely popular landlord, though there

were occasions when young toughs with too much beer inside them would want to pick a fight with the man with the VC. '*No one ever bested him,*' recalled his daughter Pauline. '*He would make a joke of it but if they wouldn't take no for an answer, he would take them outside. They always regretted it*.'

But the war years took their toll. Bullets and shrapnel remained lodged in his body for the rest of his life. His children remember him standing behind the bar of The Green Howard, re-named by him in honour of his regiment, for hours on end with blood seeping from painful old wounds in the bones of his feet. He didn't boast about his achievements and took no pride in the Germans he had killed in battle. If he got word that a journalist was on the way to the pub to interview him, he would slip out of the back.

Yet nor was he prepared to forgive and forget. During his escape from Dunkirk, he had seen the bodies of British soldiers massacred by the enemy. The sight haunted him. When in 1963, the film epic The Longest Day was released to great fanfare, some bright PR spark thought it would be marvellous to get D-Day hero Hollis along to the premiere to shake hands with a former German officer. Where a new generation was ready to bury the hatchet, an affronted Hollis was not. '*I find it impossible to treat a man as an enemy one minute and then shake his hand*,' he said. '*I saw the result of too many of their atrocities ever to trust, or like, the Germans again*.'

Equally, he had his own demons that never left him. In Normandy he had shot down a teenage member of the Hitler Youth, the same age as his own son, who had gone on the rampage with a gun. For years after he had terrible nightmares. His children remember him locking himself in his room for days on end, crying to himself that he had blood on his hands. Those wounds and the long-term suffering they caused may well have contributed to his premature death from a stroke at the early age of 59 on 8th February 1972 at Liverton Mines. He was laid to rest in Acklam Cemetery, Middlesbrough with full military honours, attended by three fellow VCs. In 2015, following a campaign to raise £150,000 a statue was erected in his memory in Middlesbrough. He is also commemorated in Crepon, France with a statue of him at the Green Howards Memorial.

His medal group, which he personally kept in a drawer with bottle tops he collected for charity, was bought by medal collector Sir Ernest Harrison OBE, chairman of Racal and Vodafone. Harrison presented the medal to the Green Howards Museum in Richmond, North Yorkshire in 1997. Ten years later, he purchased, for the Green Howards, the Normandy hut which Hollis had attacked.

Lest we forget

Source: vconline.co.uk