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Willy Apiata was doing what he is trained for. In winning the Victoria Cross, Corporal Apiata joins an elite group of seven others, including Charles Upham, Second Lieutenant Wallace-Mai-a-ke-a-Rohe, Bernard Lloyd Field, and Sir Harry Elliot.

The Victoria Cross (VC) is the highest decoration for gallantry in peace or war that can be awarded to New Zealand service personnel. It was created by Queen Victoria in 1856 to recognize acts of gallantry in the face of the enemy.

The action that earned Corporal Apiata the highest valor award, and the actions of the other three recipients, are in keeping with the Army's values of courage, commitment, comradeship and integrity. This is a proud day for the New Zealand Army and adds to the already rich history of its soldiers performing their highest act of valor.

The New Zealand Victoria Cross

The New Zealand Victoria Cross was awarded to British military service personnel serving with either the British or Australian forces on foreign soil. The VC was first awarded to a New Zealand service personnel in 1939.

Three others awards to be made

Three other gallantry awards are to be made to SAS members following the same 2004 Afghanistan incident. The New Zealand Gallantry decoration will be awarded to the three SAS members for their bravery during the incident.

The Victoria Cross for New Zealand is manufactured by the London jewellers Hancock and Co, who have made the VC since its inception. From July 2000 – April 2001 he served in East Timor as a member of the UN Force. He also received several other gallantry awards, including the New Zealand Gallantry Medal and the New Zealand Long Service Medal.

Who is Willy Apiata?

Willy Apiata was born on 7 July 1980 in Wanganui, New Zealand, and grew up in Waikato. His birth certificate carries the first name “Bill” but he is known as Willy by all.

His father is Maori and his mother Pakeha. His parents are from Auckland; he is close to this family.

The Victoria Cross has only been awarded to New Zealand military personnel on three other occasions since 1939:

- 1945 – Corporal Charles Upham
- 2003 – Corporal Apiata

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Such an incredible event is unfolding all around me. Today at work, Monday 2 July, at Defence Public Relations Unit, we are waiting for the Prime Minister, Helen Clark, to make an announcement that will go down in New Zealand history. As I look at my watch, it is just after 9.20am.

We were told to be in here at 8am by DPRI Director, Liz Col Mike Shirtfield for “an announcement”. I didn’t know what for, but there had been a quiet buzz around the office ever since I arrived here two and a bit weeks ago. Of course, I am the lowest in the chain so it wasn’t my place to ask too many questions. And being a little wary of everything, I just did what I was told.

Today, there is a quiet but purposeful energy about the place. Different people around the office and lots of equipment. Something’s on their minds. The Commanding Officer of the SAS is here – what the hell is going on?

The announcement is that Corporal Willy Apiata has been awarded the Victoria Cross. Mike, our boss, is commanding everything with precision. The preparation is done, everything planned. Holding what they’re doing – and now we’re just waiting.

Waiting for the media frenzy to start. But to me, what the really astonishing thing is the link I have with this Victoria Cross winner.

Years ago, while I was a reporter on the Eastern Bay News in Whakatane in 2000, I remember doing a photo and story of five young TF soldiers who were about to go on a deployment to East Timor. There was one particular soldier who really stood out. He looked so proud to be wearing his uniform and he was really stoked to be formally embarking on a mission.

For a soldier, it’s the real thing. The young men were joking around nervously, as young soldiers do when a little media attention is being paid – especially when you’re taking their photo but this guy didn’t seem so much. You could tell that he didn’t want to bring any disrepute on the uniform.

He had a no-nonsense manner. This was another part of the pre-deployment process and was just as important as any other military duty.

I remember holding what they were saying – and wrote the story. Both were published in the Eastern Bay News. It was a good photo. The guys looked handsome in their blue United Nations berets and they were so proud of their achievement. To have even come this far, was so much. You could tell that he didn’t want to bring any disrepute on the uniform.

Today, when they announced our mission and I opened the digital image file and saw who the Victoria Cross medal was awarded to – I was like, “Whoa!” It was the same guy, but the years have added some other character there.

He’s seen stuff and he’s built a stronger physical frame. I wondered what it would be like to talk to him. I wish we had the media conference and it all went smoothly. Dignified and to the point.

I was lucky enough to shake Corporal Apiata’s hand today and reminded of that time I took his photo in Whakatane. After a second or two you could see he remembered that particular event.

“My mum’s still got that photo,” he said quietly.

His eyes smiled at that recognition. For me, it was a nice feeling to know we had shared an experience – as brief as it was.

Sometimes you think your work is of no matter or of little consequence in the bigger scheme of things. Never again will I allow myself to think this way.

Things we do that are every day routine may not be a big deal to us individually, but now all I can think of is this - that photo I took innocently all those years ago now has a value that cannot be quantified.

I was just doing my job – but someone else’s action has made that photo a piece of history. Isn’t that truly amazing?

It only proves that everything we do is important. We may perhaps never know if our deeds will touch the lives of anyone else.

Clearly they did and I was lucky enough to find out for myself.

Never underestimate the value of your everyday work – no matter who you are or what you do.

By Denise Landau

Simple photo becomes life lesson

Messages pour in for Willy

People from all over the world are sending messages to Victoria Cross recipient, CPL Willy Apiata.

Soon after the announcement on July 2, Defence opened an internet message board to which people can send their thoughts.

The words speak for themselves. Here is a selection of some received so far.

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Full names withheld to protect privacy.

Rudi, Auckland writes:

"Thank you for showing the world how a true New Zealander acts in the face of the enemy, thank you for doing your job and defending our country's interests. You really are an inspiration, please join the Army at the end of 2000 and only hope I can be as professional as you all obviously are." 

An Opononi resident writes:

"Tena Keo Willy congratulations on your outstanding achievement. I know all the hard work and effort will be paid for you. You look like a very experienced person and you will be an excellent role model not only for Maori kids but all races. ... I know that the army isn't everyone's cup of tea but I know it would make a difference to some of our youth today. My daughter is a sergeant in the army in Waiouru and it has certainly made a difference to her life. Keep up the good work for every bad story about Maori there are always some positive ones that need to be celebrated also. Good luck, God bless."

A new TF soldier from Lower Hutt writes:

"Kia Ora, to Willy Apiata. Overnoon ki Waitangi day. I saw that the news of you being awarded the Victoria Cross was on the news last night. Congratulations to you and your family. I was going to $14.95 for your ethnicity. Exactly what our rangatahi need."

Eddie, New Plymouth writes:

"I'd like to extend my congratulations to Corporal Apiata. Your humility and humbleness as a professional soldier demonstrates the comradeship for your mates and serves as a role model for all, and a super bonus for your ethnicity. Exactly what our rangatanga need." 

Ted, Manurewa AUCKLAND writes:

"Congratulations on the award of the VC! Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods. – Aristotle."

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To send a message to Cpl Apiata, visit www.army.mil.nz.

Willy: “Thanks for the support”

Kia Ora,

At 0900 on Sunday 1 July my CD handed me three letters to read. The first was from the Governor General, the second from the Prime Minister and the third was from the Minister of Defence. These letters informed me that I had been awarded the Victoria Cross for New Zealand (V.C.). My boss also advised me that three other members of the 1st NZSAS Special Air Service Group received awards - specifically two to receive the New Zealand Gallantry Medal (NZGM) and one to receive the New Zealand Gallantry Medal (NZC). I would like congratulate those other members of my Unit for their awards.

I had no idea this great honour was to be bestowed on me and to be quite honest, life has been pretty hectic since that morning. I feel very proud and privileged to receive this award although I must admit to being looking forward to getting back into my normal work routine. I would also like to get around further down the track to personally thank those who have supported me.

Until then, I would just like say thank you to all those friends, colleagues and members of the wider NZDF that have shown me support over the last few weeks in the form of emails, letters and other messages.

I have had really positive support from my Unit, the wider Army, NZDF and my family. Thanks in particular to the Defence Public Relations Unit for their guidance in dealing with the media – something I am still getting to grips with. Right now I am looking forward to some time off with my family and a bit of hunting.

Whakatangata Kia Kaha.

Cpl Bill (Willy) Apiata, V.C.