

Charles Hazlitt Upham, VC and Bar 20th Battalion, 2nd New Zealand Division

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Charles Hazlitt Upham was born in Christchurch on 21 September 1908. From 1918 till 1927 he attended Waihi Boarding School and then Christ's College. Upham then began life as a farmer and later attended Canterbury Agricultural College. In 1935 Upham met Molly McTamney and they were engaged in 1938, but a few months later Molly left New Zealand.

With the outbreak of World War II, Upham joined the 20th Battalion at Burnham Camp and was sent to Egypt in December 1939. Upham was sent to Officer Cadet Training Unit and on graduation returned to the 20th Battalion as a 2nd Lieutenant.

In March 1941 the NZ Division was shipped to Greece and then Crete. Upham led his platoon during a night counter attack on Maleme airfield and performed a number of outstanding acts of bravery which resulted in his first nomination and the award of the Victoria Cross.

Next the Division moved into the Western Desert and went into combat at Minqar Qaim where they made a stand against four German Armoured Divisions. After a day's fighting the New Zealanders were completely surrounded. On the night of 27 June 1942 the NZ Division broke through the ring of German units in a night attack. Upham was at the forefront of the breakout and his apparently fearless mode of attack saw him nominated for another Victoria Cross.

By July 1942 the NZ Division was ordered to take Ruweisat Ridge. Upham, severely wounded, was captured after two days of audacious reconnaissance and further obstinate fighting. Upham's actions saw the third nomination for a Victoria Cross. The award of three Victoria Crosses to one person was unprecedented so, after discussion with King George VI, the two nominations in the desert were combined and Upham was awarded a second Victoria Cross.

Finally liberated from being a prisoner of war, Upham returned to England where he was reunited with Molly. On 11 May 1945 Upham received his first VC from King George VI at Buckingham Palace, and a month later Molly and Charles were married.

Less than a month after arriving home in September 1945, Upham received his second Victoria Cross. Since the Victoria Cross was instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856, only two other soldiers have been awarded the honour twice. Upham declined the offer of a subscription to buy him a farm, suggesting instead that the money raised be used to start a fund for the children of servicemen - the Charles Upham Scholarship Fund - which awards scholarships to Lincoln College and Canterbury University. Upham bought a portion of a station where he had worked before the war, Rafa Downs, and settled down to the life he loved.

On the 22nd of November 1994, Charles Upham died and all New Zealanders paid their last respects to a man who had earned the respect of all who knew him or who had heard of him.