



Commonwealth
of Australia

Gazette

No. S 12, Monday, 24 January 2011

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SPECIAL

Government House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

23 January 2011

It is notified for general information that Her Majesty The Queen has approved the award of the *Victoria Cross for Australia* to:

Corporal Benjamin ROBERTS-SMITH MG, WA

For the most conspicuous gallantry and daring in the face of the enemy while in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

By Her Excellency's Command

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

Stephen Brady

Official Secretary to the Governor-General

VICTORIA CROSS FOR AUSTRALIA (VC)**Australian Army****Corporal Benjamin ROBERTS-SMITH MG, WA**

For the most conspicuous gallantry and daring in the face of the enemy while in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

Demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents. With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his team mates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy. Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine gun positions killing both machine gun teams. His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force.

DEPARTMENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET

PM&C
Secretary
Mr Lewis
Dr Southern
Mr Rush
Mr Eveille

PMO
Ms Lampe
Mr Bentley
Ms Harrison
Mr Patrick

PSPM
Senator Lundy
Mr Belgrove

File:

To: Prime Minister (for event)

HIGH LEVEL AWARD - INVESTITURE

Purpose: To provide background for your attendance at the investiture ceremony on 23 January 2011.

Timing and Venue: 11am, Sunday 23 January 2011, Campbell Barracks, Swanbourne, WA

Key Points:

- An event to invest the award of the *Victoria Cross for Australia* (VC) to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith MG is scheduled to take place at the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) Headquarters in Perth, WA, on Sunday 23 January 2011 at 11.00 am.
- The VC is awarded "for the most conspicuous gallantry, or a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy".
- You wrote to the Governor-General on 19 November 2010 requesting that she seek The Queen's approval of the award (see B10/1562). The Queen has approved the award.
- The Governor-General, as The Queen's representative, will invest Corporal Roberts-Smith with the award. You are to make an address following the investiture.

s 47E(d)

Background:

- The citation and short narrative for the award to Corporal Roberts-Smith is at Attachment A. Information about ^{s 22(1)(a)(ii)} his career and family is also provided.
- A list of prominent guests expected at the investiture is at Attachment B.
- General background on the VC is at Attachment C.

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

s 22(1)(a)

Duncan Lewis
National Security Adviser

20 January 2011

Contact Officer: Peter Rush
6271 5909 / ^{s 22(1)(a)(ii)}
Consultation: Government House,
Defence Policy Branch

NOTED:

Julia Gillard
Date:


**AWARD OF THE VICTORIA CROSS FOR AUSTRALIA (VC) TO
Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith MG**

For the most conspicuous gallantry and daring in the face of the enemy while in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

Demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents. With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his team mates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy. Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine gun positions killing both machine gun teams. His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force.

[Date of action: June 2010.]

s 22(1)(a)(ii)



Prominent investiture guests

(* indicates unconfirmed guest)

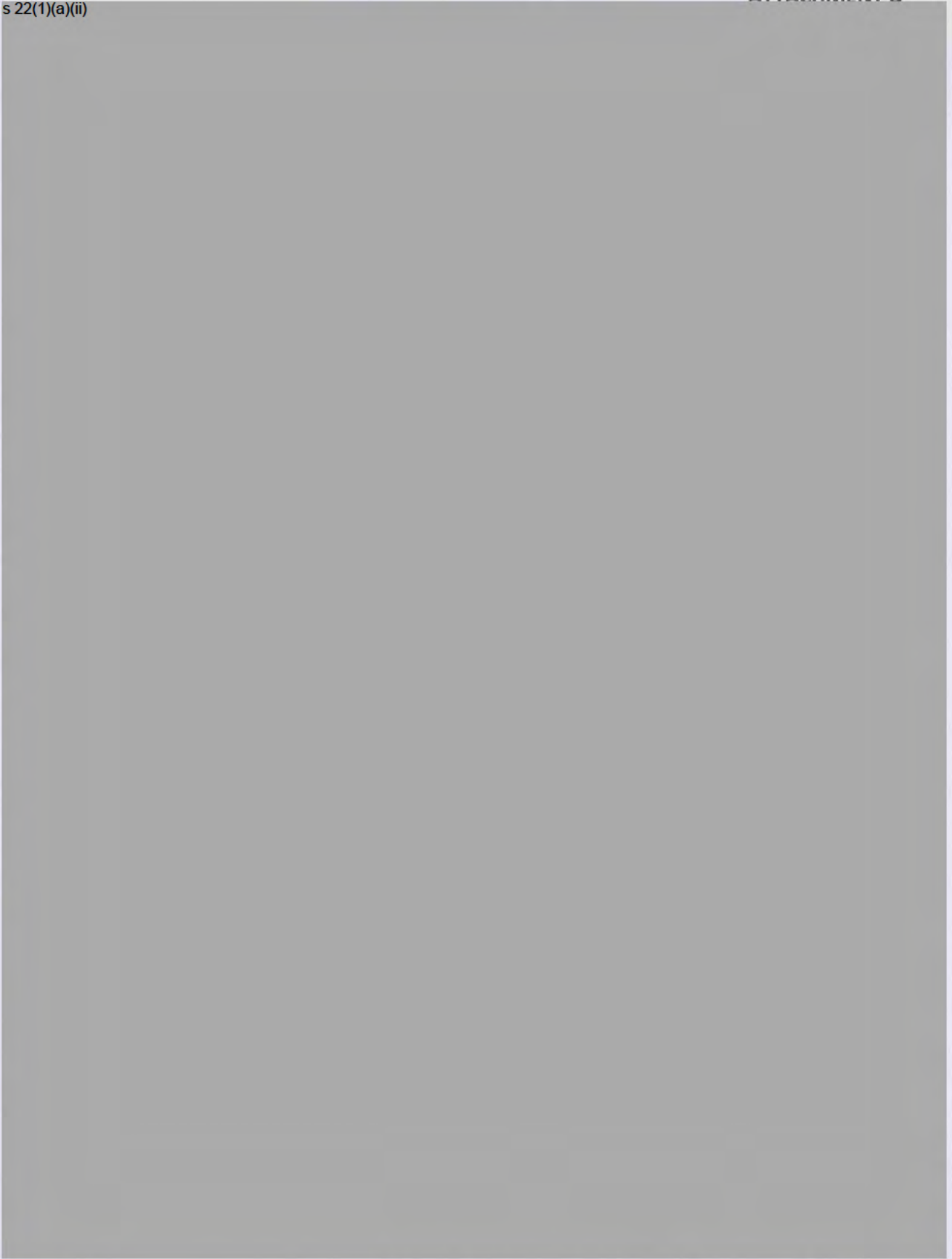
Name	Remarks
Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC	Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia – will perform the investiture
Justice William Gummot AC	A/g Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia
The Hon Tony Abbott MP	Leader of the Opposition
The Hon Stephen Smith MP	Minister for Defence
Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston AC AFC	Chief of the Defence Force
Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie AO DSC CSM	Chief of Army
Vice Admiral Russell Crane AO CSM RAN	Chief of Navy
Air Marshal Mark Binskin AM	Chief of Air Force
His Excellency Dr Amanullah Jayhoon	Ambassador to Australia and New Zealand from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Corporal Mark Donaldson VC	First recipient of the VC for Australia
Warrant Officer Class 2 Keith Payne VC OAM *	Last Australian recipient of a (British) VC
His Excellency Dr Kenneth Michael AC	Governor of Western Australia
The Hon Colin Barnett MLA	Premier of Western Australia

Background on the *Victoria Cross* and the *Victoria Cross for Australia*

- The *Victoria Cross* (VC) was created by Queen Victoria in 1856 and made retrospective to 1854 to cover the period of the Crimea War. The first VCs were awarded in a ceremony on 26 June 1857 to 62 British recipients for actions during the Crimean Campaign.
- The VC for Australia was established in 1991, to replace awards of the British VC to Australians.
 - When Australia established its own honours system in 1975 a process was begun to create awards to cover the broad spectrum of Australian achievements and contributions. The VC for Australia is at the pinnacle of the Australian honours system.
 - As with the British award, awards of the VC for Australia are approved personally by The Queen. The medal itself is cast from the same materials as the British VCs and the engraving of the medal, in accordance with its 155 year history, is undertaken by the jewellers Hancocks of London.
- To date 97 awards of the VC have been made to Australians:
 - 6 in the Boer War 1899-1902
 - 64 in World War I 1914-1918 (including 9 at Gallipoli)
 - 2 in North Russia 1919
 - 20 in World War II 1939-1945
 - 4 in Vietnam 1962-1972
 - 1 in Afghanistan 2001-present
- Corporal Roberts-Smith is the 98th Australian recipient of a VC.
- Captain Neville Howse is generally considered to be the first Australian to have been awarded the VC. While the grant of his award postdated a couple of others for the Boer War, it was for actions that occurred earlier. Howse was a commissioned lieutenant in the New South Wales Medical Corps and sailed with the 2nd Contingent for South Africa. While with a mounted infantry brigade in the Orange Free State during the action of Vredefort on 24 July 1900, Howse 'went out under a heavy crossfire and picked up a wounded man and carried him to a place of shelter'. For this action he was awarded the VC on 4 June 1901. Howse continued his military duties into World War I, and he was knighted for his service as administrator of AIF troops in England, France and Egypt. He later served in the Federal Parliament and Cabinet. His family and descendants met at the Australian War Memorial on Monday 17 January 2011 for a tour and to view his VC, which is on display there.

- The last Australian to receive the (British) VC was Warrant Officer Class 2 Keith Payne VC OAM for gallant actions in May 1969. At that time he was commanding the 212th Company of the 1st Mobile Strike Force Battalion (a US Army Special Forces formation) when it was attacked by a strong North Vietnamese force. Payne, while wounded and under heavy fire, covered the withdrawal of his troops and then scoured the battle scene for isolated and wounded soldiers, while the enemy kept up regular fire. He found some 40 wounded men, some of whom he brought back and others he organised to be rescued, and he led the group back to base through enemy dominated terrain.
- The first award of the VC for Australia was made in January 2009, to Corporal (then Trooper) Mark Donaldson VC of the SASR. Corporal Donaldson was with coalition forces engaged in a prolonged enemy ambush in Afghanistan, in September 2008. On numerous occasions he deliberately drew the enemy's fire in order to allow wounded soldiers to be moved to safety. At one stage he ran eight metres across exposed ground to rescue a coalition interpreter and carry him back to a vehicle. Corporal Donaldson's actions saved that man's life and ensured the safety of many others. Corporal Donaldson has loaned his VC and the original citation to the Australian War Memorial, and they are on display there.
- The "Hall of Valour" at the Australian War Memorial commemorates Australia's VC recipients, including displaying 61 of the original medals awarded. A redeveloped Hall of Valour was reopened in December 2010.

s 22(1)(a)(ii)



s 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Thursday, 20 January 2011 1:58 PM
To: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: FW: award narrative [SEC=IN-CONFIDENCE:HONOURS]

Security Classification:
 HONOURS-IN-CONFIDENCE

done 6/20/11

Could you email it to me when cleared to

From: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Thursday, 20 January 2011 1:57 PM
To: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Rush, Peter
Subject: RE: award narrative [SEC=IN-CONFIDENCE:HONOURS]

It'll be in the 2.30pm run – Duncan has signed and it's been delivered for distribution.

Cheers,

s 22(1)(a)(ii)
 s 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Thursday, 20 January 2011 1:56 PM
To: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Rush, Peter
Subject: RE: award narrative [SEC=IN-CONFIDENCE:HONOURS]

s 22(1)(a)(ii) Thanks for that. When would we be getting the full briefing on this? We're keen to get it through asap, thanks.

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Thursday, 20 January 2011 12:37 PM
To: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Rush, Peter
Subject: FW: award narrative [SEC=IN-CONFIDENCE:HONOURS]
Importance: High

s
 22(1)

As foreshadowed below, Government House has now provided the official citation and short narrative. This is the information that will be gazetted, and Government House have impressed upon me the importance of holding this information extremely tightly.

Corporal Benjamin ROBERTS-SMITH MG

For the most conspicuous gallantry and daring in the face of the enemy while in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

Demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents. With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his team mates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy. Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine gun positions killing both machine gun teams. His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force.

Regards,

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Thursday, 20 January 2011 9:55 AM
To: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Rush, Peter
Subject: award narrative [SEC=IN-CONFIDENCE:HONOURS]
Importance: High

Dear s 22(1)(a)(ii)

As discussed, attached is the "full narrative" for the award to be invested on Sunday. Please note that this is the
s 47E(d)

I'll endeavour to obtain a copy of the formal "short narrative" in the next hour and will forward that to you.

I trust that this assists in the preparation of the PM's speaking notes.

Regards,

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

*A/g Senior Adviser, Honours Policy and Operations
Awards and Culture Branch
Government Division
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet*
Ph: s 22(1)(a)(ii)

www.itsanhonour.gov.au

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Thursday, 20 January 2011 12:05 PM
To: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Brady, Stephen; s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: ***HONOURS-IN-CONFIDENCE*** [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]
Attachments: Gazette January 2011.doc

Good morning s 22(1)(a)(ii)

Please find attached the announcement with has not yet been gazetted.

I understand that within PM&C, only Peter Rush, Duncan Lewis and the Secretary will view this aside from you and that it will be sent to s 22(1)(a)(ii) within the Prime Minister's office.

regards

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

Assistant Director

Australian Honours and Awards Secretariat

Government House

Canberra ACT 2600

Tel s 22(1)(a)(ii)

<<Gazette January 2011.doc>>

IMPORTANT: This message, and any attachments to it, may contain information that is deemed confidential and may also be the subject of legal professional or other privilege. If you are not the intended recipient of this message, you must not review, copy, disseminate or disclose its contents to any other party or take action in reliance of any material contained within. If you have received this message in error, please notify the sender immediately by return email informing them of the mistake and delete all copies of the message from your computer system.

Government House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

23 January 2011

It is notified for general information that Her Majesty The Queen has approved the award of the *Victoria Cross for Australia* to:

Corporal Benjamin ROBERTS-SMITH MG, WA

For the most conspicuous gallantry and daring in the face of the enemy while in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

By Her Excellency's Command

Stephen Brady

Official Secretary to the Governor-General

VICTORIA CROSS FOR AUSTRALIA (VC)

Australian Army

Corporal Benjamin ROBERTS-SMITH MG, WA

For the most conspicuous gallantry and daring in the face of the enemy while in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

Demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents. With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his team mates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy. Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine gun positions killing both machine gun teams. His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force.

From: [Rush, Peter](#)
To: s 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: redraft citation [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]
Date: Tuesday, 23 November 2010 3:14:32 PM
Attachments: [redraft citation 23 November \(Rush\).doc](#)

VICTORIA CROSS FOR AUSTRALIA

Corporal B

Address

Awarded for the most conspicuous gallantry, or a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.

This award recognises Corporal B's actions, as a Patrol Second-in-Command, s 33(a)(ii) Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER, Afghanistan, in June 2009.

In the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal B initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents. With members of his patrol pinned down by the enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his team mates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy. Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal B stormed two enemy machine gun positions killing both machine gun teams. His selfless actions served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force.

DEPARTMENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET

To: Prime Minister (correspondence: for signature/decision)

**VICTORIA CROSS FOR AUSTRALIA: RECOMMENDATION FOR AWARD TO
CORPORAL BENJAMIN ROBERTS-SMITH MG**

Timing: Routine.

Recommendations - that you:

1. Endorse the Minister for Defence's recommendation to award the *Victoria Cross for Australia* to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith MG.

Agreed / Not Agreed

2. Sign the attached letter to the Governor-General requesting that she convey the recommendation to Her Majesty The Queen (Attachment A).

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

Signed / Not-Signed

Julia Gillard

Date: 19/11/10

Purpose: To obtain The Queen's approval of an award of the *Victoria Cross for Australia* to Corporal Roberts-Smith.

Key Points:

1. The Minister for Defence, the Hon Stephen Smith MP, wrote to you on 16 November 2010 to recommend that the *Victoria Cross for Australia* (VC for Australia) be awarded to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith MG in recognition of his most conspicuous acts of gallantry displayed in action as a Patrol Second-in-Command, s 33(a)(ii), Special Operations Task Group, Operation SLIPPER, in Afghanistan on 11 June 2010.
 - a. Awards of the VC for Australia are made by the Sovereign on the recommendation of the Minister for Defence. Communications with the Palace require your involvement, which is why Mr Smith has asked that you endorse the recommendation and seek Her Majesty's approval.
 - b. Prior to the establishment of the VC for Australia, in 1991, the British (Imperial) *Victoria Cross* was awarded to 96 Australians. The VC for Australia is the highest award in the Australian honours system, with identical qualifying criteria and insignia to its British equivalent.
2. We support the recommendation to award the VC for Australia to Corporal Roberts-Smith on the basis that his actions meet the requirements for the award.
 - a. The award recommendation for Corporal Roberts-Smith, including narrative, citation and witness statements, is attached to the draft letter to the Governor-General.
 - b. Please note that the witness statements attached to the letter to the Governor-General are written by, and refer to, several serving members of the SAS Regiment. They should be handled on a strict need-to-know basis and not publicly disclosed in any way.

HONOURS-IN-CONFIDENCE

3. If you endorse Mr Smith's recommendation you should sign the attached letter to the Governor-General at Attachment A, requesting that Her Excellency convey the recommendation to Her Majesty. If approved:
 - a. announcement and investiture arrangements will be undertaken in consultation with your office; and
 - b. the Australian Honours and Awards Secretariat (Government House) will source the insignia from the United Kingdom.
4. Strict confidence should be maintained in case the recommendation is not approved.
s 22(1)(a)(ii)
5. 
6. The award of the VC for Australia has financial implications for Government House (purchase of insignia, gazettal, investiture and reception) and the Department of Defence (media and counselling support, and arrangements for the recipient to attend special events). These costs will be absorbed within existing resources.

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

Duncan Lewis
Acting Secretary
/8 November 2010

Policy Officer: Peter Rush
Assistant Secretary
Awards and Culture Branch
Phone no: 6271 5909

ATTACHMENTS

ATTACHMENT A Draft letter to Governor-General

HONOURS-IN-CONFIDENCE



PRIME MINISTER
CANBERRA

19 NOV 2010

Reference: B10/1562

Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia
Government House
YARRALUMLA ACT 2600

Your Excellency

The Minister for Defence, the Hon Stephen Smith MP, has recommended the award of the *Victoria Cross for Australia* to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith MG of the Special Air Service Regiment. This award is in recognition of his most conspicuous gallantry in a circumstance of great peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, s 33(a)(ii) Special Operations Task Group, Operation SLIPPER, in Afghanistan, on 11 June 2010.

Copies of the narrative, citation and supporting statements are attached.

I endorse this recommendation and would be grateful if you would seek Her Majesty The Queen's approval to the award of the *Victoria Cross for Australia* to Corporal Roberts-Smith.

Yours sincerely

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

Julia Gillard

HONOURS-IN-CONFIDENCE

HONOURS-IN-CONFIDENCE (After first entry)

Department of Defence

Nomination for Half - Yearly Honours

Refer DI(G) PERS 31-3 and DI(G) PERS 31-5

Honours list/award

(Please tick appropriate box)		Award for which nomination is being made (Please tick appropriate box)	
Australia Day <input type="checkbox"/>		Order of Australia <input type="checkbox"/>	Distinguished Service decorations <input type="checkbox"/>
Queen's Birthday <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Conspicuous Service decorations <input type="checkbox"/>	Gallantry decorations <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other <input type="checkbox"/>		Name of honour, decoration or award	
Year 2011		Victoria Cross	

Nominee's personal details (All boxes are mandatory)

Rank/title	Family name	Given name(s)
CPL	Roberts-Smith	Benjamin
Employee ID	Service number (if applicable)	Service
s 47F	s 47F	Army
		Employment status
		Permanent
Honours/decorations/awards held (Do not include Service Medals or Long Service Medals)		
Medal for Gallantry		
Is this a renomination? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
If 'Yes', date of last nomination and award		
Branch, billet, corps, specialisation/mustering	Unit	Group
RAINF	SASR	SOCOMD

Nominating officer

Signature s 22(1)(a)(ii)	Printed name	Rank/title
	s 47F	LTCOL
Appointment	Phone number (in full)	Date
CO SOTC	s 22(1)(a)(ii) 3	29 Aug 10

Recommending officer

Nomination and level of award supported Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>		
If 'No', please provide comments and revised level of award s 22(1)(a)(ii)		
Signature	Printed name	Rank/title
	J.P.CANTWELL, AO	MAJGEN
Appointment	Phone number (in full)	Date
CJTF633	s 22(1)(a)(ii) 3	29 Aug 10

Approval of Executive Two-Star (e) Officer (Minimum) in the chain-of-command

Nomination and level of award supported Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>		
If 'No', please provide comments and revised level of award s 22(1)(a)(ii)		
Signature	Printed name	Rank/title
	M. EVANS AO, DSC	LTGEN
Appointment	Phone number (in full)	Date
CJOPS	s 22(1)(a)(ii)	26 Oct 10

Rating (Only where multiple nominations are made)

Rated as (eg 1 of 4) ☐ of ☐

Approved by CDF s 22(1)(a)(ii)

6 Nov 10.

Are there any public restrictions? (Mandatory) (eg Gazette, website etc) Yes ☒ No ☐

If 'Yes', please provide comments

HAS PROTECTED IDENTITY STATUS

Office of the Chief of the Defence Force

R1-5B-CDF Suite

Russell Offices

CANBERRA ACT 2600

HONOURS-IN-CONFIDENCE (After first entry)

AUSTRALIAN ARMY

TO BE AWARDED THE VICTORIA CROSS

§ 47F **CORPORAL BENJAMIN ROBERTS-SMITH MG**

For the most conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, § 33(a)(ii) Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith enlisted in the Australian Regular Army in 1996. After completing the requisite courses, he was posted to the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment where he saw active service in East Timor. In January 2003, he successfully completed the Australian Special Air Service Regiment Selection Course. During his tenure with the Regiment, he deployed on Operation VALIANT, SLATE, SLIPPER, CATALYST and SLIPPER II. Corporal Roberts-Smith was awarded the Medal for Gallantry for his actions in Afghanistan in 2006.

On the 11th of June 2010, § 33(a)(ii) of the Special Operations Task Group conducted a helicopter assault into Tizak, Kandahar Province, in order to capture or kill a senior Taliban commander. Immediately upon the helicopter insertion, the troop was engaged by machine gun and rocket propelled grenade fire from multiple, dominating positions. Two soldiers were wounded in action and the troop was pinned down by fire from three machine guns in an elevated fortified position to the south of the village. Under the cover of close air support, suppressive small arms and machine gun fire, Corporal Roberts-Smith and his patrol manoeuvred to within 70 metres of the enemy position in order to neutralise the enemy machine gun positions and regain the initiative.

Upon commencement of the assault, the patrol drew very heavy, intense, effective and sustained fire from the enemy position. Corporal Roberts-Smith and his patrol members fought towards the enemy position until, at a range of 40 metres, the weight of fire prevented further movement forward. At this point, he identified the opportunity to exploit some cover provided by a small structure. As he approached the structure, Corporal Roberts-Smith identified an insurgent grenadier in the throes of engaging his patrol. Corporal Roberts-Smith instinctively engaged the insurgent at point-blank range, resulting in the death of the insurgent. With members of his patrol still pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he exposed his own position in order to draw fire away from his patrol, which enabled them to bring fire to bear against the enemy. His actions enabled his Patrol Commander to throw a grenade and silence one of the machine guns. Seizing the advantage, and demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry, Corporal Roberts-Smith, with total disregard for his own safety stormed the enemy position killing the two remaining machine gun teams. His act of valour enabled his patrol to break-in to the enemy position and to lift the weight of fire from the remainder of the troop who had been pinned down by the machine gun fire. On seizing the fortified gun position Corporal Roberts-Smith then took the initiative again and continued to assault enemy positions in depth during which he and another patrol member engaged and killed further enemy. His acts of selfless valour directly enabled his Troop to go on to clear the village of Tizak of Taliban. This decisive engagement subsequently caused the remainder of the Taliban in Shah Wali Kot District to retreat from the area.

Corporal Roberts-Smith's most conspicuous gallantry in a circumstance of extreme peril was instrumental to the seizure of the initiative and the success of § 33(a)(ii) against a numerically superior enemy force. His valour was an inspiration to the soldiers with whom he fought alongside and is in keeping with the finest traditions of the Australian Army and the Australian Defence Force.

TO BE AWARDED THE VICTORIA CROSS

s 47F

Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith MG

s 22(1)(a)(ii)

For the most conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril as a Patrol Second-in-Command, s 33(a)(ii) Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

s

Demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents. With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his team mates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy. Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine gun positions killing both machine gun teams. His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force.

s 47E(d)



Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Defence

1 6 NOV 2010

The Hon Julia Gillard MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

I am pleased to enclose for your consideration a nomination for an award of the Victoria Cross for Australia to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, MG.

The Chief of the Defence Force has endorsed the nomination for Corporal Roberts-Smith in recognition of his most conspicuous acts of gallantry displayed in action as a Patrol Second-in-Command, ^{s 33(a)(ii)} Special Operations Task Group, Operation SLIPPER.

In accordance with the evidentiary standards required for an award of the Victoria Cross for Australia, three independent eye-witness statements have been sought and are included with the enclosed nomination.

I agree to the nomination.

I would be pleased if you would endorse the award of the Victoria Cross for Australia to Corporal Roberts-Smith and seek final approval for the award from Her Majesty The Queen through the Governor-General in accordance with the Victoria Cross for Australia Regulations.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

Best Wishes

^{s 22(1)(a)(ii)}

Stephen Smith

**NOMINATION FOR THE AWARDED THE
VICTORIA CROSS**

s 47F

CORPORAL BENJAMIN ROBERTS-SMITH, MG



reminder of their own tragic loss. Our thoughts go with them, as they do to Sapper Rose, wounded in the same improvised explosive device explosion, and to his family, together with the families and friends of the over 160 who have been wounded in the course of our commitment and contribution in Afghanistan.

Corporal Atkinson was a fine young soldier. He served in Indonesia in 2009 on Operation Padang Assist, seeing the two great arms of Australian Defence Force personnel contribution: military, defence and national security; and humanitarian intervention and disaster assistance. Members would have seen from the ramp ceremony in Tarin Kowt over the weekend, telecast into Australia, the sorrow in the eyes of his mates but the great pride in which he was held—the respect and the regard.

As the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have said, this has of course occurred in the course of our contribution to Afghanistan. Richard's family should understand that he died pursuing our nation's national interest and that he died pursuing Australia's contribution to the international community's efforts to stare down international terrorism. Our thoughts, our prayers and our thanks are with them at this point.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (2.10 pm)—I rise to join the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Minister for Defence here in this great hall of democracy to honour the fallen Corporal Richard Atkinson—22 years old, short-haired, fit, strong, healthy, the world seemingly at his feet—who under normal circumstances would be considered a young man, yet to us here is a warrior old beyond his years—old enough to serve his country; old enough to die for it.

The English poet and Great War veteran Siegfried Sassoon said:

Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

It is profoundly sad that Corporal Atkinson will never realise his dream of marrying his fiancée, Dannielle, or spending another holiday with his parents, Ross and Kate, his brother, James, and his sister-in-law, Sumah. To them and his wider family and friends, we offer our most sincere condolences.

Corporal Atkinson epitomised all that is great about the volunteer Australian soldier. He was tragically killed in action because he would not ask his men to do anything that he himself would not do. Selfless, spirited and professional to the very end, he has set an enduring example, leading from the front, caring for his mates and staring down adversity with grit and determination.

This is a selfless act that we cannot forget. He fell on a battlefield that is the front line in the fight for our very way of life. He fell fighting for freedom for the Afghani people and freedom for all Australians that

dream of a life where the insidiously cowardly act of terrorism is a mere byword. He and his family have paid a high and exacting price for the freedom we enjoy.

For 110 years, Australia's military have watched zealously over our national freedoms. They have stood in the watchtowers of our national conscience and have borne the brunt of our national demands. Over 100,000 Australians have fallen, sealing this commitment with their blood, and Corporal Atkinson has now joined their hallowed ranks, his name added to those of 21 other Australian soldiers tragically killed in action in Afghanistan.

Corporal Atkinson never asked for anything in return for his service except our friendship and our understanding. It is incumbent upon us to remember him always, for he has richly earned our respect and enduring admiration. He knew service above self and demonstrated so ably that there is no greater love than this: to lay down your life for your friends. If the price of freedom is eternal vigilance then let us steel ourselves once again for the fight ahead; let us recommit anew to care for our fighting men and women and those left behind; and let us honour Corporal Atkinson's sacrifice. He is the epitome of the modern-day Anzac, and he has truly made us proud.

The SPEAKER—As a mark of respect, I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

Debate (on motion by **Mr Albanese**) adjourned.

MAIN COMMITTEE

Condolence: Corporal Richard Edward Atkinson Reference

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (2.14 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the following order of the day be referred to the Main Committee for debate: Death of Corporal Richard Edward Atkinson—Copy of the condolence motion moved by the Prime Minister—Motion to take note of the Paper: Resumption of Debate.

Question agreed to.

CORPORAL BENJAMIN ROBERTS-SMITH, VC, MG

Ms GILLARD (Lalor—Prime Minister) (2.15 pm)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence, whilst we reflect on the very great sacrifices and burdens that are borne by the men and women of the Australian Defence Force it does seem an appropriate time to also celebrate a moment of very great courage and to celebrate particularly the courage shown by Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, who on 23 January was awarded the Victoria Cross in recognition of extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry. In receiving that award, the highest award our nation can give, he becomes the 98th Australian to ever receive it, the third

still living, and the first from Western Australia since 1945.

Ben Roberts-Smith has been called a hero, a legend and a role model, and he is all of these things. But he is also a human being, a husband and a father who grew up in Perth, went to school and played sport just like every other Aussie kid. But when he joined the Army 15 years ago he took on new risks and new responsibilities; risks and responsibilities that most of us will never comprehend. The greatest of these responsibilities and the core of the Anzac story is to look after your mates. On that day in June last year when our Australian forces came under insurgent attack, Ben did what he needed to do to bring his comrades safely home. As he would say later on—and put so simply—‘You don’t let your mates down.’ He did not.

I have had the opportunity now to talk to Ben on three occasions and on each of them I have been struck by his unassuming nature. He is a humble man who wants nothing more than to return to his unit and to return to his mates. Ben, who was quickly dubbed by the newspapers ‘Big Ben’—you have got to love a headline like that—is a man of very big stature, but very big in character as well. If you have seen him, as I have, with his wife, Emma, and their baby twin girls, Eve and Elizabeth, you are struck by his gentleness and the depths of his love. If you have met his remarkable family—father, Len, mother, Susan, and his brother Sam, who is an opera singer—you are struck by their close bonds and abundance of different talents. Ben is a remarkable Australian from a remarkable family.

Ben’s award and the award to Mark Donaldson two years ago show that the VC tradition lives on in a new generation, a generation as brave and as selfless as those which have gone before. I honour Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, and gratefully commend his valour to this House and to this nation.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the Opposition) (2.18 pm)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence, I am very pleased to rise and echo the words of the Prime Minister. What we have just witnessed in the House today shows that the war in Afghanistan is not without its successes while it has its fair share of tragedy.

The Victoria Cross is the highest and most respected military award that can be given by our country. The highlight of the ceremony of conferral of the Victoria Cross on Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith was the salute that he took from the Chief of the Defence Force. Metaphorically today we all salute him, as every Australian metaphorically salutes him for the rest of his life.

The Victoria Cross is not so much a celebration of martial prowess as of selflessness in time of war. Every Victoria Cross winner has put his life on the line for his mates. Ben Roberts-Smith risked his life to relieve his comrades who were under withering machine-gun fire

at the time, just as a couple of years earlier Trooper Mark Donaldson risked his life to rescue an Afghan interpreter who otherwise would certainly have been killed. These remarkable men are great heroes, but they are human beings too. We cannot all be soldiers but we can all be our best selves. May Ben Roberts-Smith’s example and that of his mates inspire every Australian to do more for other people.

MAIN COMMITTEE

Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith VC, MG

Reference

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (2.20 pm)—by leave—I move:

That further statements by indulgence in relation to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith VC, MG be referred to the Main Committee.

Question agreed to.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.20 pm)—I inform the House that we have in the gallery today Lord Lasike, Speaker of the Tongan Legislative Assembly. He is accompanied by his Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the House would wish me to give them both a warm welcome and wish them every success in the reform of the Tongan parliamentary democracy after the recent elections.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

CONDOLENCES

Australian Natural Disaster Victims

Ms GILLARD (Lalor—Prime Minister) (2.21 pm)—I move:

That the House:

- (1) acknowledges with great sadness the devastation occasioned by this summer’s natural disasters, including unprecedented floods, Cyclone Yasi and bushfires;
- (2) extends its deepest sympathies to the families of those who have lost loved ones;
- (3) records its profound regret at the impact of this summer’s natural disasters on the economic and social well-being of affected communities;
- (4) records its admiration for the courage shown by so many in the face of these disasters;
- (5) acknowledges the enormous efforts of defence personnel, emergency workers, and so many volunteers in responding to these disasters; and
- (6) pledges the full support of the Australian parliament and community to assist affected areas to recover and rebuild.

Yesterday we commemorated the two-year anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires which took 173 lives. Around Victoria, communities have been coming together to remember the dead and share the stories of that day of hell and the journey of rebuilding since. I shared such a moment of coming together on Sunday and had the opportunity to talk to a number of survi-

ticular, his fiancée, Dannielle, who he was planning to have a family with; his parents, Ross and Kate, who live in Launceston; and his brother, James, and sister-in-law, Sumah. My heart also goes out to the Grammar community at this time, because only last week they were advised of the death of James Poland, who died in a bushwalking accident in New Zealand. We had a wonderful thanksgiving service for his life last week with the whole school community. The students are now returning to the school at Grammar—this week in fact; grades 11 and 12 yesterday and the rest of the school community tomorrow. It will be a very heavy burden for them to bear. But it will be good for them to know that we stand with them shoulder to shoulder in terms of their condolences and support for Corporal Richard Atkinson's family and the friends that he knew so well at Grammar during his school days in Launceston. I pay tribute to him and give honour to his courage, bravery and sacrifice. He is the 22nd soldier to have died in Afghanistan.

I note in particular the comments of the principal, Stephen Norris, about him being a leader at Grammar. It has been noted that he was the head of Wilkinson House. Mr Norris also noted that he was highly respected, reliable, kind, considerate and well mannered and showed initiative. I know that the school community will be mourning his loss with his family. Together with other senators and the entire Senate, I pay my respects and give him honour.

Question agreed to, honourable senators standing in their places.

CORPORAL BENJAMIN ROBERTS-SMITH, VC, MG

Senator CONROY (Victoria—Acting Leader of the Government in the Senate) (1.32 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the Senate records the occasion of national significance in the awarding of the Victoria Cross to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, VC, MG on 23 January 2011.

The Victoria Cross for Australia is awarded to those who 'in the presence of the enemy display the most conspicuous gallantry; a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice; or extreme devotion to duty'. On Sunday 23 January 2011 the Governor-General, Her Excellency Quentin Bryce, invested Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, of the Special Air Service Regiment, with the Victoria Cross at Campbell Barracks in Western Australia.

Corporal Roberts-Smith's citation award reads:

For the most conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril as Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

On 11 June 2010, Corporal Roberts-Smith demonstrated extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very de-

termined and aggressive enemy. With total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents. With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his team mates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy. Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine gun positions, killing both machine gun teams. His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force.

Corporal Roberts-Smith enlisted in the Australian Regular Army in 1996 and completed the Australian Special Air Service Regiment selection course in 2003. As a member of the regiment, he has been deployed on Operations Valiant, Slate, Slipper, Catalyst and Slipper II. In 2006, Corporal Roberts-Smith was awarded the Medal for Gallantry for his actions in Afghanistan.

The VC for Australia was established in 1991 and has been awarded on only one previous occasion—to then Trooper Mark Donaldson in January 2009. Corporal Roberts-Smith is the 98th Australian VC recipient and joins Corporal Donaldson VC and Warrant Officer Class II Keith Payne VC OAM as the only living Australian recipients of the VC. This is august company indeed.

Earlier today the Senate mourned the loss of Corporal Richard Atkinson, the 22nd member of the Australian Defence Force to lose their life in Afghanistan in service to their nation. The danger that our forces confront every day in Afghanistan cannot be underestimated. Through his actions, Corporal Roberts-Smith has brought great honour upon himself, his family, the Australian Defence Force and our nation. On behalf of the government, I extend to him warm congratulations and the thanks of a grateful nation for his continuing service.

Senator ABETZ (Tasmania—Leader of the Opposition in the Senate) (1.36 pm)—Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith received his Victoria Cross for:

... the most conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril as Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation SLIPPER.

In an early morning raid on a Taliban stronghold near the village of Tizak in Afghanistan, Corporal Roberts-Smith and two other special forces soldiers were lying

in a horribly exposed position just 20 metres in front of an insurgent machine-gun post. According to one report, he was part of a force of 25 up against 100 Taliban. From the cover of a small pile of rubble, Corporal Roberts-Smith saw gunfire tearing up the ground around his friends and realised that they would soon be killed. He stormed the machine gun, drawing fire away from his comrades, silencing it at point blank range. He then moved on to silence another machine gun and then moved on in company to silence a third.

SAS Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith has the words 'I will not fail my brothers' tattooed across his chest. To him, it is not just a slogan; to him, it is a commitment. His words on receiving our highest military honour tell us a lot about this man:

I saw my mates getting ripped up, so I decided to go forward. I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing. I thought I'd have a crack. I'm not going to let my mates down. It just got to a point where we had to stop the fire. Someone just had to move forward, and I think that if it wasn't me it would have been someone else. That's what it's about: to complete the mission, get the job done.

Corporal Roberts-Smith is a giant of a man and soldier, but he is also extraordinarily self-effacing. He also said:

I saw a lot of brave men do a lot of brave things that day. I am wearing it—

the VC—

for my unit.

He also said:

Every single person there showed gallantry.

Laconically, RS, as he is known, described this action as 'just a busy day'. More than saving the lives of his comrades, Corporal Roberts-Smith's conspicuous gallantry in perilous circumstances was instrumental to the success of the troops against a numerically superior force. This decisive engagement caused the Taliban to retreat from the Shah Wali Kot District.

His obvious heroism aside, Corporal Roberts-Smith is dedicated to his mission in Afghanistan:

I want my children to be able to live as everyone does now without the fear of getting on a bus and having it blow up.

... ..

I will definitely deploy again ... Being a father ... I think about my children every second of the day and that is what I do it for.

I do what I do because I believe in the country that we live in. I believe that we are making a difference and stemming the flow of terrorism.

I am just very proud to do my job I do so that my kids will grow up and know that.

The coalition pays tribute to this soldier's sense of purpose. We stand in awe of his selflessness. It should be noted that his VC follows a Medal for Gallantry that Corporal Roberts-Smith received in 2006. The account

of his gallantry near Chora Pass on that occasion—disregarding his own personal safety and maintaining an exposed sniper position under sustained fire, with a risk of being surrounded by the anticoalition militia—is truly inspiring. At one point, while alone in an exposed position, he used his sniper rifle to stop the advance of 16 insurgents and held his position while under fire from other militia until air support arrived.

Our country and his comrades owe a great debt to Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith. He is truly a worthy recipient of the Victoria Cross. He is a great role model for all Australians. We in the coalition salute him and congratulate him.

Senator JOYCE (Queensland—Leader of the Nationals in the Senate) (1.41 pm)—I rise to concur with the remarks of Senator Conroy and Senator Abetz about Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, who now forever more will have the postnominal VC. He is a person of absolutely exceptional character. The thought of approaching one machine gun is beyond what most people would ever contemplate, but the thought of approaching three is absolutely incredible. This person is also not a small target. Corporal Roberts-Smith is two metres tall. I do not know what that is in the old measurements, but I think it is about six foot seven or six foot eight. The other thing about Corporal Roberts-Smith is that this was not the first time he has done this. He has already received a citation for gallantry. So this person is of exceptional character. To emphasise what the Victoria Cross means, I note that during the Second World War only 20 were awarded. During the First World War, only 64 Victoria Crosses were awarded. In Australia at this point in time, Trooper—now Corporal—Mark Donaldson, Keith Payne and Corporal Roberts-Smith are the three recipients that we have. So it is not something that is ubiquitous; this represents the absolute pinnacle of gallantry.

It is an interesting day today, in that we are talking about three servicemen. We have offered condolences and basically celebrated the life of former Flight Lieutenant Maunsell, who has died at 88 years old, and offered condolences on the tragic passing of Corporal Atkinson. Now we come to this presentation for gallantry for Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith. It should be noted that this is the ultimate statement of someone who is willing to lay down their life for their friends. Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith's friends—his brothers, as he has noted—were in a position where they were in dire requirement of being relieved of the fire they were under. Corporal Roberts-Smith at that point made a movement forwards that would most likely mean that he would be dead. He did it not because he was suicidal; he did it to put himself in a position which would give the people serving in his section the capacity to be relieved. The action was not done in a sense of insanity; it was done with a full calculation

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of what the likely consequences would be to him. It was not done by a person who was intoxicated or lacking their faculties; it was done by a person who was completely cerebral and knew exactly what they were about to do. That action, that exhibition of the highest form of character, of the highest form of bravery, recommends Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith as a human being of immense worth. His action is part of a catalogue of similar actions by this person, so it was not a one-off; it was the kind of thing for which he had already received a citation and, in other instances, been noted in dispatches.

We in this chamber commend his character and we have the greatest sense of gratitude for Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, VC, MG. We hope and pray that he remains safe for the remainder of his time in service.

Senator FIELDING (Victoria—Leader of the Family First Party) (1.45 pm)—I join with my fellow senators to congratulate Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith on being awarded the Victoria Cross. It is the highest honour that can be awarded to a soldier, and Corporal Roberts-Smith is thoroughly deserving of it. The courage he displayed on 11 June 2010 as he put his life under threat in order to draw fire away from his patrol is unquestionable. His actions saved the lives of his fellow soldiers and were an act of complete selflessness. He is an inspiration to all Australians and embodies the true meaning of the word 'hero'. On behalf of Family First I congratulate Corporal Roberts-Smith on his great bravery and his VC award.

Senator JOHNSTON (Western Australia) (1.46 pm)—I rise to congratulate my fellow Western Australian Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith on his investiture of the Victoria Cross for conspicuous gallantry and bravery in Afghanistan. In so doing I of course want to support the remarks of all senators so far, but particularly those of my leader, Senator Abetz, and of Senator Conroy, representing the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Corporal Roberts-Smith, like all of his fellow soldiers, particularly those down at Swanbourne, would not invite accolades and awards and would just believe he was simply part of a team engaged in a difficult and challenging mission. However, as a nation we would be remiss not to recognise his incredible courage with the highest decoration a soldier in our Australian Defence Force can receive. I know his family is extremely proud of him. His soldiers and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice would look down on him and smile and say, 'That is the way to deal with this enemy.'

Corporal Roberts-Smith has been totally supported in his ADF career by his wife, Emma, and his twin daughters, Elizabeth and Emma. In addition, he is the proud son of a highly acclaimed Western Australian,

Supreme Court Justice Len Roberts-Smith, a revered jurist in Western Australia and, may I say, a former Judge Advocate General of the Australian Defence Force and, until recently, the head of the Western Australian Corruption and Crime Commission. It is a very proud family heritage.

His VC citation states—we have heard something of it already but I do wish to repeat it:

Immediately upon the helicopter insertion, the troop was engaged by machine gun and rocket propelled grenade fire from multiple, dominating [Taliban] positions. Two soldiers were wounded in action and the troop was pinned down by fire from three machine guns in an elevated fortified position to the south of the village. Under the cover of close air support, suppressive small arms and machine gun fire, Corporal Roberts-Smith and his patrol manoeuvred to within 70 metres of the enemy position in order to neutralise the enemy machine gun positions and regain the initiative.

Corporal Roberts-Smith and his patrol members fought towards the enemy position until, at a range of 40 metres, the weight of fire prevented further movement forward. At this point, he identified the opportunity to exploit some cover provided by a small structure.

As he approached the structure, Corporal Roberts-Smith identified an insurgent grenadier in the throes of engaging his patrol. Corporal Roberts-Smith instinctively engaged the insurgent at point-blank range resulting in the death of the insurgent. With the members of his patrol still pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he exposed his own position—

at great personal risk—

—in order to draw fire away from his patrol, which enabled them to bring fire to bear against the enemy. His actions enabled his Patrol Commander to throw a grenade and silence one of the machine guns. Seizing the advantage, and demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry, Corporal Roberts-Smith, with a total disregard for his own safety, stormed the enemy position killing the two remaining machine gunners.

... ..

This decisive engagement subsequently caused the remainder of the Taliban in Shah Wali Kot District to retreat from the area.

Corporal Roberts-Smith's most conspicuous gallantry in a circumstance of extreme peril was instrumental to the seizure of the initiative and the success of the troop against a numerically superior enemy force.

The citation concludes by saying:

His valour was an inspiration to the soldiers with whom he fought alongside and is in keeping with the finest traditions of the Australian Army and the Australian Defence Force.

I certainly endorse that comment.

As a fellow Western Australian I am particularly proud of the fact that Corporal Roberts-Smith is only the 14th recipient of the Victoria Cross from my home state of Western Australia and just the 98th to be invested in Australia. I sincerely congratulate him. All of

us from Western Australia are very proud of him. We wish him every success in the future.

Senator BACK (Western Australia) (1.50 pm)—I rise also to endorse the comments made by Senator Conroy, Senator Abetz and others. I speak with pride about a Western Australian VC winner, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, VC, MG. As Senator Johnston said, he is the 14th person from our state to win the VC, the first being Lieutenant Fred Bell, in 1901 during the Boer War, and the second being Lieutenant Hugo Throssell, in 1915, who remains the only light horseman to have won a Victoria Cross.

In joining in my congratulations I will not repeat the comments made by others, except to refer to Senator Joyce's comments about Ben Roberts-Smith and his size. He is an enormous man, and, in seeing the most wonderful photograph of him with his two young twin daughters, one on each arm, on the day that he received his citation, I could not help but be concerned for any young fellows in 15 or 16 year's time who might actually have some interest in those daughters, because not only the size of the potential father-in-law but his track record would cause them to think more than once.

If I may, I just want to quote from Ben Roberts-Smith himself because I think this is the significance and the depth of the man. He was asked to describe in exact detail the incident for which he had been recognised and he simply likened the situation to a football match with his mates. 'I saw my mates getting ripped up and just decided to move forward because I was not going to sit there and do nothing,' he said. 'I thought I'd have a crack. I didn't want to let my mates down. It was certainly an amazing squadron effort and a good result. We are always hearing these stories about ambushes and losing good Australians but we won and we hurt the insurgency.' He said again, 'It's just like being on a football team. You don't let your mates down. You go as hard as you can until the game is won.'

I will conclude with the reaffirmation of those comments. He is an old boy of Hale School, one of the colleges in Perth, and those of us who were interested and represented other schools at that time were always very concerned when the First XV was playing Hale, because he played in the second row and they did not need anybody else in their scrum. He was invited last week to Hale School to present the prefects awards to the prefects for this year and he reiterated this theme. He urged the next generation of students to strive for the pursuit of excellence, integrity and the team. He told the prefects, 'We are representatives of Australia in all we do and must represent these values.' 'Remember,' he said, 'it is not a single act nor the grand final that you win and lose nor the exam that you pass or fail and not the Victoria Cross that defines you. It is who you are all the time that matters. You need to give

100 per cent always, however daunting it may seem and, to coin a phrase, have a crack at it, fellas.'

I join with my colleagues in congratulating Ben Roberts-Smith, his wife, their children and the family. As Senator Johnston has said, it is a very august family in Western Australia. All Australians are rightfully proud of this man's contribution and the award that he has been offered.

Senator BOB BROWN (Tasmania—Leader of the Australian Greens) (1.54 pm)—I join with all fellow senators in congratulating SAS Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril in Afghanistan. I preface further comments by saying that war is extraordinarily horrific for those who are faced with enemy fire and the consequences of that. It is brutish, it is nasty and it is deadly. The memories of circumstances like those that this very brave corporal have been through do not leave one this side of the grave. I hope he will remember that he was in these circumstances at the behest of this great country and he served this great country in that role in an extraordinary way, which has led to him receiving the Victoria Cross.

I will not reiterate the circumstances of that, as good senators have done that before me, but it is notable that this special man not only was prepared to get in the line of fire to defend his Australian comrades but is prepared to remove himself from the spotlight to honour those comrades who will not come back from Afghanistan. I quote:

Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith ... urged Australians to remember the digger 'heroes' who did not come back alive from Afghanistan.

'These are the guys who put their hands up willingly and they didn't come back,' he said.

'They are our mates and their families live with that every day.

'So I will really urge the public to remember they are the heroes, they are the ones who gave the ultimate sacrifice.'

They are the words of a very special Australian.

Question agreed to.

Sitting suspended from 1.57 pm to 2 pm

CONDOLENCES

Australian Natural Disasters

Senator CONROY (Victoria—Acting Leader of the Government in the Senate) (2.00 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the Senate:

- (a) acknowledges with great sadness the devastation occasioned by this summer's natural disasters including unprecedented floods, Cyclone Yasi and bushfires;
- (b) extends its deepest sympathies to the families of those who have lost loved ones;

The Australian

A higher rate of recognising bravery

- Paul Cleary
- From: The Australian
- February 05, 2011 12:00AM

Recommend

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MORE high honours for gallantry have been awarded for service in Afghanistan on a per capita basis than in any other conflict involving Australian personnel, raising the issue of possible politicisation of awards.

The two Victoria Crosses awarded to SAS men represent a much higher rate of recognition of bravery than in the Vietnam war and in World War II.

Comparing the rate of military honours to the numbers who served is a very crude measure, but the results are striking.

A surprisingly large number of defence personnel have served in this theatre. The Defence Department puts the figure at 21,000, which includes contractors, individuals who have been deployed two or even three times, and personnel who may not have even been to Afghanistan. But even this apparently inflated figure works out at one VC for every 10,500 who have served.

In the Vietnam war, four VCs were awarded out of 60,000 who served, or one for every 15,000.

And in World War II, only 20 Australian soldiers received the VC out of the 1.2 million people who served, which is one for every 60,000 men and women who served. Similar figures emerge for World War I.

Comparing VCs awarded to numbers of casualties -- a measure of reward versus sacrifice -- produces an ever higher incidence of awarding this honour for service in Afghanistan. Similar trends are likely for other high honours.

Three factors seem to best explain this trend.

First, in previous conflicts, recommendations for bravery were routinely downgraded by the military bureaucrats. In my research for a World War II history, I found numerous records in the archives of the War Memorial that showed recommendations had been downgraded. A thoroughly deserved Military Medal or Military Cross, a third-level award, was often turned into a generic Mentioned-in-Dispatches (MID). Many acts of bravery and extraordinary service were unrecognised in those desperate times.

Second, the type of deployment over the past decade has involved a much higher proportion of special forces, which means our troops have been doing relatively more heavy hitting than in conflicts involving general infantry.

Under the so-called imperial system that operated before 1991, former officers say the rules governing awarding of honours were too restrictive, though some fear that some medals are now being handed too freely.

In 1991, Australia abandoned the imperial honours system developed by Britain and introduced a unique set of high honours for gallantry and distinguished service. Under these changes, the Victoria Cross became the Victoria Cross for Australia, but it still requires approval of the sovereign. Other awards are approved by the defence minister and the governor-general.

The names of former imperial awards were revamped considerably. The VC is now followed by the Star of Gallantry, the Medal for Gallantry, the Commendation for Gallantry, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal and the Commendation for Distinguished Service. These awards all require proof that soldiers displayed gallantry under fire, but another set of medals was developed for service personnel not serving in war-like situations. While the names of these awards sound impressive, such as the Conspicuous Service Cross and Medal, a senior officer said many personnel were now being awarded medals for simply doing their desk jobs.

A retired senior officer says it is possible for someone deployed to East Timor to have received Australian medals, UN medals and Timorese medals -- for a campaign in which no Australian was killed in combat. The officer says many military decorations are awarded to personnel who have carried out only administrative roles.

A third factor is the rise of so-called spin doctors in government, which might explain why politicians are more prone to using medals to win public support as a means of overcoming their poor ability to sell a war that involves fighting terrorism.

Some defence personnel lament the fact politicians have shown little enthusiasm for explaining the need for Australia's deployment to Afghanistan. It wasn't until last year, after nine years of operations, that federal politicians debated the deployment in parliament.

Our politicians' fondness for awarding medals was confirmed recently when Prime Minister Julia Gillard said she had asked the Queen to establish a new medal for people who perform extraordinary acts or services during a national emergency. The new medal would cover the Queensland floods and be backdated to include the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

As the retired officer explained, the existing honours system includes bravery awards and would more than cover these events. He described this as "medal proliferation", and feared that it would mean more bureaucracy and would debase the value of existing medals.

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THE AUSTRALIAN

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February 3, 2011

'I WAS DOING MY JOB'

Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith awarded the Victoria Cross

Page 3

SPECIAL FEATURE
 What really happened in the village of Tizak
 Centrepiece

INSIDE: Flood emergency liftout

Black Hawk rescue

OF QUEENSLAND FLOOD ASSIST

Humbling: Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith, VC, listens as senior officers and politicians pay tribute to his actions during the Shah Wali Kot offensive in Afghanistan in June last year. Photo by Cpl Chris Moore

Pte Adam Skinner

Army February 3, 2011

NEWS 3

Recognised for heroism

By Sgt Andrew Hetherington

"MY HEAD'S still spinning. It feels extremely humbling and makes me feel extremely proud to be a part of the unit, but more so the squadron for what we achieved on the day and being a part of something where we took the fight to the Taliban and we won. The boys did some amazing things."

This was the reaction from Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith after he was awarded the second Victoria Cross for Australia and became Australia's most decorated serving soldier.

He said he was speechless after being informed a week before Christmas that he would receive the award.

"I told my family and wife Emma - what do you do? We talked about it and were blown away."

"After the initial shock wore off, Emma told me not to do it again, but she was over the moon."

He said he never thought he would be awarded a VC.

"You read all the other winners' stories and think that's awesome," he said.

"It's still surreal. I was just like everyone else in Afghanistan; I was doing my job - I know it's a cliché but it's true. You always go over there and fight as hard you can and never go over there half-hearted."

Governor-General Quentin Bryce presented him with his award in front of more than 500 guests at his unit's home at Campbell Barracks in Perth on January 23.

One of Cpl Roberts-Smith's mates

who shared a beer with him at the after-ceremony function was fellow VC recipient Cpl Mark Donaldson.

"I was in the same troop as 'RS' when I joined the regiment and I used to play rugby with him," Cpl Donaldson said.

"For me to be told there was another VC, then to be told it was for someone from the regiment and it was someone you're actually good mates with, what more could I ask for? It's fantastic."

Cpl Donaldson said his mate was a naturally talented soldier.

"He does everything well across the board. He is naturally gifted at being able to shoot," Cpl Donaldson said. "To do his job properly as a trooper, then to step up to a corporal's position, take command and inspire leadership, came to him naturally."

He said his mate now had a lot to look forward to after becoming one of only three surviving Australian VC recipients.

"He'll get to shake a lot of hands and sign a lot of signatures and I think he'll enjoy it."

Sgt P - who was Cpl Roberts-Smith's patrol commander during the action on June 11 last year and who received a Star of Gallantry on Australia Day for his role in the battle - was also there to congratulate him.

"Whatever job he takes on he does it to the best of his ability," Sgt P said.

"He's good at it, he's an out and out good soldier and obviously extremely brave."

Cpl Roberts-Smith said he knew his life would change after receiving the award.

"Having been mates with Mark for



Hard earned: Australia's three living VC recipients at the medal presentation ceremony at Campbell Barracks in Perth. Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith is flanked by Cpl Mark Donaldson and Keith Payne. Photo by Cpl Chris Moore

quite some time, I've had a bit of an insight into what it would be like and I think I knew what I was getting into," he said.

"The bottom line is life's going to

change drastically, particularly with the media.

"The reality of it is the world will turn and I'll come back to work and there will be things I'll have to do on

the side, but my main focus, as always will be to come back to work and run my patrol and get prepared to go back to Afghanistan."

Full account of the action - Pages 18-19



History of valour

THE Victoria Cross was created by Queen Victoria in 1856 and made retrospective to 1854 to cover the Crimean War.

Until the Victoria Cross for Australia was created in 1991, Australians were eligible for the Victoria Cross and other awards under the Imperial system of honours.

The Imperial Victoria Cross has been awarded to 96 Australians.

Ninety-one received the Victoria Cross while serving with Australian forces and five

Australians received the award while serving with South African and British units.

Australians received the Imperial Victoria Cross in the following conflicts:

- 6 in the Boer War, 1899-1902
- 64 in World War I, 1914-1918
- 2 in North Russia, 1919
- 20 in World War II, 1939-1945
- 4 in Vietnam, 1962-1972

The two recipients of the Victoria Cross for Australia - Cpl Donaldson and Roberts-Smith, both SASR - received the award for their actions in Afghanistan.

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Are you being deployed during April/May/June? The annual Rent Allowance review will commence in April 2011.

If you are currently in receipt of Rent Allowance, you may be included in this year's review.

You will need to complete a statement with details of your rental situation and provide a current rent receipt or tenant payment history.

It is important that you respond to this review as it establishes if there have been any changes to your domestic circumstances that could affect your Rent Allowance.

Failure to respond by the due date may cause your Rent Allowance to be stopped.

If you are being deployed and receive Rent Allowance, you should contact your regional DHA office on 139 DHA (139 342).

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In action: Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith. Roberts-Smith was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions during a day-long battle in the Shah Wali Kot offensive.

EXTREME PERIL

Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith earned the Victoria Cross for his actions during a few moments of a day-long battle. He tells **Sgt Andrew Hetherington** how he came to be our most decorated serving soldier.

THE mission for which Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith was awarded the Victoria Cross took place during the Shah Wali Kot offensive.

On June 11 last year, he was part of a Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) troop that conducted a helicopter assault into the village of Tizik, north of Kandahar. Their aim was to capture or kill a senior Taliban commander.

Cpl Roberts-Smith's role in the mission was patrol 21C and leading his primary patrol sniper.

"The ground assault had gone in on helos and after landing immediately came under heavy rocket-propelled grenade and machine gun fire from multiple positions," he said.

"Their airframes took rounds too, and we continued to circle the area [in the helicopter] and at that point our job was to provide sniper cover for the ground assault force."

The patrol landed and engaged insurgents who were firing on their troops.

Shortly after, two members of the troop needed to be taken out of the area for medical treatment.

"We established a landing zone so the wounded could be airlifted out. Up to this point it was two hours into the mission," he said.

It took the Black Hawk, medium aircraft three runs to land and remove the casualties because it was also getting hit by machine gun fire.

"Once we got them out our patrol moved up with the troop position," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"A decision was made by the ground force commander we would close with the enemy."

"This was done because we couldn't sustain casualties who was in the green belt, also because we were ourselves on being surgical and didn't know if there were civilians there or not."

"We also knew the enemy was in there and we had to go after the target we came for."

As the troop began to cross a dry creek bed, the lead patrol was hit with what they thought was one PKM gun. They were pinned down on either side of the creek bed.

"We were in like a mouth of a valley and we tried to push one patrol higher than us to get visibility of the target, but they couldn't see anything as there was thick vegetation consisting of orchards and mulberry bushes," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"We were lower than the enemy and after about 20 minutes of trying to get the edge out of the creek line and out of the firing, my patrol commander decided he'd had enough and told the ground force commander he was going to take us on and go by to neutralise the machine gun position."

He and his mates separated from the main body of the troop, got into extended line and advanced to certain.

There were random enemy running in the trees and the position itself was an elevated courtyard in front of a building surrounded by orchards," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"As we approached we got hit on an oblique angle on our left flank."

"It meant three of us had to swing onto the position to fully assault the three guns front-on and the other three of us were trying to manoeuvre on our right flank to get into a flanking position."

"As they did that they were engaged by another group of enemy while we were moving forward and I believe they were trying to engage the rear of the target we were going for."

Cpl Roberts-Smith was on the left flank with two of his patrol mates.

"We began to fire and move onto the three-gun position, covering each other," he said.

"We got to within 40m of the position and the rate of fire became ridiculous."

"They had now moved forward, focusing all their

fire on us and we found it really hard to see them as they were elevated, but they could see us."

The three men started to crawl forward as they couldn't bound forward anymore.

"The rounds were ripping over our heads and it got to the point where we stopped at the 20m mark and I held up a grenade to one of the boys, Tpr J, and to me," he said.

"He knew what I was going to do, so he jumped up in front of the three other guys and engaged a clip into the position and this enabled me to throw the grenade."

Cpl Roberts-Smith's grenade didn't have any impact, but the patrol commander came up to their position and threw an additional grenade.

"We believed his grenade took out one of the guns," he said.

"They had two guns now and they started to move around, with one orientated onto us with a couple of guys with AKs 20m away and another guy on a gun concentrating his main effort firing on the creek line to try to stop our guys from coming across."

The fire on our position didn't stop and Tpr J, who

had a stoppage after covering us while we had thrown our grenades, was now taking fire."

Another one of the patrol's troopers was also taking too much accurate fire he had his face in the dirt and couldn't fight back.

"The was getting ambushed and the other three on our right were in their own light 30-40m from us on a down-hill angle," he said.

"I could then see one of the guns traversing across our narrow frontage of fire."

At this decisive and frustrating moment Cpl Roberts-Smith made up his mind to do something about the two gun positions.

"It got to the point where it was like 'F--- this, I'm not going to sit here while one of the boys gets hit,'" he said.

"I thought I'd just have a crack."

The patrol commander, Sgt P, described what he saw when Cpl Roberts-Smith moved forward.

"He saw the opportunity and he ran forward on his own after I'd thrown my grenade," Sgt P said.

"He got to the wall and took out the two guns with his M4."

"I've been in the Special Forces a long time and it's the first time I've ever seen something like that. Fire running at two guns while they were still firing was amazing to watch."

Sgt P had his concerns about Cpl Roberts-Smith's safety during the charge.

"When he went forward I honestly thought he would be hit," he said. "If he didn't make it to the wall, he was done. Before he went forward I thought percentages of him surviving were zero, but when he got to the wall I knew he was all over it."

Making it to the wall was only part of the problem for Cpl Roberts-Smith, who then had to take on several insurgents to clear the position.

"As I got up to move forward I saw two guys run into the house and I then ran straight up to the gap in the wall and got about 3m from the first gun, which was firing at us."

"I could clearly see his face and there was the realisation from us both when we saw each other – and in the end it was me being the luckier out of the two of us. I stopped and engaged him."

About 6-10m away from the first PKM was the other person, who was holding up the troop on the creek outside.

"I saw him and then engaged him," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"It was like standing in someone's backyard with a flat, mud-brick floor maybe 12m long by 16m wide."

"By the time I'd engaged the second guy the two others in my patrol had moved forward to where I was."

At this stage he didn't know where the rest of the patrol was and didn't want to lose the initiative over the enemy.

"We knew there were other Taliban in the building and we quickly discussed what each of us was going to do, so I moved to the door of the house and the other two followed," he said.

"My mate entered the door and he saw an insurgent in the corner of the inside of the house but he had a stoppage."

"He peeked back out and I went in and engaged the first guy I saw, he went down and then I had a stoppage."

"I continued down the room and there was another insurgent and another one beside him, I got him and my mate came in behind me and engaged the second guy."

"We moved through the position and mopped up the last remaining insurgents."

So that one position they had killed about 16 insurgents.

After Cpl Roberts-Smith silenced the two guns and he and his mates cleared the house, they and the rest of the troop continued to fight for more than six hours in the area.

This included three hours of heavy fighting and a further three of sporadic contact.

"It's important to note once we got through that position it achieved the breakthrough we needed," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"The next patrol which pushed up on our flank broke through the sand compound in a different scenario."

"All day for most of the patrol it went from one thing to another."

"All day in our earpieces we could hear the numbers of KIA coming in," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"Our fire support team was inserted onto the side of a mountain to provide cover for us. As soon as they hit the deck they came under fire immediately and were fighting for their lives on the mountain by themselves, like we were in the valley."

"No matter what you were doing no one missed out, everyone was in their own little battle."

Even the helicopter crews found themselves constantly under fire.

"Our pilot took multiple machine gun hits through his cockpit into the belly of the aircraft, we had RPVs flying underneath the wheels while we were sitting with our legs outside the aircraft," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"In the end we gathered all the enemy weapons, took them back with us and we were extracted after midnight on June 12."

Initially, the Special Forces troop was told there would be about 10 insurgents in the locality, but it turned out to be about 100.

"We were outnumbered four to one and we ended up killing 110 or a lot of wounded Taliban and found out that as we arrived, senior Taliban commanders were having a meeting."

Cpl Roberts-Smith didn't have time to contemplate if he had put in a performance that would result in a VC.

"Commander JTF 613 Maj-Gen John Castwell had travelled to Tarin Kot and congratulated us on our mission."

Thirty minutes later we went to bed, got up the next day and went on another mission that night. That's just how it was.

"I've never been in Afghanistan and not been in a gun fight. This is how we operate over there – we're an offensive unit."

Cpl Roberts-Smith said the Shah Wali Kot mission was a landmark win for the ADF.

"What was wrapping things up on us was the loss of the 2CER engineers Sps Smith and Meredith to IIR's earlier in the month," he said.

"That affected the troop a lot."

Two medals for bravery

AFTER receiving the Victoria Cross Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith became the most highly decorated current serving Australian soldier.

He was also awarded the Medal for Gallantry for his efforts as a patrol scout and sniper working in an observation post (OP) near the Chora Pass in Afghanistan in May-June 2006.

At the time he worked with Sgt Matthew Locke, who also earned a Medal for Gallantry on the same mission.

Sgt Locke was killed in action by Taliban small-arms fire while on a patrol during Operation Spin Ghar in Afghanistan's Uruzgan province on October 25, 2007.

"He was an excellent soldier, absolute nails," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"This was the guy I watched on numerous occasions in contacts stand up under a weight of fire and just return fire, while the rest of us were lying there taking up firing positions."

"He was inspirational, that was how I'd describe him."

He won his MG engaging his weapon, exposing himself, climbing up an 8m sheer cliff face to get to a position to cover our flank because we were receiving elevated fire."

"I think that speaks volumes for what kind of man he was."

"In the same mission Cpl Roberts-Smith recalls his actions which earned him his MG."

"We were observing the Chora Valley when it was full of Taliban and we were in a position waiting for a coalition assault to come in," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"We had infiltrated the area after a 10-hour march with 80kg packs on our backs and planned to be there for 10 days."

"During the day we'd coordinate air support and called in fire on enemy positions."

"For whatever reason our position was located by the enemy and we started taking fire on multiple flanks, originally with small arms."

Cpl Roberts-Smith then saw a large group of enemy armed with two RPG machine guns and an RPG.

"They seemed quite coordinated and were approaching us in an arrow-head formation," he said.

"We tried to contact air support but couldn't get through because there were other contacts going on in the area."

"We were stuck for two and a half hours without air support, so I saw an opportunity to move forward of the patrol and slow the advance of the group of Taliban."

When he did move forward he was engaged from one of his flanks by other Taliban fighters.

"I had to hold the main group back with my sniper rifle for about 40 minutes before they got into the dead ground while the air support was coming," he said.

"I couldn't see the Taliban on my flank firing at me, but they could see me."

Sgt Matthew Locke

"It was similar to the Shah Wali Kot incident, the bottom line was I had to do something or they were going to get up to us."

He said it was hard to compare the action that led to the VC because there were always intricate details between the two which aren't the same," he said.

"The day of the MG felt longer to me compared to the VC because we were alone, they knew where we were and we couldn't get air support."

"We didn't have the advantage and we were trying to stay alive."

"The action in Tizik we had the whole troop there and we had so many of the lads to manoeuvre."

He said the intensity of the fight in Tizik was hard and fast, but with the Chora Valley it was about not getting overrun and was a bit more desperate.

"We eventually got air support after they had ascertained we were on track," he said.

"It was a desperate call to make."

"They sent 10, A-10 Thunderbolt ground attack aircraft, firing 10 consecutive 30mm gun striking missions for us."

The aircraft fired 40m either side of their OP, ripping up the terrain and the enemy."

"The pilots tried to get a hold of us and when they did they said, 'we thought we'd hit your position and killed you'," he said.

Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith was awarded his Medal for Gallantry in December 2006.



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THE AUSTRALIAN

THE HEART OF THE NATION

A moment to honour acts of extreme valour

Our latest Victoria Cross winner joins a remarkable club

THERE is no rule, but it is the convention that soldiers of every rank salute Victoria Cross winners, irrespective of their place in the hierarchy. The gesture underlines how the VC has nothing to do with seniority or role but rather honours something more fundamental — that mix of duty, discipline, daring, self-sacrifice and courage that cuts across any formal layers of military organisation. Our highest military honour recognises that bravery has no boundaries. It marks that rare quality that — as the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, said yesterday when she invested our new VC winner, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith — does indeed “bring our hearts to soar”.

The VC marks a spirit that no amount of military training can create — although good training doubtless provides the skills and builds the self-belief that allowed Corporal Roberts-Smith to act so bravely in the heat of battle. Training also helps create the bonds that prompted his actions in a dusty fig orchard in Afghanistan last June when he charged into the face of fire to take out two Taliban machine-gun posts. His motivation was more personal than political or even strategic. As he tells defence editor Brendan Nicholson in *The Australian* today: “At that point I decided I’d had enough. I wasn’t going to wait until someone got hit. I know their families, they know mine ... I’m not going to let someone get hit while I sit here doing nothing.” This is a spirit as old as humanity yet as contemporary as the actions of those Australians who found the strength to perform extraordinary actions to rescue others during the recent Queensland floods. Whether it be mateship, friendship, love, respect or duty, it is a spirit that we are delighted to honour, espe-

cially so as we prepare to celebrate Australia Day this week.

Ours is a fast-paced world where success is too often measured by achievement at work or material wealth and less often by the depth of relationships. The well-lived life, guided by self-respect and respect for others, commitment to family, friends and colleagues, is often overlooked in a society that applauds celebrity and power. Yet we are reminded over and over of the presence of ordinary goodness among us. Not everyone is called upon to demonstrate extreme courage during their lifetime. Few Australians will ever be confronted by the choices faced by the Locker Valley saviours, let alone a professional soldier like Corporal Roberts-Smith. As Julia Gillard said yesterday when she thanked him on behalf of the nation, our new VC winner is like us, and yet different from us, his actions on that June day permanently setting him apart, even while reaffirming his quintessentially Australian nature. Yet the achievements of those, like him, who put their lives on the line for others is a reminder to us all of what is meant by character and courage, and how important it is that as a nation we take every opportunity to publicly acknowledge these qualities at every level. This is so whether it is the Australian of the Year awards or the Australian honours lists that will be revealed this week or through an elite award such as the VC.

At only 32, Corporal Roberts-Smith is already an outstanding soldier, the addition of the VC to his 2006 Medal for Gallantry making him Australia’s most decorated soldier, with an extraordinary record in Afghanistan. He joins a small band of brothers as only the 98th Australian to have won the VC since it was instituted by Queen Victoria in

1856. He is only the second Australian to win the VC in a theatre of war since the end of the Vietnam conflict. Like Mark Donaldson, who was awarded the VC for action in 2008, he is from the elite SAS regiment serving in Afghanistan. Like Corporal Donaldson, Corporal Roberts-Smith does not want the award to be the end of his active service. The public demands on VC winners are intense — all Australians want a slice of these special role models — but we are not surprised both men have wanted to continue in the theatre of war, given the dedication and professionalism they have shown. Corporal Roberts-Smith went out of his way at his press conference yesterday to say that he would wear the VC “for the unit” as he emphasised the heroism of his mates and said how much he wanted to “get back to work” alongside them all. Indeed, he spoke of how the VC added to the pressure on him to do even better, train harder, show more leadership, prove himself all over again. His courage is an inspiration, but his grounded and humble demeanour are equally impressive.

In this sense, Corporal Roberts-Smith is a worthy successor, not just to earlier VC winners, but to all those ANZACs who have gone before him. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott was right yesterday to remind us we should have faith in the “iPod” generation of soldiers. The wars we fight today may be different, the military hardware more sophisticated and the technology more precise, but in the end, as our VC winner has shown, our serving men and women share the same instincts for daring, and the same selflessness and humanity that have distinguished our defence forces for generations. We salute them all.



Pledge to 'brothers' inspired VC bravery

**BRENDAN NICHOLSON,
AMANDA O'BRIEN**

SAS corporal Ben Roberts-Smith has tattooed across his chest the simple message: "I will not fail my brothers."

Early on June 11 last year, in the rugged north of Afghanistan's Kandahar Province, the special forces soldier lived up to his own promise.

In an early morning raid on a Taliban stronghold, Corporal Roberts-Smith and two other special forces soldiers were lying in a horribly exposed position just 20m in front of an insurgent machine-gun post.

From the sparse cover of a small pile of rubble, Corporal Roberts-Smith saw gunfire tearing up the ground around his friends and realised they'd soon be killed. He leapt to his feet and charged the machine-gun, killing the gunners at point-black range.

Yesterday, he was awarded the

highest award for valour, the Victoria Cross of Australia.

The medal was presented in front of Corporal Roberts-Smith's family and previous VC winners Mark Donaldson and Keith Payne.

Corporal Roberts-Smith's father, West Australian Corruption and Crime Commission chief Len Roberts-Smith, told *The Australian* last night he was not surprised by his son's courage.

He said his son lived by the message he wore on his chest.

"To have a son that you know did that is just extraordinary. We are incredibly proud of him," said Mr Roberts-Smith, himself a former army major-general.

"As a parent, of course I worry enormously. We know the circumstances he goes into and we know our son, so we know he's going to be at the forefront. But we're very proud of him."

Corporal Roberts-Smith comes from a high-achieving family. His brother Sam, 24, is an opera singer critically acclaimed

for his role in *Carmen*, which is playing in Sydney at the moment

Yesterday, Corporal Roberts-Smith, the second member of Australia's Special Air Service regiment to win the VC in Afghanistan, spoke of the fear felt by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan and said they all showed great courage under fire.

"I saw a lot of brave men do a lot of brave things that day," the 32-year-old SAS soldier said yesterday after being honoured for his extreme gallantry.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce said she felt honoured just pinning the medal on his chest.

"In these times of hardship for so many Australians, you bring our hearts to soar," she said.

"Corporal, you are not invincible, you are human, extraordinarily and exceptionally so."

Julia Gillard said Corporal Roberts-Smith was reluctant to be at the centre of "so much fuss" but he was a true hero.

Continued on Page 2



VICTORIA CROSS OF AUSTRALIA Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith

AGE: 32

CAREER: Joined Army at 18

UNIT: Special Air Service Regiment

ACTION: When the patrol was pinned in Tazik village, Kandahar Province, he attacked a machinegun nest in the face of point black fire

PREVIOUS HONOURS: Medal for Gallantry in 2006 for single-handedly taking on a force of insurgents who had surrounded his isolated patrol



CHRIS MOORE

Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, centre, with two other VC recipients, Corporal Mark Donaldson, left, and Keith Payne, at yesterday's ceremony in Perth

Pledge to 'brothers' inspired bravery

Continued from Page 1

She said the Victoria Cross was "an honour so high that even the chief of the Defence Force salutes those that hold it".

Defence Force chief Angus Houston, himself a decorated pilot, followed convention and, despite his vastly superior rank, saluted the corporal.

uted the corporal.

Air Chief Marshal Houston said Corporal Roberts-Smith had brought great credit to himself, the Australian Army, the Special Air Service Regiment and the Australian Defence Force. "Today, we in the military feel great admiration and respect for the extreme valour shown by Corporal Roberts-Smith and we are honoured to call him one of our own," Air Chief Marshal Houston said.

The SAS soldiers were pinned down in a battle with the Taliban in Afghanistan's Shah Wali Kot region when Corporal Roberts-Smith made his life-saving dash through a storm of gunfire.

"Every single bloke in that troop was at some stage fighting for their lives, every person there showed gallantry," Corporal Roberts-Smith said. "The deci-

sions that I saw made were heroic, just watching some of my mates who were wounded by frag just keep firing, just ignoring the fact that they were drawing fire to themselves."

Corporal Roberts-Smith said he was aware of bullets flying around him as he tackled the machine-gun posts, and anyone who said they didn't feel fear was "either crazy or not telling the truth".

But he said his actions were instinctive. "I saw my mates getting ripped up so I just decided to move forward. I wasn't going to just sit there and do nothing. I thought I'd have a crack, I was not going to let my mates down," he said.

The father of twin five-month-old girls said Australia was achieving results in Afghanistan.

"I believe that we are making a

difference in stemming the flow of terrorism into Australia, and I want my children to be able to live as everyone does now without the fear of getting on to a bus and having it blow up," he said.

Corporal Mark Donaldson, who received a VC in 2009 for his gallantry in Afghanistan, said Corporal Roberts-Smith's life was likely to change forever.

"He did something fantastic and he's been singled out for it on a day when probably a lot of guys did a lot of fantastic things," he said.

"It's probably very similar to my situation where there was a lot of brave guys doing extraordinary things, but you're the one that gets singled out for it, you're the one that gets to pass on that message about the good work that is getting done."



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Battlefield mateship worthy of VC

How an SAS corporal became our most highly decorated soldier

BRENDAN NICHOLSON
 DEFENCE EDITOR

EARLY on a June morning, SAS Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith crouched behind a small pile of rubble in an Afghan valley as Taliban machinegunners hosed bullets at him from 20m away.

He saw the lines of gunfire tearing up the dust around two other soldiers lying in the open near him.

Convinced the men were about to be killed, the corporal unfolded his 196cm frame from behind the rubble, dashed the length of a cricket pitch towards the bullets, and killed the insurgents, who were shooting from behind the protection of a low stone wall.

Roberts-Smith's courage almost certainly saved the lives of his patrol-mates.

A week before Christmas and safely back in Australia, he was called by his commanding officer, who asked him to bring his wife to his office. The couple were told they were to be sent to speak to a defence housing committee to explain life as a "normal army family". Instead, when Roberts-Smith arrived he found the chief of the army waiting and he was told he'd be awarded the Australian Defence Force's top bravery award, the Victoria Cross of Australia. He's now in a very exclusive group and, with the Medal for Gallantry he won in 2006, Australia's most highly decorated soldier.

The action in which Roberts-Smith won his VC began just after dawn on June 11, 2010, when an Australian SAS troop carried out a helicopter assault on the village of Tazik in northern Kandahar Prov-

ince to capture or kill a senior Taliban commander.

The battle took place in a 300m-wide belt of lush vegetation along the floor of a valley lying between towering brown Afghan mountains.

Interviewed by *The Australian*, Roberts-Smith described how, as the helicopters approached, they were attacked by insurgents with machineguns and rocket-propelled grenades from well-prepared positions that dominated the landing area.

During the landing, one SAS soldier and an Afghan policeman were wounded.

Roberts-Smith and three other soldiers, all crack shots trained as snipers, were aboard another helicopter covering the landing from above.

"We were circling around the assault force trying to provide them with sniper fire to cover them, engaging the machineguns," he says.

The snipers killed some of the insurgents but a big burst of machinegun fire smashed into the Black Hawk's cockpit and its belly, and rockets blasted past below the helicopter's wheels.

"The pilots did a fantastic job, never once tried to pull off," Roberts-Smith says.

Then the snipers were dropped in the village to link up with the rest of the assault force. "When they saw the Black Hawk they all focused on it, so we got off under a heavy weight of fire."

The soldiers set up a landing zone to get the wounded out on a medivac helicopter.

Outnumbered four to one, the SAS troop set off through an orchard of fig trees that offered little cover. The trees were exploding as the insurgent gunfire hit them.

Three machineguns pinned down the lead element as it crossed a creek. Part of the patrol moved to the right to outflank the Taliban position and ran into a group of insurgents.

Taking turns at shooting to keep the enemy's heads down, Roberts-Smith and his team worked their way forward until they were about 20m from the Taliban position. That was where the sparse cover of the orchard ended with a stretch of open ground.

"The fire got so heavy that we had to stop there. That left three of us in front of the guns," he says.

Roberts-Smith was on the right of the group of three Australians.

"At that stage I think I probably had the best cover out of anyone. It was a small piece of rubble. The other two blokes didn't have much at all," he said.

One of the men to his left knelt up and fired a long burst at the machinegunners, which bought Roberts-Smith and the patrol commander, who'd moved up behind them, enough time to throw grenades.

The patrol commander's grenade appeared to silence one of the machineguns but the fire kept coming.

Roberts-Smith saw that the two men to his left were pinned down and dangerously exposed, with gunfire ripping up the ground around them.

"One of them was copping a lot," he says. "He couldn't even fight back, couldn't move. At that point I decided I'd had enough. I wasn't going to wait until someone got hit."

"I know their families, they know mine. They were fighting hard. I saw an opportunity to move forward, so I did that. I'm not going to let someone get hit while I sit here doing nothing."

"The main threat was one gun that was firing, traversing back and forwards across our frontage."

Roberts-Smith leapt to his feet and ran towards the Taliban gunners.

"I dropped to my knee at the wall," he says.

"The insurgent who was firing at us had seen me. I dropped down

about 3m from him, he's looked up at me but he just wasn't fast enough. That's how it is.

"Then the other machinegunner was focused on the troop. He was still pinning the troop down, so I engaged him."

By then the other two soldiers had reached him and they decided to charge on through the Taliban position.

"We've got the advantage, let's keep pushing it," he says.

They killed several more insurgents and linked up with the rest of the troop. Then followed 10 hours of fighting across the valley floor.

"It was a bit of a hornet's nest. There were a lot of brave guys doing a lot of brave things," he says.

So intense was the fighting, it was amazing none of the Australians was killed.

"It was a pretty awesome thing to be part of, particularly as we brought everyone home," Roberts-Smith says.

The action was so close and constant that other soldiers suffered minor shrapnel wounds that they considered were "not worth worrying about".

"I saw guys take wounds and 'yeah, whatever' — they kept fighting," he says.

"You'd be lying or foolish to say you aren't scared. You are scared but the fear comes through, I think, as adrenalin.

"The importance I place on making sure my team gets home outweighs the fear. You control it to get the job done.

"You don't think about it when it's happening.

"You just have to put it to the side and get it done. That's what we do."

So, was it training, instinct or temperament that triggered that dash across open ground?

"Mateship," Roberts-Smith says.

"I look at everything like a football match. You just see things happening and you've just got to

know where to go.

"I think the biggest sin in my line of work is to let your mates down. You just can't do it.

"As those blokes did for me that day, I did for them. It's that simple. They fought next to me as hard as they could and I gave them 100 per cent.

"I'm seeing the fire hitting the ground around them and I'm thinking, 'He's getting it pretty rough'; and I looked at the bloke on the other side, and he's getting it pretty rough. And at the end of it they were saying, 'Gee you were taking a lot of fire'."

The Taliban commander the troop went in to find was killed, Roberts-Smith says.

"We not only got him but we killed a significant number of senior Taliban commanders in that area, which actually destroyed their command network in northern Kandahar.

"It was a great win for the Australians in that province. It made a massive difference which was well noted by the coalition."

When Roberts-Smith joined the army in 1996 as an 18-year-old, he found himself dubbed Two Dads, which often happened to soldiers with hyphenated surnames.

To put a stop to that, a section commander dubbed him "RS" and that stuck.

He was serving with the infantry in East Timor when he saw the SAS in action, and decided that was where he wanted to be.

He joined the regiment in 2003 and has been deployed to Afghanistan five times, and has also served in Iraq.

Roberts-Smith won the Medal for Gallantry in 2006 on his first trip to Afghanistan in another extraordinary display of courage.

On the night of May 31, 2006, he was a scout and sniper in a small patrol setting up an observation post above an insurgent sanctuary in rugged terrain over the Chora

Pass to co-ordinate air support for a coalition force in the valley.

That patrol walked to the site, each man carrying more than 80kg of kit.

Its position was spotted by the insurgents, who surrounded it and attacked from multiple flanks with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades.

At one point Roberts-Smith moved forward 50m from the rest of the patrol to hold off a large group of attackers.

He was on his own with a sniper rifle when he spotted 16 insurgents advancing on the observation post. He fired on this group to stop its advance while a second insurgent force tried to surround him.

"There wasn't a lot of cover there," he says. "But there wasn't a lot of option. It was a matter of either stay there and hold the bigger group off or move back. If I moved back the larger group would get on top of us and we were all going to die anyway, so I thought it best to stay out there and have a crack."

Roberts-Smith held on without support for 20 minutes, until he was joined by a second soldier who helped hold the insurgents at bay until a US ground attack aircraft arrived and strafed the attackers.

The citation for that medal praises him for his courage under intense fire, his tenacity, and his sense of duty to the other members of his patrol. This week Roberts-Smith and his family went to the War Memorial in Canberra to once again apprehend the experiences of diggers from wars past. It's a place he's always loved.

"You can take a piece, one guy's story, from every war and that's why we do it, for the same reasons they did it," he said. "You're just walking round thinking the boys haven't changed. Same as it was on Kokoda, same as it was in France. The same type of blokes.

"That really appeals to me."

Recognition for exemplary courage under enemy fire

AUSTRALIAN heroes have tended to receive the country's highest military honour either for rescuing mates under fire or for charging machineguns.

The original VC was instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856 and six Australians received it during the Boer War. In 1991 the local honours system was changed to make it the Victoria Cross for Australia.

Two soldiers, Trooper Mark Donaldson, pictured, and Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, both from the SAS, have now received the new award. In



September 2008, Donaldson was in a convoy of Afghan, US and Australian troops that

drove into a well-planned insurgent ambush. He defied intense enemy fire while protecting wounded soldiers and then made a long dash on foot across open ground to rescue a wounded Afghan interpreter.

The first Australian VC recipient was Lieutenant Frederick William Bell of the West Australian Mounted Infantry, who rescued a soldier under heavy fire in May 1901.

And in an action in many ways similar to that which gave Roberts-Smith his VC, Private Edward Kenna charged a Japanese bunker with his Bren gun at Wewak, New Guinea, in May 1945. Bullets passed between his arms and body but missed him.



Australian soldiers during the Shah Wali Kot offensive



SAS Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, in focus, prepares to deploy during the Shah Wali Kot offensive last year, in which his actions during a battle led him to be chosen as a recipient of the Victoria Cross of Australia

OUTSIDE/DAVID MENZ



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Corporal joins elite company with VC

Ian McPhedran

THE newest holder of the Victoria Cross for Australia, 32-year-old SAS Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, was lauded as a true "hero" yesterday by political and military leaders.

The father of five-month-old twin girls, Elizabeth and Eve, stood proudly before Governor-General Quentin Bryce at SAS Headquarters in Perth as she pinned the gunmetal cross and its crimson ribbon to his chest for "conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril".

He then sat beside his wife, Emma, and looked completely bewildered when the VIP

crowd, that included the nation's other surviving VC winners Keith Payne and Corporal Mark Donaldson, broke into spontaneous applause for Australia's 98th Victoria Cross holder.

With his parents and younger brother sitting proudly in the front row, Prime Minister Julia Gillard summed up the prevailing mood.

"Benjamin Roberts-Smith you went to Afghanistan a soldier, you came back a hero," Ms Gillard said.

His elevation to the exalted ranks of VC winners happened during his fourth tour to Afghanistan on a hot and dusty day at a village called

Tizak in Northern Kandahar province on June 11, 2010 where he single-handedly neutralised two enemy machinegun positions and exposed himself to enemy fire to protect his mates.

Corporal Roberts-Smith or "RS" as he is known to his comrades, was circling the battle in a Blackhawk helicopter providing sniper support to the force on the ground.

His official citation reads "With the members of his patrol still pinned down by the three enemy machine-gun positions, he exposed his own position in order to draw fire away from his patrol, which enabled them to bring fire to

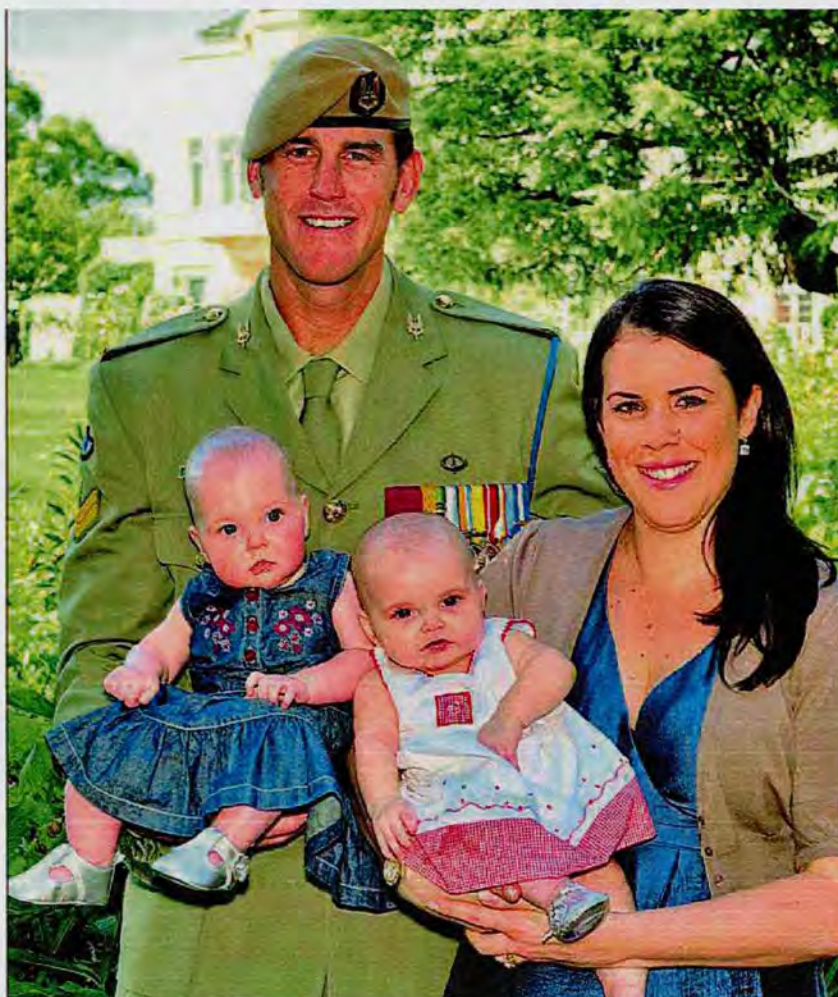
bear against the enemy."

"I saw my mates getting ripped up so I decided to move forward, I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing," Corporal Roberts-Smith said.

He said some of his colleagues would be recognised at a later date for their bravery that day.

With his VC following a Medal for Gallantry in 2006 Corporal Roberts-Smith has become the most decorated member of the Australian Defence Force.

He will return to Afghanistan, but it is understood that he is planning to attend the Royal Military College, Duntroon, to become an officer.



TRUE HERO: Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith with wife Emma and daughters Elizabeth and Eve



Nation salutes humble warrior

IAN MCPHEDRAN

DEFENCE WRITER, PERTH

STANDING in attention in the national spotlight yesterday, a humble young father lauded as a true warrior admitted he was "overwhelmed" to join the ranks of Australia's greatest military heroes.

Just hours before SAS Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith was awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia, he went for a run in Kings Park to pay his respects to previous VC holders at the War Memorial.

"I spent my life looking up to these guys, it's overwhelming, extremely humbling to be told that you're

one of them," he said, with the nation's highest honour pinned on his chest.

The father of five-month-old twin girls Elizabeth and Eve stood proudly before Governor-General Quentin Bryce at SAS Headquarters in Perth as she pinned the gunmetal cross and its crimson ribbon to his chest for "conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril".

He then sat beside his wife, Emma, and looked bewildered when the VIP crowd, that included the nation's other living VC winners, Keith Payne and Corporal Mark Donaldson, broke into applause for our

98th Victoria Cross holder.

His parents and younger brother sat proudly in the front row while Prime Minister Julia Gillard summed up the mood.

"Benjamin Robert-Smith

you went to Afghanistan a soldier, you came back a hero," Ms Gillard said.

Corporal Roberts-Smith's elevation to the ranks of VC winners happened on his fourth tour to Afghanistan.

Continued Page 4

From Page 1

On a hot and dusty day at a village called Tizak in Northern Kandahar province on June 11, 2010, he single-handedly neutralised two enemy machine gun positions and exposed himself to enemy fire to protect his mates. Corporal Roberts-Smith or "RS" or "Arse" as he is known to his comrades, was circling the battle in a Blackhawk helicopter providing sniper support to the force on the ground.

His official citation reads: "Immediately upon the helicopter insertion, the troop was engaged by machine gun and rocket-propelled grenade fire from multiple, dominating positions. Two soldiers were wounded in action and the troop was pinned down by fires from three machine guns in an elevated fortified position to the south of the village. Under the cover of close air support, suppressive small arms and machine gun fire, Corporal Roberts-Smith and his patrol manoeuvred to within 70 metres of the enemy position in order to neutralise the enemy machine gun positions and regain the initiative.

"With the members of his patrol still pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he exposed his own position in order to draw fire away from his patrol, which enabled them to bring fire to bear against the

enemy." By that stage the lead group was pinned down by enemy machine gun fire, but no one knew how many guns were in the elevated position on the other side of a fig orchard.

"We weren't really sure; we thought there was one gun, maybe two," Corporal Roberts-Smith said.

"We realised we had hit up against three machine guns and a number of other insurgents armed with rifles.

"Three of us ended up in front of the guns."

The three Diggers crawled to within 20m of the insurgent position when grenades were thrown and another SAS soldier knelt up to engage the enemy positions until his gun jammed. The third soldier was under such withering fire that he could not even raise his head, so Corporal Roberts-Smith realised it was down to him.

"I saw my mates getting ripped up so I decided to move forward; I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing."

He got to the wall and silenced the first gun before moving forward nine metres to the second enemy machine gun, which also fell silent.

"Within seconds my mates were right next to me and we just decided to push the advantage while we had it, killed a number more insurgents and pretty much consolidated that position." The battle lasted six hours and throughout everyone was fight-

ing for their lives and according to "RS", every man exhibited gallantry.

"It was certainly an amazing squadron effort," Corporal Roberts-Smith said. "We won and we hurt the insurgency and it was an enduring effect, so I am very proud to be a part of that."

He said his focus was to position himself to avoid being hit, concentrate on the fight, listen for the sounds of the enemy's weapons, try and help everyone else there. "You don't really focus on yourself".

Corporal Roberts-Smith said a number of his colleagues would be recognised at a later date for their bravery that day. "You don't really have a lot of time to think," he said.

"We train hard so that in situations like that it's instinctive. You just won't let your mates down.

"It is just like being a football team; you go as hard as you can until the game is won."

In this case, the score was about 60 Taliban dead to two Australians wounded and while he wouldn't discuss his personal tally yesterday, Corporal Roberts-Smith accounted for at least six enemy dead.

"I am just extremely honoured, I am very proud to be a member of this unit. I saw a lot of brave men do a lot of brave things that day. I am wearing it (the VC) for my unit."

He said that as a father he thought

about his kids every minute of the day. "I want my children to be able live as everyone does now, without the fear of getting on a bus and having it blow up."

In the front row of yesterday's ceremony was his father Len, a retired Major General and former Judge Advocate General of Defence and WA Supreme Court Judge and his younger brother Sam, a baritone with the Australian Opera.

Corporal Donaldson, who stood

beside his mate at the press conference, said it was fantastic to have another VC in the Regiment.

"It changes aspects of your life, but you can't let it define who you are," he said.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce thanked Corporal Roberts-Smith VC on behalf of a grateful nation.

"Corporal, to use a very Australian expression, it's a big day, but on the 11th of June 2010, you saw a far bigger day than this one. The citation distils

what you did that day and bears out your award's distinction," she said.

With his VC following a Medal for Gallantry in 2006, Corporal Roberts-Smith has become the most decorated member of the Australian Defence Force. He will return to Afghanistan but it is understood that plans are under way for him to attend the Royal Military College, Duntroon, to become an officer.



DECORATED DAD: Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith with wife Emma and daughters Elizabeth and Eve yesterday, and, inset, Corporal Roberts-Smith with his medals.
Pictures: LAUREN BLACK

HERO: SAS Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith with wife Emma and twin girls Elizabeth and Eve yesterday.

Picture: LAUREN BLACK





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Page 1 of 3

'I wasn't going to sit doing nothing VC winner just doing his duty

Ian McPhedran

Perth

HE didn't know how many guns he was braving when he leapt into the firing line.

But to Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, it didn't matter much.

"We weren't really sure — we thought there was one gun, maybe two," the nation's latest Victoria Cross winner said.

"We realised we had hit up against three machineguns and a number of other insurgents armed with rifles.

"Three of us ended up in front of the guns."

Corporal Roberts-Smith was lauded as a true hero, by political and military leaders alike, at a ceremony at SAS headquarters in Perth yesterday.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce pinned the gunmetal cross with its crimson ribbon to his chest.

And Prime Minister Julia

Gillard summed up the prevailing mood: "Benjamin Roberts-Smith, you went to Afghanistan a soldier. You came back a hero."

But as far as the VC winner was concerned, he had just been doing his duty.

He and the other two Diggers had crawled to within 20m of the insurgents' position. Grenades were thrown.

One SAS soldier knelt up to engage the enemy; then his gun jammed.

The other was under such withering fire he could not even raise his head.

So Cpl Roberts-Smith realised it was down to him.

"I saw my mates getting ripped up, so I decided to move forward," he said.

"I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing."

He got to the wall and silenced the first gun. Then he moved forward nine metres and silenced the second gun.

About 60 Taliban fighters were killed, and two Diggers wounded during the six-hour battle, in which the Australians faced odds of four to one.

Every man was fighting for his life, "RS" said, and every man displayed gallantry. Some would be recognised later for their bravery, he said.

"You don't really focus on yourself," he said. "It is just like being a football team — you go as hard as you can until the game is won.

"I am just extremely honoured. I am very proud to be a member of this unit.

"I saw a lot of brave men do a lot of brave things that day. I am wearing it (the VC) for my unit."

His elevation to the exalted ranks of VC winners happened on a hot and dusty day at the village of Tizak, in northern Kandahar province, last June 11.

Cpl Roberts-Smith was on his fourth Afghan tour. Having won a Medal for Gallantry in 2006, he has now become the defence force's most decorated member.

He will return to Afghanistan, but it is believed there are plans for him to attend the Royal Military College, Duntroon, to become an officer.

The father of five-month-old twin girls, Elizabeth and Eve, he stood proudly to receive the medal, then sat beside wife Emma. His father Len, a retired major-general, and his mother and younger brother watched proudly.

Cpl Roberts-Smith looked completely bewildered when VIPs including other surviving VC winners, Keith Payne and Cpl Mark Donaldson, broke into spontaneous applause for Australia's 98th VC winner.

'I saw a lot of brave men do a lot of brave things that day'

— VC winner Cpl BEN ROBERTS-SMITH

The citation

FOR the most conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril as Patrol Second-in-Command, Special Operations Task Group on Operation Slipper.

Corporal Benjamin Roberts Smith enlisted in the Australian Regular Army in 1996.

He was posted to the 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment where he saw active service in East Timor. In January 2003, he successfully completed the Australian Special Air Service Regiment Selection Course.

Cpl Benjamin Roberts-Smith was awarded the Medal for Gallantry for his actions in Afghanistan in 2006.

On June 11, 2010, a troop of the Special Operations Task Group conducted a helicopter assault into Tizak, Kandahar Province, in order to capture or kill a senior Taliban commander.

The troop was engaged by machine gun and rocket propelled grenade fire from multiple, dominating positions.

Under the cover of close air support, suppressive small arms and machine gun fire, Cpl Roberts Smith and his patrol manoeuvred to within 70m of the enemy.

He identified the opportunity to exploit some cover provided by a small structure.

As he approached the structure, Cpl Roberts Smith identified an insurgent grenadier engaging his patrol. Cpl Roberts Smith instinctively engaged the insurgent at point-blank range resulting in the death

of the insurgent. With the members of his patrol still pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he exposed his own position in order to draw fire away from his patrol.

Cpl Roberts Smith, with a total disregard for his own safety, stormed the enemy position killing the two remaining machine gunners.

On seizing the fortified gun position, Cpl Roberts Smith then took the initiative again and continued to assault enemy positions in depth during which he and another patrol member engaged and killed further enemy. His acts of selfless valour directly enabled his troop to go on and clear the village of Tizak of Taliban.

*** Edited text**

Salute: Governor-General Quentin Bryce speaks with Cpl Ben Roberts-Smith after awarding him the Victoria Cross.
Picture: CHRIS MOORE





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READ Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith's citations for his amazing bravery **PLUS** watch Governor-General Quentin Bryce award him the Victoria Cross



Proud family: Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, after receiving the VC, with wife Emma and their twins Eve and Elizabeth. Picture: LAUREN BLACK



Sydney Morning Herald

24/01/2011

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Page 1 of 2

Big Ben receives military's highest honour

Damien Murphy

GENERATIONS of Australians have seen faces like his. All taut skin, thin lipped and determined jaw, Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith's face looks the very essence of the Digger drawn by war artists and filmed down the years.

But like 97 Diggers before him, he also played the part.

During an operation in Afghanistan one warm day last northern summer he drew fire away from his fellow Diggers by making himself an easy shot before single-handedly silencing two Taliban machine-gun posts.

Yesterday the towering 32-year-old father of five-month-old twin girls was presented with the Victoria Cross by the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, at his Special Air Service regiment's home base, Campbell Barracks in Perth.

Ms Bryce pinned the medal—long believed to be struck from Russian guns captured during the Crimean war—on Corporal Roberts-Smith's chest saying it represented the finest values and traditions of military service.

"In these times of hardship and grief for many Australians, you bring our hearts to soar and you remind us of the strength and the endurance of the human

spirit," she said. "Thank you for what you did and for what you will continue to do."

The investiture took place in the barracks' memorial garden before a rock bearing a plaque with the names of 47 SAS soldiers who had died.

It was watched by the corporal's wife, Emma, the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, the Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, and a host of politicians and military brass. Present, too, were two of the 97 Australians awarded the VC since the Boer War, Keith Payne (who won his medal in 1969) and SAS Corporal Mark Donaldson (rescuing a wounded Afghan interpreter in 2009).

Ms Gillard said while he exhibited humility, mateship and love of family, Corporal Roberts-Smith was different. "He will always know as we know now that in the heat of battle he did not fail when mateship and duty called."

The son of Western Australia's Corruption and Crime Commission head, Len Roberts-Smith, he was awarded the VC for actions as a patrol second-in-command with the Special Operations Task Group on "Operation Slipper" last June 11.

His citation reads: "Demonstrating extreme devotion to

duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine-gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents.

"With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine-gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his position in order to draw fire away from his teammates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy.

"Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine-gun positions, killing both machine-gun teams.

"His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force."



Selfless ... Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith with Quentin Bryce; top right, with his wife, Emma, and their twins; and in his school yearbook. Photos: Chris Moore, Laura Black





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VC hero says: 'I thought I'd have a crack'

By **DAMIEN MURPHY**

GENERATIONS of Australians have seen faces like his. Taut skin, thin-lipped and determined jaw, Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith's face looks the very essence of the Digger drawn by war artists and filmed by photographers down the years.

But like 97 Diggers before him, he also played the part.

In an operation in Afghanistan one warm day last northern summer he drew fire away from his fellow Diggers by making himself an easy shot before single-handedly silencing two Taliban machinegun posts.

The tall 32-year-old father of five-month-old twins girls was presented the Victoria Cross by Governor-General Quentin Bryce at his Special Air Service regiment's home base, Campbell Barracks, Perth, yesterday.

Corporal Roberts-Smith said all members of his unit showed gallantry that day. "I saw a lot of brave men do a lot of brave things."

After flying in by helicopter the unit was pinned down by heavy Taliban machinegun fire.

"I just looked across and saw my mates getting ripped up," Corporal Roberts-Smith said. "I thought I'd have a crack, not to let my mates down."

At great risk to himself, Corporal Roberts-Smith single-handedly assaulted two mach-

inegun positions and knocked them out, enabling his unit to go on and clear a village of Taliban.

"We won and we hurt the insurgency. I'm very proud to be part of that," he said.

He urged Australians to remember the Australian soldiers who "put their hands up willingly" but didn't come back from Afghanistan alive.

"They're our mates and their families live with that every day," he said.

"So I will really urge the public to remember they are the heroes, they are the ones who gave the ultimate sacrifice."

He could not do his job, he said, without the support of his wife, Emma, and the rest of his family.

"I do what I do because I believe in the country that we live in. I believe we are making a difference in stemming the flow of terrorism into Australia," Corporal Roberts-Smith said.

"I want my children to be able to live as everyone does now without the fear of getting on a bus and having it blow up."

Ms Bryce pinned the medal — struck from Russian guns captured in the Crimean war — on Corporal Roberts-Smith's tunic, saying it represented the finest values and traditions of military service.

"In these times of hardship and grief for many Australians,

you bring our hearts to soar and you remind us of the strength and the endurance of the human spirit," she said. "Thank you for what you did and for what you will continue to do."

The investiture took place in the barrack's memorial garden before a rock bearing a plaque with the names of 47 dead SAS soldiers.

It was watched by his wife, Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Chief of the Defence Force Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, and a host of politicians and military brass. Present, too, were two of the Australians awarded the VC since the Boer War, Keith Payne (who won his medal under the imperial system in 1969) and SAS Corporal Mark Donaldson (rescuing a wounded Afghan interpreter in 2009).

Ms Gillard said while he exhibited humility, mateship, love of family, Corporal Roberts-Smith was different. "He will always know as we know now that in the heat of battle he did not fail when mateship and duty called."

The son of Western Australia's Corruption and Crime Commission head, Len Roberts-Smith, he was awarded the VC for actions as a patrol second-in-command with the Special Operations task group on "Operation Slipper" on June 11. With AAP

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Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, wife Emma and their five-month-year-old twins, Elizabeth and Eve; the Victoria Cross; the theatre of war in Afghanistan.

PICTURE: LAUREN BLACK



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Page 1 of 3

The Daily Telegraph monday, January 24, 2011 | \$1 inc. gst

BIG BEN

Husband, dad, son, brother ... meet our VC national hero

Still only \$1.00

Proud moment: Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith steps up to receive the Victoria Cross in Perth yesterday and, right, with wife Emma and twin daughters

Main picture: Cpl Chris Moore

Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith

Defence Writer

HE'S the man mountain with a heart to match.

SAS Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith was yesterday awarded the nation's highest military honour - the Victoria Cross for Australia.

And the 202cm soldier, lauded as a true hero for his actions against the Taliban, was also revealed to be a family man - the father of five-month-old twin girls

Continued page 5

Take a bow Big Ben, a grateful nation salutes you

From page 1

Elizabeth and Eve and husband to Emma.

With his family — including his mother, his former major-general father and his opera singer younger brother — watching, Corporal Roberts-Smith stood proudly before Governor-General Quentin Bryce at SAS Headquarters in Perth as she pinned the gunmetal cross and its crimson ribbon to his chest.

It was an honour awarded for "conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of extreme peril" and, together with the Medal for Gallantry he won in 2006, the VC makes him the most decorated member of the ADF.

Corporal Roberts-Smith, 32, sat beside his wife Emma as the VIP crowd, included the nation's other surviving

VC winners Keith Payne and Corporal Mark Donaldson, applauded Australia's 98th Victoria Cross holder.

"Benjamin Robert-Smith you went to Afghanistan a soldier, you came back a hero," Prime Minister Julia Gillard said.

His elevation to the ranks of VC winners happened during his fourth tour to Afghanistan at a village called Tizak in Northern Kandahar province. There, on June 11, 2010, he single-handedly neutralised two enemy machinegun positions and exposed himself to fire to protect his mates.

"We realised we had hit up against three machineguns and a number of other insurgents armed with rifles," Corporal Roberts-Smith said.

"Three of us ended up in

front of the guns."

The three Diggers crawled to within 20m of the insurgent position when grenades were thrown and another SAS soldier engaged the enemy positions until his gun jammed.

The third soldier was under such withering fire that he could not even raise his head, so Corporal Roberts-Smith realised it was down to him.

"I saw my mates getting ripped up so I decided to move forward, I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing."

He got to the wall and silenced the first gun before moving forward 9m to the second enemy machinegun, which also fell silent.

"Within seconds my mates were right next to me and we just decided to push the advantage while we had it, killed

a number more insurgents and pretty much consolidated that position." The battle lasted for six hours and the odds were four to one against the Australians.

He said his focus was to position himself to avoid being hit, concentrate on the fight, listen for the sounds of the enemy's weapons and try to help everyone else there.

He said a number of his colleagues would be recognised at a later date for their bravery that day.

"It is just like being a football team," Corporal Roberts-Smith said. "You go as hard as you can until the game is won."

In this case the score was about 60 Taliban dead.



For Valour: Corporal Roberts-Smith and the Governor-General

In their own words

// Benjamin Roberts-Smith, you went to Afghanistan a soldier, you came back a hero
- Prime Minister Julia Gillard

// The citation distils what you did that day and bears out your awarcs distinction
- Governor-General Quentin Bryce

// I saw my mates getting ripped up ... I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing
- Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith VC

// [A VC] changes aspects of your life, but you can't let it define who you are
- Corporal Mark Donaldson VC





Canberra Times
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Giant among men brings 'hearts to soar'

By Damien Murphy

Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith looks the very essence of the heroic Australian digger, as drawn by war artists and photographed down the years.

And like 98 Victoria Cross winners before him, he also played the part.

During an operation in Afghanistan one day last northern summer he drew fire away from fellow soldiers by making himself an easy shot before single-handedly silencing two Taliban machine gun posts.

The towering 32-year-old father of five-month-old twin girls and a young son was presented the Victoria Cross by Governor-General Quentin Bryce at his Special Air Service regiment's home base, Campbell Barracks in Perth yesterday.

Ms Bryce pinned the medal – struck from Russian guns captured during the Crimean war – on Corporal Roberts-Smith's chest, saying it represented the finest values and traditions of military service.

"In these times of hardship and grief for many Australians, you bring our hearts to soar and you remind us of the strength and the endurance of the human spirit," she said. "Thank you for what you did and for what you will continue to do."

The investiture took place in a memorial garden before a rock bearing a plaque with the names of 47 SAS soldiers who had died.

It was watched by his wife, Emma, Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Chief of Defence Force Angus Houston and a host of other politicians and military brass. Present, too, were two of the 98 Australians awarded the VC since the Boer War, Keith Payne and SAS Corporal Mark Donaldson.

Ms Gillard said, "He will always know as we know now that in the heat of battle he did not fail when mateship and duty called."

The son of Western Australia's Corruption and Crime Commission head, Len Roberts-Smith, he was awarded the VC for actions as a patrol second-in-command with the Special Operations Task Group on "Operation Slipper" last June 11.

His citation reads: "Demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry in action in the face of a very determined and aggressive enemy and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith initiated an assault against an elevated fortification consisting of three enemy machine gun positions and superior numbers of heavily armed insurgents."

"With members of his patrol pinned down by the three enemy machine gun positions, he knowingly and willingly exposed his

position in order to draw fire away from his teammates and enabled them to apply fire against the enemy."

"Fighting at ranges as close as 20 metres, he seized the advantage and, demonstrating extreme devotion to duty and the most conspicuous gallantry and with total disregard for his own safety, Corporal Roberts-Smith stormed two enemy machine gun positions killing both machine gun teams."

"His selfless actions in circumstances of great peril served to enable his patrol to break into the enemy's defences and to regain the initiative, thereby resulting in a tactical victory against an enemy more than three times the size of the ground force."

He won the Medal for Gallantry fighting in Afghanistan in 2006.



HOME BASE: Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, wife Emma and five-month-old twins Elizabeth and Eve.



AUSTRALIAN HERO: Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith chats with Governor-General Quentin Bryce at the Victoria Cross investiture in Perth yesterday. Photos: Defence



Opinion

The West Australian

Victoria Cross recognises the best of the best

It takes a special kind of person to serve in the Special Air Service Regiment. They are the elite of Australia's armed forces — the best of the best.

Just attempting to join the regiment says a lot about the character of the candidate. The demanding and gruelling selection process involves tests of urban combat, advanced weapons, demolitions and survival in the wilderness without supplies. Much of it is attempted while deprived of food and proper sleep for days.

It may seem unnecessarily tough, and even cruel, to many outside the system. But it is the SAS that the defence force turns to in the most dangerous and challenging of situations and we want the finest in action on our behalf.

The SAS Regiment, based at Campbell Barracks in Swanbourne, is leading Australia's presence in Afghanistan, where danger is ever-present and heroics are not unusual. Even so, the efforts of Australia's newest Victoria Cross winner have been singled out for a reason. Ben Roberts-Smith's story is an extraordinary example of courage under fire which has made him the second Australian soldier to receive the VC from the Afghanistan conflict.

His account of the incident in Shah Wali Kot on June 11 last year, as told to *The West Australian* in a rare interview with a VC recipient, is a gripping story of a prolonged and tense encounter with Taliban forces.

The insurgents had SAS personnel pinned down and under constant fire from three machinegun positions in a network of mud compounds. It took an act of selflessness and extreme bravery on the part of Cpl

Roberts-Smith to retrieve what could have been a perilous situation for himself and his mates. He took it upon himself to storm the Taliban positions and shot dead two machine gunners at close range.

Victoria Crosses are not handed out easily. Cpl Roberts-Smith's citation was the second to an Australian since the Vietnam War, after fellow SAS trooper Mark Donaldson, and there have been fewer than 100 Australian recipients. The last time a West Australian achieved the honour was in World War II.

Cpl Roberts-Smith is from a well-known Perth family. His father, Len Roberts-Smith, is head of the Corruption and Crime Commission and a former Supreme Court judge but also has a military background, serving as judge advocate general and in the Australian Army Legal Corps.

About 1500 Australian troops are involved in the war in Afghanistan which, in its 10th year, has turned into an intractable conflict with no indication that any sort of victory can be achieved soon. Prime Minister Julia Gillard has said that Australia is likely to have a military presence there for the next decade, though it is envisaged that the combat role will be over much sooner.

It is not a popular conflict with the Australian public but the purpose of the fighting — to quell the rise of radical terrorist elements — is a worthy one.

Soldiers such as Cpl Roberts-Smith and his SAS colleagues are doing their bit towards that aim. So, too, were 21 other soldiers who have lost their lives in the process. While the task remains unfinished, we owe it to them all to maintain strong support for the conflict and ensure their efforts are not wasted.



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War hero didn't want to let down his mates

KIM MACDONALD

An SAS Digger has paid tribute to his mates he fought with in Afghanistan after yesterday accepting the Victoria Cross to become Australia's most highly decorated soldier.

Cpl Ben Roberts-Smith, 32, yesterday received his VC from Governor-General Quentin Bryce at Campbell Barracks in Swanbourne, adding to his 2006 Medal for Gallantry.

He was recognised for his "conspicuous gallantry and daring in the face of the enemy" during a battle on June 11 last year.

He had knowingly exposed his position to draw fire away from up to 30 SAS comrades, stormed a nest of Taliban fighters and silenced two enemy machineguns.

"I saw my mates getting ripped up and just decided to move forward because I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"I thought I'd have a crack, I didn't want to let my mates down."

Ms Bryce said she was honoured to pin the medal on Cpl Roberts-

Smith. "In these times of hardship and grief for many Australians, you bring our hearts to soar and you remind us of the strength and the endurance of the human spirit," she said.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard labelled the former Hale School student a hero. "Exhibiting those characteristics — humility, mateship, love of family — Ben is clearly one of us," she said.

"But Ben is also different from us ... because he will always know as we know now that in the heat of battle he did not fail when mateship and duty called."

Defence Force chief Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, who must now salute the married father of two, said it would be an honour to do so.

Cpl Roberts-Smith said he had spent his life looking up to previous VC winners. He was motivated to stem the flow of terrorism and to keep Australia safe for his two daughters and future generations.



A new Australian hero

I just looked across
and saw my mates
getting ripped up.
I just decided to move
forward because I wasn't
going to sit there and
do nothing. I thought I'd
have a crack, not to let
my mates down.

VC WINNER CPL BEN ROBERTS-SMITH
DESCRIBES HIS MOMENT OF HEROISM

IN HIS OWN WORDS P6-7



A split-second difference between life and death



NICK BUTTERLY

Cpl Ben Roberts-Smith remembers with great clarity little moments from the battle of Shah Wali Kot in Afghanistan.

He remembers lying on his back as Taliban bullets cracked around him and seeing leaves falling off the trees above him. It took a second to register that it was the rounds ripping the leaves off the branches as the enemy guns swept back and forth.

He remembers looking over at a mate a few metres away and watching him calmly get to one knee — ignoring the bullets kicking up dust around him — and emptying a magazine of his M-4 rifle into the insurgent machinegun nest just 20m ahead.

And most of all, he remembers coming face to face with two Taliban fighters, a split second before he shot them both dead.

"We were looking at each other like you and I are looking at each other now," he tells *The West Australian*.

"I dropped down on my knee and for whatever reason he just wasn't fast enough."

Cpl Roberts-Smith was yesterday awarded Australia's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross, for his actions at Shah Wali Kot on June 11, 2010.

He has previously been awarded Australia's third highest military gong, the Medal of Gallantry, for his part in another action in Afghanistan's Oruzgan province in May 2006.

He is the only Australian to have received both honours and the two combined make him the most highly decorated soldier currently serving in the Australian military.

He is the second Australian sol-

dier to be given the VC in the course of the Afghan war.

Just 96 Australians have won the Imperial Victoria Cross since the Boer War. Only Cpl Roberts-Smith and Cpl Mark Donaldson have been awarded the relatively new Australian VC.

Thirty-two-year-old Cpl Roberts-Smith is a man-mountain.

He stands about 200cm and is said to be the biggest man in the SAS.

He hails from a prominent Perth family. His father is Len Roberts-Smith, the soon-to-retire head of the Corruption and Crime Commission, and his younger brother, Sam, is an up-and-coming opera singer who trained at the prestigious WA Academy of Performing Arts. Cpl Roberts-Smith was selected for the SAS in 2003 and has deployed to Afghanistan five times since 2006.

Shah Wali Kot is a district in the north of Kandahar province, the heart of the Taliban insurgency.

On the morning of June 11, a group of SAS and Afghan National Police were sent in US Black Hawk helicopters to Shah Wali Kot to hunt a senior Taliban leader.

As the main assault force went in, Cpl Roberts-Smith, a sniper by training, sat in the open door of a helicopter hovering over the green valley and network of mud compounds, ready to provide fire support with his M-14 rifle.

But as soon as the soldiers hit the ground, they struck trouble.

They took heavy machinegun and rocket fire on landing and almost immediately an Australian soldier and an Afghan police officer were wounded.

The weight of insurgent fire was so great the men became pinned.

Cpl Roberts-Smith's helicopter

came under fire too, with one round smashing away the American pilot's foot pedal.

Daring US medivac helicopters also braved the bullets, taking several hits as they rushed in low to pick up the two casualties.

Eventually, the patrol commander decided the copter carrying Cpl Roberts-Smith was in too vulnerable a position and ordered it to land.

This was so the big West Australian and the handful of others soldiers aboard could help those Australians and Afghans still pinned down.

Cpl Roberts-Smith and a small group of SAS pushed forward to make contact with the Australians.

The decision was made among the group to move on and complete the mission.

But as he and three SAS soldiers moved forward through an orchard, they came under a torrent of fire from three Taliban machineguns positioned behind a mud brick wall just 20m ahead. The men again found themselves unable to move.

"I was lying on my back at one point trying to fire back and I am looking back at one of the boys and I am thinking, 'Bloody hell, look at the fire racking up around him'."

After being unable to move for about 30 minutes, one of the three SAS soldiers got to his knees and sprayed the mud compound with bullets, allowing Cpl Roberts-Smith to lob in a grenade.

The grenade fell behind the compound and exploded with an ear-splitting crack, knocking out one of the guns but another two continued spitting fire, again halting the Australians in their tracks.

"It seemed to have little effect and the fire just kept coming," he said.

More in frustration than anger or fear, Cpl Roberts-Smith made the decision to rush forward to the wall from where the Taliban were firing.

"I just thought, 'I am not going to wait to get hit'," he said.

There were four Taliban in position. As he made the dash, two turned and fled back into a mud hut a few metres behind.

As he rounded the wall, he found himself about 3m from two Taliban who were still pouring fire on his mates.

They saw him but were too slow.

He shot them dead in quick succession at close range.

In a flash, the other two SAS men were by his side and the trio quickly pushed their advantage.

They swept inside the mud hut and killed the pair who had fled, as well as a number of other fighters inside.

Cpl Roberts-Smith's move was a game changer.

The Taliban position had been a bottleneck in the valley, holding up the rest of the Australian force.

With the strongpoint smashed, other Diggers were able to push through to turn the tables on the Taliban, though the heavy combat was far from finished.

The battle continued for hours and the assault force only pulled out at dusk — 10 hours after they had gone in. "Every single guy in that troop at some stage was fighting for his life," Cpl Roberts-Smith said.

"There were a lot of brave men doing a lot of brave things."

Now back in Perth, Cpl Roberts-Smith is unsure how the VC will affect his life.

He has sought counsel from fellow VC winner and long-time mate Cpl Donaldson on how to handle his new-found fame.

"Mark said just try not to let it all

overwhelm you, enjoy the moment and try not to let it go to your head."

Cpl Roberts-Smith said the other men with him were equally brave.

He just happened to be in the right position to do what was needed. "I know they will be recognised in due course. I am extremely proud to be part of that group that was in that valley."

For now, his focus is on family. He and wife Emma have five-month-old twins, Eve and Elizabeth.

Cpl Roberts-Smith is confident he will be able to return to Afghanistan on operations.

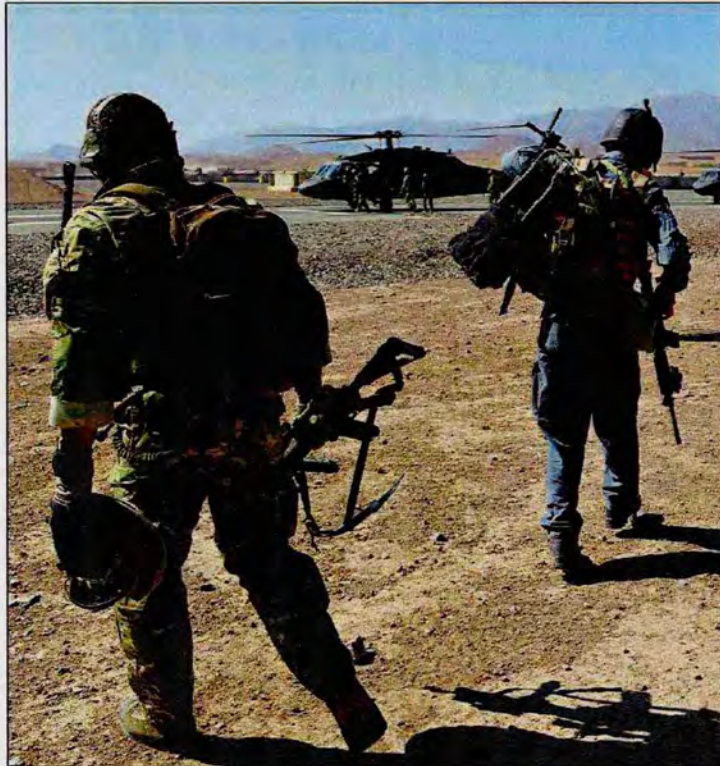
Normally, SAS soldiers are "protected identities", meaning their faces and names are secret.

But Cpl Roberts-Smith is now a very public figure — an invidious position for someone used to living his life in the shadows.

"I will put my hand up to go away again," he said.



Family man: Cpl Ben Roberts-Smith with his wife Emma and their twins, Elizabeth and Eve, in a photograph supplied by the Defence Department



Dangerous mission: Afghan National Police officers and Australian soldiers in the offensive.

Picture: Cpl Raymond Vance



Honoured: Cpl Ben Roberts-Smith with Governor-General Quentin Bryce.



On the lookout: An Australian soldier watching and waiting.



Battle fatigue: An Australian soldier after returning from the offensive.



'There were a lot of brave men doing a lot of brave things'



Selfless ... Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith with the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce; top right, with his wife, Emma, and their twins, Elizabeth and Eve; and in his school magazine. Photos: Chis Moore, Lauren Black

Big Ben a reminder of strength of the human spirit

The VC recipient risked his life to save his mates, write **Ben Harvey** and **Damien Murphy**.

CORPORAL Ben Roberts-Smith remembers with great clarity little moments from the battle of Shah Wali Kot in Afghanistan.

He remembers lying on his back as Taliban bullets cracked around him and seeing leaves falling off the trees above him. It took a second to register that it was the rounds ripping the leaves off the branches as enemy gunfire swept back and forth.

Most of all he remembers coming face to face with two Taliban fighters, a split second before he shot them dead.

"I dropped down on my knee and for whatever reason he just wasn't fast enough," Corporal Roberts-Smith said.

Yesterday he was awarded Australia's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross of Australia, for his actions at Shah Wali Kot on June 11 last year.

He has previously been awarded Australia's third-highest military gong, the Medal

of Gallantry, for his part in another action in Afghanistan's Oruzgan province in May 2006, making him the only Australian to have received both honours.

Generations of Australians have seen faces like his. All taut skin, thin-lipped and determined jaw, Corporal Roberts-Smith's face looks the very essence of the Digger drawn by war artists and filmed by photographers down the years.

But like 97 Diggers before him, he also played the part.

During an operation in Afghanistan one warm day last northern summer he drew fire away from his fellow Diggers by making himself an easy shot before single-handedly silencing two Taliban machine-gun posts.

The towering 32-year-old father of five-month-old twin girls and a young son was presented the Victoria Cross by the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, at his Special Air Service

regiment's home base, Campbell Barracks, in Perth.

"In these times of hardship and grief for many Australians, you bring our hearts to soar and you remind us of the strength and the endurance of the human spirit," she said.

The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, said at the ceremony that while he exhibited humility, mateship, and love of family, Corporal Roberts-Smith was different. "We will always know, as we know now, that in the heat of battle he did not fail when mateship and duty called."

He was awarded the VC for actions as a patrol second-in-command with the Special Operations Task Group.

The investiture was also watched by his wife, Emma, the Chief of Defence Force, Angus Houston, and a host of other politicians and military brass.

Corporal Roberts-Smith stands about 200cm and is said

→
to be the largest man in the SAS.

He hails from a prominent Perth family. His father is Len Roberts-Smith, the soon-to-retire head of the Corruption and Crime Commission. His younger brother, Sam, 24, who lives in Sydney, is a baritone in the Opera Australia Chorus which is performing *Carmen*.

Corporal Roberts-Smith was selected for the SAS in 2003 and has been deployed to Afghanistan five times since 2006.

Shah Wali Kot is a district in the north of Kandahar province, the heart of the Taliban insurgency.

On the morning of June 11 a group of SAS and Afghan National Police were sent in US Black Hawk helicopters to Shah Wali Kot to hunt a senior Taliban leader. Corporal Roberts-Smith and three SAS soldiers came under a torrent of fire from three Taliban

machine-guns and found themselves unable to move.

"There was very limited cover. The boys were just face down," Corporal Roberts-Smith said.

"I was lying on my back at one point trying to fire back and I am looking back at one of the boys and I am thinking 'bloody hell, look at the fire racking up around him'."

The corporal made the decision to rush forward to the wall from where the Taliban were firing.

"I just thought I am not going to wait to get hit," he said.

There were four Taliban in the position. As he made the dash two turned and fled back into a mud hut a few metres behind. "I got up - they were moving - I was moving, it was all happening at once," he told *The West Australian*.

As he rounded the wall he found himself about three

metres from two Taliban who were still pouring fire on his mates. They saw him but were too slow. He shot them dead in quick succession at close range.

"Every single guy in that troop at some stage was fighting for his life," Corporal Roberts-Smith said. "There were a lot of brave men doing a lot of brave things."

At the end of the battle the senior Taliban commander they had come for lay dead, as well as many other insurgent fighters.

Emma admits she is frightened when she hears the details of what her husband did, but knows there is little she can do to stop him going into combat again.

"I don't particularly want him in that situation again but I know I can't stop him," she says. "I am glad I don't know about it most of the time."



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Top honour for war hero

By **TIM LESTER**
NATIONAL BUREAU CHIEF

AUSTRALIA will honour a new hero tomorrow when the Governor-General awards an SAS corporal the Victoria Cross, the country's highest military honour for bravery.

Yesterday, the Australian Defence Force asked the media not to name the soldier before tomorrow's presentation, but instead refer to him as Corporal Ben. He is the son of a prominent legal figure in Western Australia and a father of two.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce will lead the ceremony at Campbell Barracks in Perth. Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott and the Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, will attend.

Corporal Ben will join the elite group of Australian VC winners for an act of extraordinary bravery in a battle with Taliban forces on October 18 last year.

Four Australian soldiers were wounded in the intense gun fight in Afghanistan's Shah Wali Kot region, in northern Kandahar.

The operation came just as Federal Parliament began a debate on the Afghanistan war. Twenty-one Australian soldiers have died in the nine-year war.

Corporal Ben is understood to have played a pivotal role in the Shah Wali Kot battle with an unusually daring charge through enemy fire to destroy three crucial Taliban machine-gun positions.

It's not the first time the corporal has been recognised for bravery. In December 2006, he won the Medal for Gallantry

after a battle in Afghanistan's Chora Valley.

A former colleague described Corporal Ben as a tall, thick-set soldier and a colourful "knock-about" character known to his mates as "RS".

He will be the 98th Australian to wear the coveted VC and only the second soldier to win it since the Imperial Victoria Cross was replaced for Australian soldiers in 1991 with the new Victoria Cross for Australia.

SAS trooper Mark Donaldson was awarded the first VC of Australia on January 16, 2009, for the rescue of an interpreter under heavy fire in Afghanistan's Oruzgan province.

■ Meanwhile army chief Ken Gillespie says he is "cautiously optimistic" of being able to hand over security in Afghanistan to local forces by 2014.

Afghanistan was a key topic for discussion at the AUKMIN talks between Australian and British defence and foreign affairs ministers in Sydney this week.

AAP



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Page 1 of 4

From Perth schoolboy to war hero

The amazing story of our VC medal winner

■ Sean Cowan



The son of Corruption and Crime Commission chief Len Roberts-Smith will receive Australia's highest military honour tomorrow for charging into machine-gun fire and killing several Taliban fighters in Afghanistan last year.

Cpl Ben Roberts-Smith, 32, will become just the second Australian recipient of a Victoria Cross since the end of the Vietnam War and the first to have already been awarded a Medal for Gallantry, which he received in 2006.

The married father of two, known as RS to his mates at the WA-based Special Air Service Regiment, will receive the famous medal from Governor-General Quentin Bryce at a ceremony at Campbell Barracks in Swanbourne.

Cpl Roberts-Smith followed in his father's footsteps when he joined the military soon after graduating from Hale School in 1995.

Len Roberts-Smith, a former Supreme Court judge who will retire from his position at the CCC in two weeks, was a major-general as a military judge advocate-general for several years.

Ben's brother Sam, a graduate of the WA Academy of Performing Arts, is at the Australian Opera in Sydney.

Defence yesterday refused to confirm Cpl Roberts-Smith would become the 98th Australian recipient

of the Victoria Cross and Len Roberts-Smith declined to comment.

A schoolboy rugby champion who also played school basketball with future sporting stars Michael Gardiner and James Harvey, Cpl Roberts-Smith won Hale School first XV's best and fairest award in his final year at school.

At more than 200cm tall, the giant second rower then played for the Nedlands-based Associates colts in the RugbyWA competition and later the club's premier grade team.

Former SAS soldier Rob Maylor, who used a nickname when writing about Cpl Roberts-Smith in his book SAS Sniper, said his friend would be a deserving recipient of Australia's second Afghanistan campaign Victoria Cross.

Mr Maylor, who left the SAS last year, said he served alongside Cpl Roberts-Smith and Australia's previous Victoria Cross winner Cpl Mark Donaldson several times.

Cpl Roberts-Smith had originally been with 3RAR at Holsworthy Bar-

racks in Sydney but had joined the SAS in 2002, he said.

"The three of us have worked together a hell of a lot," he said.

"We have all worked in Afghanistan and other places. I speak to RS on the phone regularly but he didn't even tell me about what happened in this incident.

"But I would say he is one of the

best soldiers.

"He is very focused on his job and he is a very, very good thinker. A very lateral thinker.

"This sort of thing (winning a Victoria Cross) can have a huge effect on someone but he is such a strong character and so humble that, although this is major, it won't go to his head."

Cpl Donaldson, who was born in NSW, received his honour after braving enemy fire to rescue a wounded Afghan interpreter in the southern Afghan province of Oruzgan in September 2008.

Cpl Roberts-Smith was recommended for the Victoria Cross after intense fighting in the Shah Wali Kot region of Kandahar last June.

Up to 30 SAS soldiers had come under heavy fire when he stormed a nest of Taliban fighters and silenced three machine-guns.

He received a Medal for Gallantry in 2006 for courage under fire in Afghanistan's Chora Valley.

He will become the first WA-born Victoria Cross recipient since World War II when Pte Tom Starcevic, of Esperance, received the medal for attacking a series of Japanese machine-gun posts in Borneo, killing 12 enemy soldiers.

He died in 1989.

■ NEWS P4

How VC hero attacked the Taliban



CONSPICUOUS BRAVERY

VC hero killed Taliban gunmen

■ Gareth Parker

Victoria Cross winner Ben Roberts-Smith was among a group of Australian and Afghan soldiers who became entangled in a fierce gun battle at a village in northern Kandahar last June.

The intense battle, lasting 13 hours from sunrise to sunset, erupted shortly after the SAS, Australian Commandos and Afghan National Army soldiers disembarked from their helicopters.

The firefight was during a big NATO offensive against Taliban insurgents in the district of Shah Wali Kot.

The coalition forces' objective was to disrupt a key insurgent stronghold from which the Taliban had been launching attacks against Afghan communities and coalition forces.

The Defence Department issued a media release about the battle last year but it made no mention of the

heroics of Cpl Roberts-Smith

Over 4½ hours, the department said, Taliban insurgents poured heavy fire on the coalition soldiers from their concealed fighting positions.

At one point in the battle, Cpl Roberts-Smith and a small group of his SAS comrades became pinned down on the outskirts of a village, under heavy fire from Taliban machinegunners.

The 202cm-tall corporal, showing complete disregard for his own wellbeing, rushed the Taliban position and shot dead several insurgents at close range.

It was an act described by his colleagues as the most conspicuous act of bravery imaginable by an Australian soldier.

In all, dozens of insurgents were killed.

The coalition forces suffered just two casualties — an Australian was

shot in the arm and an Afghani was wounded in the side.

Cpl Roberts-Smith was not one of them.

A huge cache of Taliban weapons was seized after the offensive.

They included assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, heavy machineguns and radio handsets.

"Through the Shah Wali Kot offensive, the combined coalition force has severely disrupted an important insurgent stronghold," Maj-Gen. John Cantwell, the commander of Australian forces in the Middle East, said at the time.

He said the operation had deprived insurgents of a staging area from which to launch offensives into the Australian-patrolled Oruzgan province, disrupting a key supply route and improving security for local people.



Haul: Taliban weapons captured during the Shah Wali Kot offensive.





1901

1. **Frederick William Bell** (1875-1954)
West Australia Mounted Infantry, Transvaal,
South Africa

1915

2. **Hugo Vivian Hope Throssell** (1884-1933)
10th Light Horse, Gallipoli, Turkey

1916

3. **Martin O'Meara** (1885-1935)
16th Battalion, Pozières, France

1917

4. **John Carroll** (1891-1971)
33rd Battalion, St. Yves, Belgium

5. **Charles Pope** (1883-19170)
11th Battalion, Louveral, France

1918

6. **Thomas Leslie Axford** (1894-1983)
16th Battalion, Hamel Wood, France

7. **Alfred Edward Gaby** (1892-1918)
28th Battalion, Villers-Bretonneux, France

20th Battalion, Villers-Bretonneux, France

8. **Lawrence Dominic McCarthy** (1892-1975)
16th Battalion, Madam Wood, France

9. **Clifford William King Sadlier** (1892-1964)
51st Battalion, Villers-Bretonneux, France

10. **James Park Woods** (1886-1963)
48th Battalion, Le Verguier, France

1941

11. **Hughie Idwal Edwards** (1914-82)
No.105 Squadron RAF, Bremen, Germany

12. **James Heather Gordon** (1909-1986)
2/31st Battalion, Djezzine, Syria

1942

13. **Percival Eric Gratwick** (1902-1942)
2/4th Battalion, El Alamein, Egypt

14. **Arthur Stanley Gurney** (1908-1942)
2/48th Battalion, Tel-el-Eisa, Egypt

1945

15. **Leslie Thomas Starcevich** (1918-1989)
2/43rd Battalion, Beaufort, British North Borneo



Weekend Australian

22/01/2011

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MARK DODD

VC hero eager to return to battle

THERE will be nothing to stop Australia's latest Victoria Cross recipient — a big West Australian nicknamed "RS" — going back into action in Afghanistan.

Concerns were raised that the previous VC winner, Corporal Mark Donaldson, would not be allowed back in the danger zone because of the likely impact on morale if such a high-profile medal winner were killed.

But Corporal Donaldson, who has been promoted from trooper since receiving the VC, made it clear to army commanders that he wanted to be deployed again and he has since served on a lengthy deployment in Afghanistan.

Both VC winners will be able to fill most of the roles of any other SAS soldier except undercover work.

That is made difficult as they will be easily identifiable.

Australia's latest VC recipient will receive his medal from

Governor-General Quentin Bryce tomorrow.

And no doubt, with the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant-General Ken Gillespie, warning of a challenging year ahead for his operational troops, there is a role for both soldiers.

"There are lots of pressure points that are security and defence-related and we have our job cut out for us in Afghanistan," Lieutenant-General Gillespie told *The Weekend Australian* yesterday.

Tomorrow's gala event, to be attended by top military brass and political leaders, will be held at Swanbourne Barracks, the Perth home of the elite Special Air Service Regiment.

The ceremony will see the second VC to be conferred in as many years for an SAS soldier for heroism in Afghanistan. Four VCs were awarded during the Vietnam War — two posthumously.

Corporal Donaldson received the VC — the nation's highest military honour — for conspicuous acts of gallantry when his patrol was ambushed by Taliban insurgents in 2008.

Senior defence sources told *The Weekend Australian* yesterday there would be no problem preventing the latest VC recipient, "RS", who has also been identified as Corporal Ben, from continuing his career in the special forces, including a return to active service.

The corporal, who is in his 30s and was awarded a Medal for Gallantry in 2006 during an earlier combat tour in Afghanistan, was recommended for the VC after neutralising three Taliban machinegun positions during a firefight in northern Kandahar last October.

It is understood Corporal Ben has told his superiors he wants to rejoin his mates as soon as possible.



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'Daring charge' led to awarding of newest VC

Tim Lester
NATIONAL BUREAU CHIEF

AUSTRALIA will have a new hero tomorrow when the Governor-General awards an SAS corporal the country's highest military honour for bravery, the Victoria Cross.

Yesterday, Defence asked the *Herald* not to name the soldier before tomorrow's presentation, but instead refer to him as "Corporal Ben".

He is the son of a prominent legal figure in Western Australia and a father of two.

The Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, will lead the late morning ceremony at Campbell Barracks in Perth. The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, and the Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, will attend.

It is believed "Corporal Ben" showed extraordinary bravery in a battle with Taliban forces on October 18 last year.

Four Australian soldiers were wounded in the intense gun fight in Afghanistan's Shah Wali Kot region, in northern Kandahar.

At the time, Defence kept details of the battle secret, later saying it was because of "ongoing operations" and "security

being a priority".

The operation came just as federal Parliament began a debate on the Afghanistan War. The nine-year war has claimed the lives of 21 Australian soldiers.

"Corporal Ben" is understood to have made an unusually daring charge through enemy fire to destroy three crucial Taliban machine gun positions.

It is not the first time the corporal has been recognised for bravery. In December 2006, he won the Medal for Gallantry after a battle in Afghanistan's Chora Valley.

A former colleague described Corporal Ben to the *Herald* as a tall, thick-set soldier and a colourful "knock-about" character known to his mates as "RS".

He will be the 98th Australian to wear the coveted VC and only the second soldier to win it since the Imperial Victoria Cross was replaced for Australian soldiers in 1991 with the new Victoria Cross for Australia.

SAS trooper Mark Donaldson was awarded the first VC of Australia on January 16, 2009, for the rescue of an interpreter under heavy fire in Afghanistan's Oruzgan Province.

Speculation has been building in recent weeks that the Governor-General was about to award a VC. It was widely expected the ceremony would be held in conjunction with the official opening of the Australian War Memorial's Hall of Valour on February 23.

Instead, "Corporal Ben" will receive his VC at the Special Air Service headquarters in his home state. The award is seen by some as a needed morale boost for the ADF after last year's parliamentary debate and the WikiLeaks revelations suggesting former prime minister Kevin Rudd held grave concerns about the Afghanistan War, even saying the country's outlook "scars the hell out of me".

Queen Victoria instituted the cross that carries her name in 1856, at the end of the Crimean War. The metal from which the crosses were forged was long believed to have been taken from Russian cannon captured during the war.

The Cross also remains the highest military honour for soldiers from Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

SAS soldier earns VC for fearless charge

Updated 1 hour 21 minutes ago

Australia's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross, will be awarded to a SAS soldier for his actions in Afghanistan.

Corporal Ben - his role in the SAS precludes further identification - will receive his bravery award from Governor-General Quentin Bryce at a ceremony in Perth on Sunday.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Defence Minister Stephen Smith and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott will also be in attendance.

Corporal Ben is reportedly being honoured for his actions during a battle against Taliban fighters in Afghanistan last year.

News Limited newspapers report Corporal Ben charged the enemy after realising his fellow diggers were in danger.

He took out three Taliban machinegun positions single-handedly.

"He just tore into the enemy," the Herald Sun quoted a witness as saying.

It is understood Corporal Ben also won the Medal for Gallantry in 2006.

It will be the second time in two years that an Australian soldier has received the Victoria Cross.

In 2009 SAS Trooper Mark Donaldson was awarded the VC after running through enemy fire to rescue a wounded colleague in Afghanistan.

ABC News 24 will cover the ceremony live on Sunday from 2:00pm AEDT.

Tags: [army](#), [awards-and-prizes](#), [afghanistan](#), [australia](#), [wa](#), [perth-6000](#)

First posted 1 hour 37 minutes ago

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The award ceremony will be held in Perth on Sunday. (ABC NEWS)

- [Map: Perth 6000](#)
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Second SAS Afghan VC for heroic charge



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE

Special operations soldiers in action in Afghanistan last year in the area where Lance Corporal Ben performed his heroics

MARK DODD

THE act of extreme courage that earned Australia's latest SAS hero the Victoria Cross was similar to the storming of a Japanese machinegun post by previous VC winner Edward Kenna in the jungles of Papua New Guinea during World War II.

The Special Air Service Regiment soldier, identified so far as "Lance Corporal Ben", will receive his Victoria Cross from Governor-General Quentin Bryce at a ceremony in Perth on Sunday.

It is understood the soldier has already won the Medal for Gallantry in 2006.

He is the second SAS soldier to win the VC in two years. In September 2008, then Trooper Mark Donaldson received the top award for protecting wounded soldiers under heavy enemy fire and then dashing across 80m of open ground to rescue a wounded Afghan interpreter.

The new VC soldier was recommended for the award for his actions during a fierce gun battle last October in the Shah Wali Kot region of northern Kandahar, a key stronghold of diehard Taliban

militants. Senior Defence sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, told *The Australian* the soldier was in his 30s and was born in Western Australia.

News Limited newspapers report today that the soldier, described as a specialist sniper, charged headlong into Taliban machinegun fire, and within minutes three enemy guns had been silenced and numerous Taliban fighters killed.

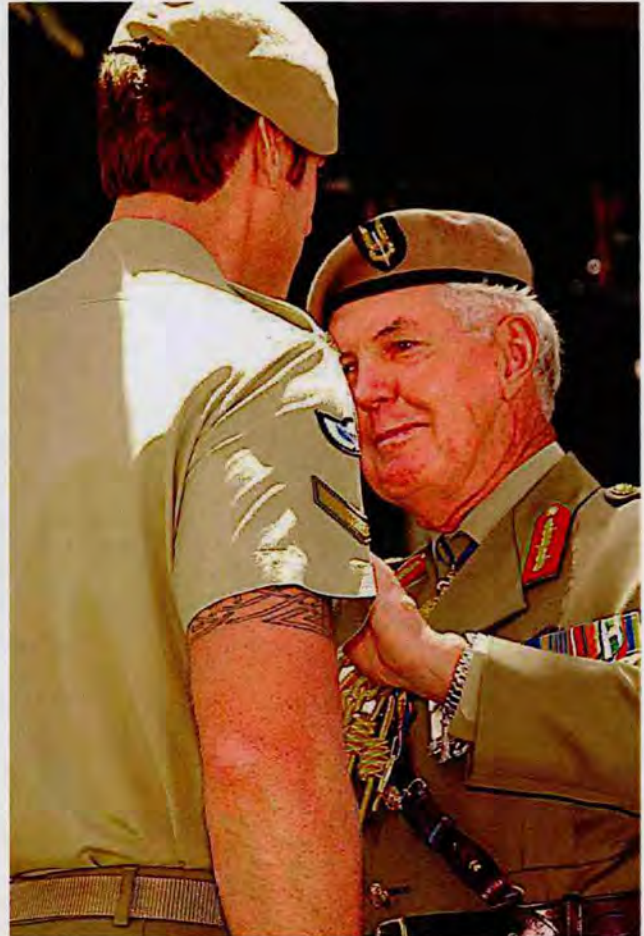
"He just tore into the enemy," one of the soldier's friends was quoted as saying.

"He is the epitome of the Spartan soldier. It was only a matter of time before he would demonstrate his true ability."

One army insider said the soldier displayed remarkable courage in a situation similar to that faced by Kenna, who, alone and armed with a Bren light machinegun, stormed a Japanese bunker at Wewak, and then, after running out of ammunition, picked up a rifle and shot dead several Japanese troops trying to outflank him. Kenna's actions cleared the way for his company to advance.

The Victorian-born Kenna died in July 2009.

Continued on Page 2



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE

Lance Corporal Ben receives his Medal for Gallantry from governor-general Mike Jeffery in 2006



SAS hero to be awarded VC

Continued from Page 1

Queensland-born Keith Payne, one of only two living Australian VC winners, reacted enthusiastically when he was told of the latest award.

"He must be a live one," said the 77-year-old, who earned his medal for extraordinary heroism during the Vietnam War.

Mr Payne offered the following advice to Corporal "Ben", who also served in East Timor.

"The corporal's life will be changed forever and he should not let it affect his character," Mr Payne said.

"He should remember to wear it with pride for others. He will now be public property and a lot

will be expected of him." Little is known about Corporal Ben's actions, but the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Afghan expert, Raspal Khosa, said Shah Wali Kot was Taliban heartland, a strategic area long the site of operations by coalition special forces.

Australian soldiers have now won two of the four VCs so far awarded to Commonwealth troops in Afghanistan, with a VC also awarded to one British and one New Zealand soldier.

In the decade that Australian troops have served in Afghanistan they have won two VCs, compared with four VCs (three awarded posthumously) given in the Vietnam conflict, from 1962-72.

no, two.



Herald Sun
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Region: Melbourne Circulation: 514000
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Page 1 of 5

REVEALED: VC winner's amazing story of bravery

TRUE BLUE HERO

A COURAGEOUS Digger who single-handedly took out three Taliban machine gun nests will be honoured with the Victoria Cross of Australia.

The *Herald Sun* has learned the SAS Corporal — realising his mates were in grave danger — charged head long into battle during a deadly firefight in Afghanistan last year

"He just tore into the enemy," a witness said of the father of two, known as Ben or "RS" to his mates.

"This guy is a warrior," another mate said

Corporal Ben's identity will be revealed on Sunday when Governor-General Quentin Bryce presents his VC.

Courage under fire, Pages 4-5

Ultimate warrior overruns Taliban

Digger defies machine guns to save mates

IAN
McPHEDRAN



THE brown dust from the departing choppers that carried the SAS Squadron to the battlefield had barely cleared when all hell broke loose.

It was **October** last year, the height of the fighting season in Afghanistan.

A large Taliban force had established numerous firing positions around several heavy machine guns.

About 25 Perth-based Diggers from the Special Air Service Regiment were under withering fire.

Realising his mates were in grave danger, a corporal charged headlong into the Taliban machine gun fire.

The sight of the 203cm Australian warrior coming at them must have terrified the bearded Afghans.

Within minutes three enemy machine guns had been silenced and numerous Taliban fighters lay dead.

A man mountain of a West

Australian boy named Ben — or “RS” to his mates — had turned the battle.

His comrades say it was the most extreme example of conspicuous gallantry since Albert Jacka VC jumped into a trench full of Turks at Gallipoli in 1915, killing seven with his rifle and bayonet.

During an offensive in the Shah Wali Kot area of Northern Kandahar Province, coalition intelligence had intercepted enemy “chatter” about a large group of Taliban fighters moving to attack a combined force of Aussie commandos and Afghan National Army soldiers.

As soon as word came through, the SAS troops at Camp Russell near Tarin Kowt immediately mounted several American Blackhawk choppers for the 15-minute flight into battle.

After landing in the customary “brown out” dust cloud, the SAS men immediately took the fight up to the enemy, but it was clear that they would falter unless the machine guns were neutralised.

Step forward “RS” — the biggest man in the regiment by a fair margin.

“He just tore into the enemy,” a comrade said. “He is the epitome of the Spartan soldier. It was only a matter of time before he would demonstrate his true ability.”

“RS” joined the SASR in 2002 from the army’s 3rd Battalion. He is a specialist sniper and “assaulter”.

He is also a loving husband and father of two young daughters.

He was awarded a Medal for Gallantry in December 2006 for his courage under fire in Afghanistan’s Chora Valley in the same battle

where Sgt Matthew Locke, who was killed in action during 2007, won his MG.

During that fight, according to comrades, “RS” tore a Taliban fighter off his back like an insect, stood on his throat and shot him dead.

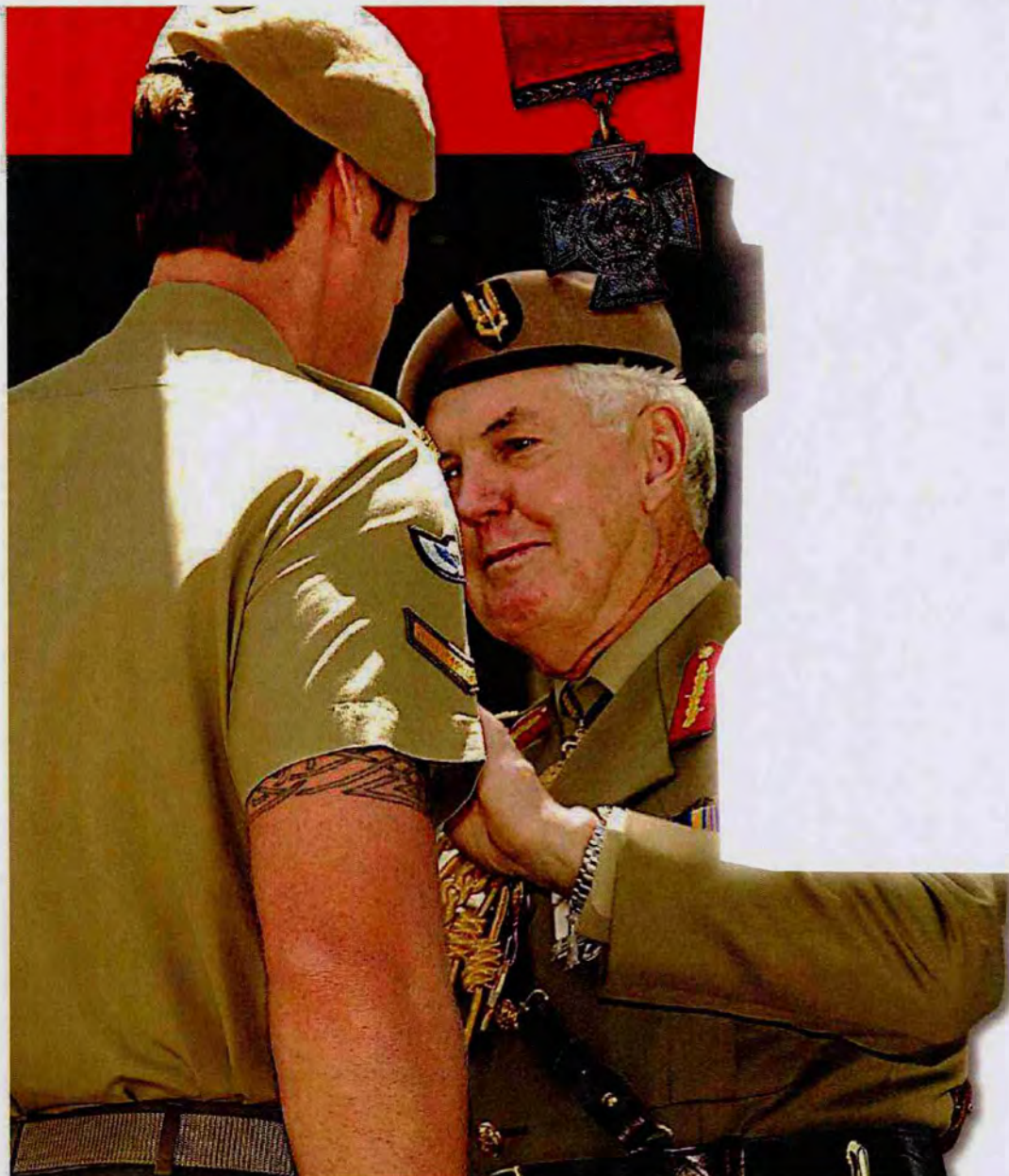
His identity will be revealed on Sunday when Governor-General Quentin Bryce pins a Victoria Cross for Australia on his massive chest in front of his proud family, mates and military and political leaders including PM Julia Gillard and Chief of Defence Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston.

Several other soldiers will also receive awards.

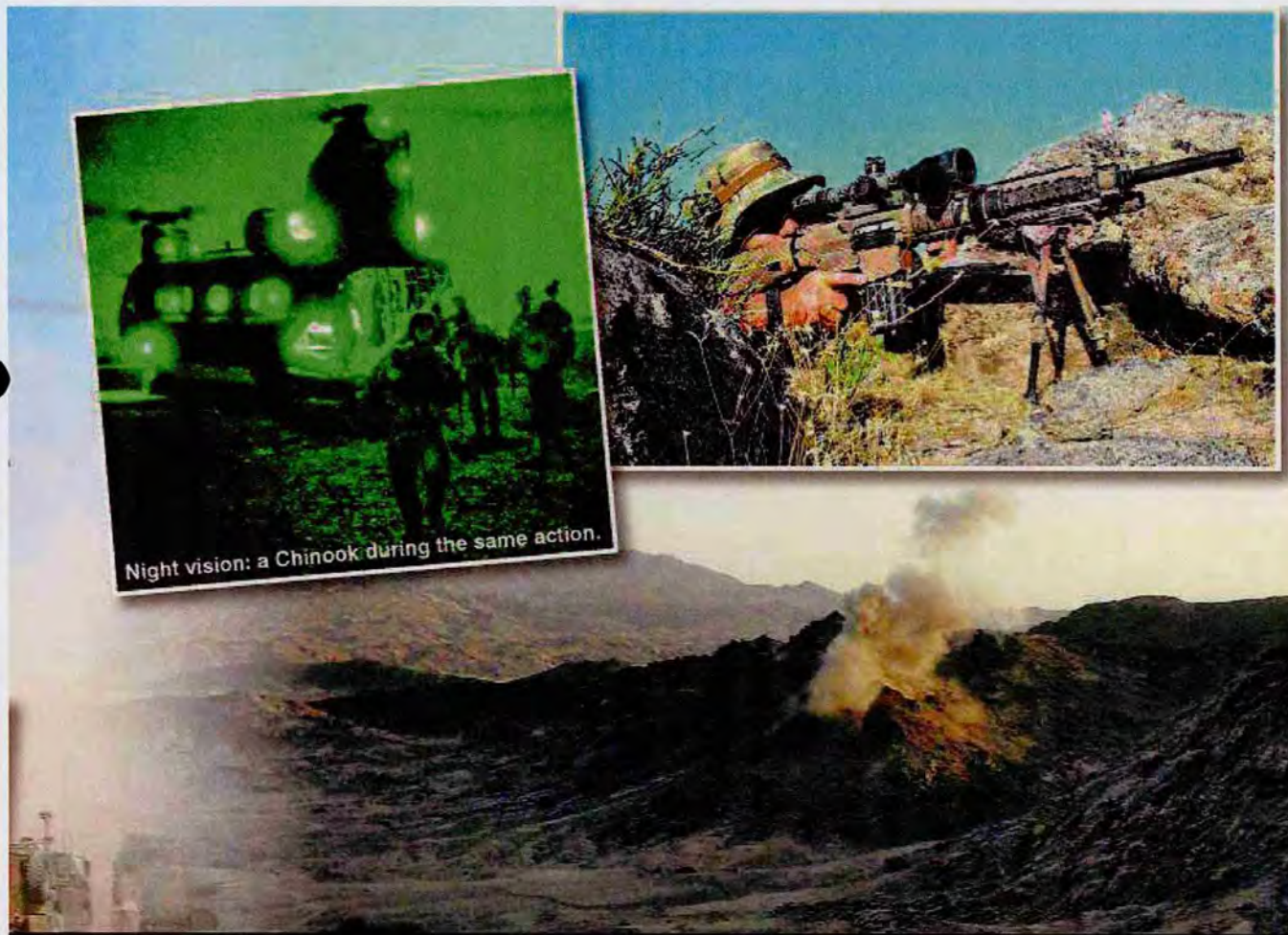
Editorial, Page 36

**“He is the
epitome of
the Spartan soldier**

A COMRADE







CREATION OF A MODERN LEGEND

October 2006 Australian Special Operations Task Group offensive launched in Shah Wali Kot area of northern Kandahar Province southwest of Tarin Kowt

Signals intelligence detects large Taliban force moving towards Australian Commandos

SAS squadron, including Cpl Ben, scrambles by Black Hawk helicopter from Tarin Kowt

SAS force lands and encounters heavy enemy fire

Specialist assaulter and sniper Cpl Ben or "RS" takes on three enemy machine gun posts

All three positions neutralised by him with arm's-length fighting, many enemy dead

More than 60 enemy killed by small arms, hand-to-hand fighting and close air support during six-hour battle

No Australian casualties

Cpl Ben awarded VC for his conspicuous gallantry that day. Several others to receive high-level awards. SAS squadron in line for Unit Citation.





Daily Telegraph
21/01/2011
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The Daily Telegraph

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UNCOMMON VALOUR

// He tore a Taliban fighter off his back like an insect, stood on his throat and shot him dead. He's a warrior

– The true story of our latest VC hero

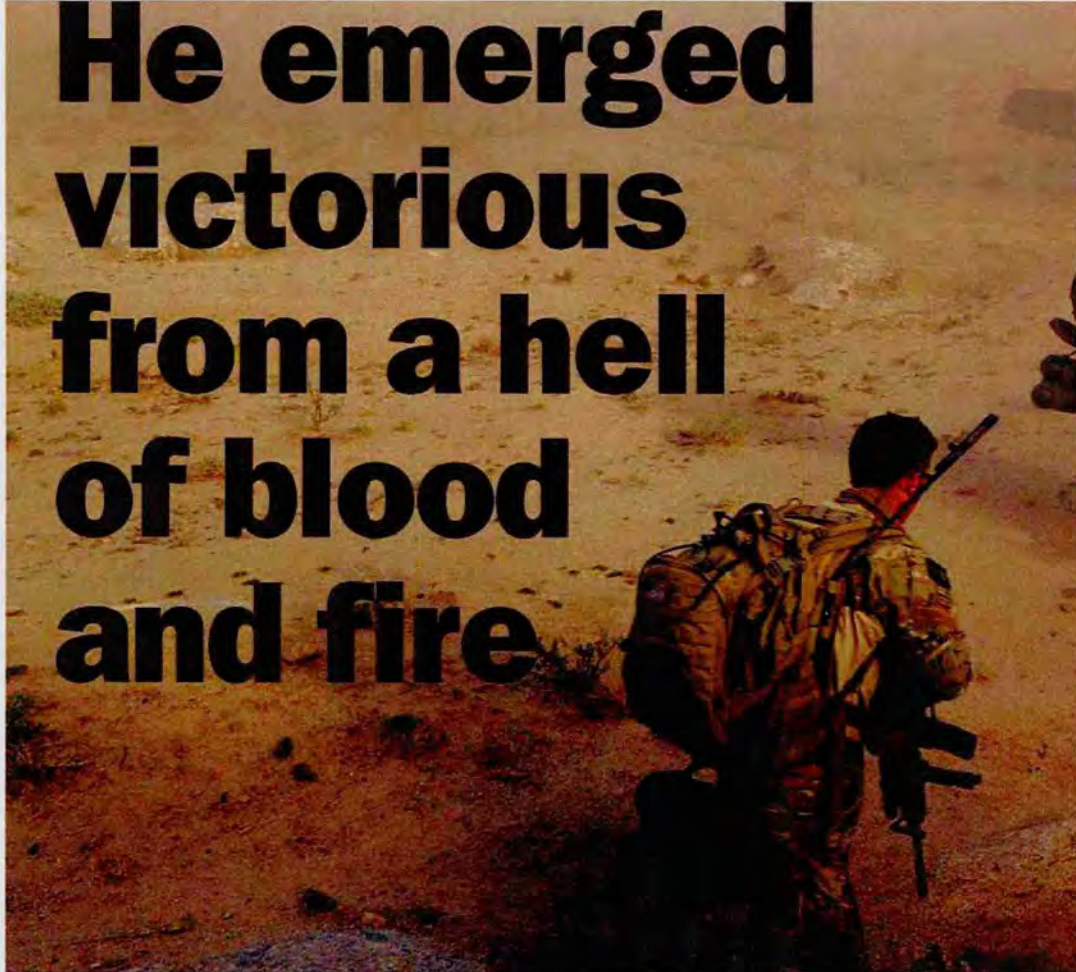
>> pages 4-5

Picture: Defence Department



Ian McPhedran
Defence Writer

He emerged victorious from a hell of blood and fire



THE brown dust from the departing choppers that carried the SAS squadron south from their base at Tarin Kowt had barely cleared when all hell broke loose.

It was October 2010, at the height of the Afghanistan fighting season, and a large Taliban force had established numerous firing positions around heavy machineguns.

More than 24 elite Perth-based Diggers from the Special Air Service Regiment were under withering fire.

Realising his mates were in grave danger, and with no regard for his own welfare, the SAS Corporal charged headlong into the Taliban machinegun fire.

The sight of the 202cm Australian warrior coming at them must have

shocked the bearded Afghans.

Within minutes three enemy guns had been silenced and numerous Taliban fighters lay dead.

A man mountain of a West Australian called Ben, or "RS" to his mates, had taken out three machinegun positions single handedly. His comrades said it was the most extreme example of conspicuous gallantry since Albert Jacka VC jumped into a trench full of Turks at Gallipoli in 1915, killing seven with his rifle and bayonet.

"He just tore into the enemy," one of his mates said.

"He is the epitome of the Spartan soldier. It was only a matter of time before he would demonstrate his true ability."

Now the soldier — already awarded a Medal of Gallantry — will become the latest to be awarded the nation's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross For Australia.

"This guy is a warrior," one of his ex-colleagues said ahead of Sunday's investiture ceremony.

The battle that led to the honour came during an offensive in the Shah Wali Kot area.

Signals intelligence had intercepted enemy "chatter" about a large group of Taliban fighters moving to attack a combined force of commandos from the Sydney based 2nd Commando Regiment and the Afghan National Army.

The SAS had been mounting

helicopter-borne assaults throughout the offensive, targeting Taliban commanders and bomb makers.

As soon as word came through, the troops from the squadron based at Camp Russell near Tarin Kowt immediately mounted several US Blackhawk choppers for the 15-minute flight into battle.

After landing the SAS took the fight to the enemy, but it was clear they would falter unless the machineguns were neutralised. Step forward "RS". The biggest man in the regiment by a fair margin.

"RS" joined the SASR in 2002

from the army's 3rd Battalion. He is a specialist sniper and "assaulter" and a devoted husband and father of two young daughters.

He was awarded a Medal for Gallantry in December 2006 for his courage under fire in Afghanistan's Chora Valley in the same battle in which Sergeant Matthew Locke, who was killed in action during 2007, won his MG. During that fight, according to comrades, "RS" tore a Taliban fighter off his back like an insect, stood on his throat and shot him dead.

By the time the battle was over

about 60 Taliban lay dead from small arms fire, hand-to-hand combat and close air support.

Ben's Victoria Cross will make him the most decorated Australian soldier in decades. His good mate Rob Maylor, whose book *SAS Sniper* was released last year, describes him as an outstanding soldier: "He has excelled as an operator in the Regiment, and is also an SAS sniper, but his main calling is as an assaulter and he is exceptional."



Dangerous business: Australian troops on patrol at Sha Wali Kot in northern Afghanistan and (below) Corporal Ben is presented with his Medal for Gallantry in 2006





**Lance Corporal
Albert Jacka**

Earned his VC on May 19-20, 1915, at Gallipoli, launching an attack from the rear on advancing Turkish troops, throwing two bombs and giving covering fire. He then took on the Turks alone, shooting five, bayoneting two and forcing the rest to flee



**Private
Edward Kenna**

Earned his VC near Wewak, New Guinea, on May 15, 1945, by standing up and solely taking on an enemy bunker with a Bren gun and rifle. Despite being under fire from only 50m away, he killed many enemy and took the bunker



**Warrant Officer
Class II
Keith Payne**

Earned his VC in Kontum province, South Vietnam, on May 24, 1969. Despite being wounded by shrapnel and under enemy fire, he set out at night to locate about 40 men, some wounded, and led them to safety, even dragging some out by himself



**Trooper
Mark Donaldson**

Earned his VC in Afghanistan on September 2, 2008. With his convoy ambushed, he deliberately exposed himself to enemy fire to draw attention from wounded comrades. He then moved 80m to carry a severely wounded interpreter to safety





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Page 1 of 2

Big Ben's charge into history

The battle that earned fearless soldier a VC

Ian McPhedran

THE brown dust from the departing choppers that carried the SAS squadron south from their base at Tarin Kowt in Afghanistan had barely cleared when all hell broke loose.

It was October 2010 and a large Taliban force had established numerous firing positions around several heavy machineguns.

More than 24 Perth-based soldiers from the Special Air Service Regiment were under fire.

Realising his mates were in grave danger, a 203cm Australian lance-corporal charged the enemy.

Within minutes three enemy guns had been silenced and numerous Taliban fighters lay dead.

A man mountain of a West Australian called Ben, or "RS" to his mates, had taken out three machinegun positions

single-handedly.

His comrades say it was the most extreme example of gallantry since Albert Jacka VC jumped in to a trench full of Turks at Gallipoli in 1915, killing seven with his rifle and bayonet.

"RS", the biggest man in the regiment, has the courage to match his imposing frame.

"He just tore into the enemy," one of his fellow soldiers said. "He is the epitome of the Spartan soldier. It was only a matter of time before he would demonstrate his true ability."

"RS" joined the SASR in 2002 from 3RAR. He is a specialist sniper and "assaulter" as well as a devoted husband and father of two young daughters. "This guy is a warrior," one of his former colleagues said.

Corporal Ben was awarded a Medal for Gallantry in December 2006 for his courage under fire in Afghanistan's Chora

Valley, in the same battle where Sergeant Matthew Locke, who was killed in action during 2007, received his Medal for Gallantry.

On Sunday, Corporal Ben will be awarded the nation's highest military honour – the Victoria Cross for Australia.

His good mate, Rob Maylor, whose book *SAS Sniper* was released last year, describes him as an outstanding soldier.

"He has excelled as an operator in the regiment, and is also an SAS sniper, but his main calling is as an assaulter and he is exceptional," the book said.

At the picturesque headquarters of the SASR above Swanbourne beach near Perth, Corporal Ben, whose identity will be revealed on the day, will join the elite ranks of Victoria Cross recipients.

Ninety-seven Australians have been awarded a VC and

only SAS Corporal Mark Donaldson wears the Victoria Cross for Australia that was instituted in 1991 to replace the imperial award.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce will pin the bronze cross – forged from Russian guns captured during the 19th century Crimean War – with a crimson ribbon, on Corporal Ben's mammoth chest in front of his proud family, mates and national military and political leaders including Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Chief of Defence Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston.

Several other SAS soldiers from Corporal Ben's squadron will also receive gallantry awards.

Twenty-one Australian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan.



PIN-UP: Lance-Corporal Ben when he received his Medal for Gallantry. On Sunday he will receive the Victoria Cross for Australia.



IN ACTION: The SAS leave a helicopter in Afghanistan.

Courage under fire

The highest honour

■ The Victoria Cross was originally instituted in 1856 as a decoration to recognise gallantry in action by all ranks of the services. The VC was awarded to Australians under the Imperial system of awards, with 96 Australians receiving the medal. It was then decided to retain the VC as the pre-eminent gallantry award in the Australian system. The Victoria Cross for Australia was approved on January 15, 1991, and in 2009, SAS Corporal Mark Donaldson became the first Australian to be awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia.

The act of valour

How Corporal Ben etched his name in history:

■ October 2010: Australian Special Operations Task Group offensive in Shah Wali Kot area of northern Kandahar Province, southwest of Tarin Kowt.

■ Signals intelligence detects large Taliban force moving towards Australian commandos.

■ SAS Squadron, including Corporal Ben, scrambles by Black Hawk helicopters from Tarin Kowt.

■ SAS force lands and encounters heavy enemy fire.

■ Specialist assaulter/sniper Corporal Ben or "RS" takes on three machinegun posts.



■ At three positions neutralised by him with arm's-length fighting, many enemy dead

■ More than 60 enemy killed by small arms, hand-to-hand fighting and close air support during six-hour battle.

■ No Australian casualties.

■ Corporal Ben awarded VC for his conspicuous gallantry that day. Several others to receive high-level awards. SAS Squadron in line for Unit Citation.

The Australian

Corporal to be second SAS soldier in two years to receive VC in Afghanistan conflict

- Mark Dodd
- From: The Australian
- January 20, 2011 12:26PM

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AN SAS corporal has become the latest soldier to be cited for the nation's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross for Australia, defence sources have confirmed.

The soldier, from Western Australia and in his early 30s, is the second member of the elite Perth-based Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) to receive the award in two years.

Senior defence sources confirmed the battle after which the soldier was recommended for the VC occurred last October in the **Sha Wali Kot** (<http://www.defence.gov.au/op/afghanistan/gallery/2010/20100616/index.htm>) region of northern Kandahar.

It's understood the action involved other Australian special forces soldiers from the Commando Regiment.

Sha Wali Kot has been the scene of ongoing operations involving Australian, US and Afghan special forces pursuing Taliban commanders.

Defence is staying tight-lipped about the award but it was virtually confirmed by Governor-General Quentin Bryce, whose office earlier today issued an alert for an "event of national importance" to be held at SAS headquarters at Campbell Barracks in Perth on Sunday.

In January 2009, SAS Trooper Mark Donaldson was conferred the VC for an incident the previous year in which his patrol was ambushed by a superior force of heavily-armed Taliban insurgents.

Trooper Donaldson deliberately exposed himself to insurgent gunfire in a bid to rescue a wounded Afghan interpreter, who he dragged to safety and gave first aid.

About 1500 Australians are deployed in Afghanistan including a 300-strong special operations task group which includes members of the SAS and Commando Regiment.

The Australian troops are often deployed outside their home province of Oruzgan on deadly counter-insurgency operations.

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Herald Sun

SAS corporal to receive Victoria Cross for Afghanistan firefight

- By Ian McPhedran
- From: The Daily Telegraph
- January 20, 2011 7:27AM

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A nation's pride ... the Victoria Cross / Pic: Jason Busch

Source: Herald Sun

THE second SAS soldier in two years will be awarded the nation's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross for Australia.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce and senior political leaders including Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Defence Minister Stephen Smith and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott will travel to Perth this Sunday for the investiture ceremony at Campbell Barracks.

They will be joined by military brass including Chief of Defence Air Marshal Angus Houston and Army Chief Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie at the headquarters of the Special Air Service Regiment at Swanbourne near Perth.

Details are being very closely guarded and sources throughout defence and the bureaucracy were tight lipped yesterday when quizzed about the occasion.

Rumours have been circulating for some time that an un-named SAS corporal engaged in an intense battle in the Shah Wali Kot region of Northern Kandahar last October could be nominated. A special forces group came under withering fire and four Commandos were wounded, including one who was shot in the chest, during an operation to capture a Taliban commander.

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Diggers query VC award for soldier in Afghanistan

Alex Mitchell
December 26, 2010 - 3:00AM

AN AUSTRALIAN soldier investigated for bullying in Afghanistan could be awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery, but the top-brass proposal has become mired in politics and recriminations.

Advertisement

Some senior officers and NCOs have declined to write citations in support of the as-yet-unnamed candidate for the nation's highest military award.

They argue that other members of his elite unit shared equally in the extreme dangers of forward operations and say his valour was no more nor less than that of his comrades-in-arms.

"If he gets the VC then the rest of the team should too," one of the soldiers told friends while on leave in Australia.

Adding fuel to the controversy, the soldier under consideration for the award is unpopular with some members of his unit and he has faced complaints of bullying.

Nevertheless, there has been pressure "from above" to fast-track the presentation of a recommendation for a VC, according to impeccable sources who have contacted *The Sun-Herald*.

One reason suggested for the haste is to boost the morale of Australian defence personnel in the Afghan war zone after a parliamentary and public debate that has questioned the purpose and effectiveness of the NATO-led mission.

Secret cables sent from the US embassy in Canberra - and released by WikiLeaks - show diplomats, politicians and defence experts held grave concerns about the nine-year war that has claimed the lives of 21 Australian soldiers. When he was prime minister, Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd reportedly said the outlook in Afghanistan "scares the hell out of me".

Under existing protocol, Governor-General Quentin Bryce awards the Victoria Cross of Australia - an award created in 1991 to supersede the British VC - with the approval of the Queen on the recommendation of Defence Minister Stephen Smith.

The soldier in contention is from Mr Smith's home state, Western Australia, but there is no suggestion the minister has played any active part in the campaign to award the medal.

The award is made for "most conspicuous gallantry, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy or belligerents".

The first VC of Australia was awarded on January 16, 2009, to Trooper Mark Donaldson for the heroic rescue of a coalition forces interpreter from heavy fire in Oruzgan Province. Recipients are entitled to an annuity from the government.

Canberra author Robert Macklin, who wrote *Bravest: How some of Australia's greatest war heroes won their medals* and the just-published *SAS Sniper*, said: "It is not unusual for VC winners to be unpopular with the chain of command; they are often strong personalities who chafe against authority.

"But in a battlefield like Afghanistan, it is sometimes almost impossible to pick out the most deserving soldier for a gallantry award. Indeed, in the action where Mark Donaldson won his VC, at least two other SAS troopers deserved decorations for bravery which have yet to be awarded. It is probably time to review the system."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/diggers-query-vc-award-for-soldier-in-afghanistan-20101225-197fb.html>



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26/12/2010
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Soldiers in row over top-brass VC proposal

ALEX MITCHELL

A TOP-BRASS proposal to award the Victoria Cross to an Australian soldier who has been investigated for bullying in Afghanistan is mired in politics and recriminations.

Some senior officers and non-commissioned officers have declined to write citations supporting the as-yet-unnamed candidate for the nation's highest military award. They say other members of his elite unit shared equally in the extreme dangers.

"If he gets the VC then the rest of the team should too," one of the soldiers told friends while on leave in Australia.

Adding fuel to the controversy, the soldier under consideration for the award is unpopular with some members of his unit and has faced complaints of bullying.

Nevertheless, there has been pressure "from above" to fast-track a recommendation for a VC, according to sources.

One reason suggested for the haste is to boost the morale of Australian troops in Afghanistan, following a parliamentary and public debate about the effectiveness of the NATO-led mission.

Secret cables sent from the US embassy in Canberra — and released by WikiLeaks — showed senior diplomats, politicians and defence experts held grave concerns about the nine-year war that has claimed the lives of 21 Australian soldiers.

When he was prime minister, Kevin Rudd, who is now Foreign Minister, reportedly said the outlook in Afghanistan "scares the hell out of me".

"If he gets the VC, then the rest of the team should too." Comrade of award candidate

Governor-General Quentin Bryce awards the Victoria Cross of Australia, created in 1991 to supersede the British VC, with the approval of the Queen and on the recommendation of Defence Minister Stephen Smith.

The soldier in contention is from Mr Smith's home state, Western Australia, but there is no suggestion the minister has played any active part in the campaign to award the medal.

The award is given for "most conspicuous gallantry, or some

daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy or belligerents".

The first VC of Australia was awarded on January 16, 2009, to Trooper Mark Donaldson for the heroic rescue of a coalition forces interpreter from heavy fire in Oruzgan province during Operation Slipper. All recipients are entitled to an annuity from the government.

Robert Macklin, author of *Bravest: How some of Australia's greatest war heroes won their medals* and *SAS Sniper*, said: "It is not unusual for VC winners to be unpopular with the chain of command; they are often strong personalities who chafe against authority.

"But in a battlefield like Afghanistan it is sometimes almost impossible to pick out the most deserving soldier for a gallantry award.

"In the action where Mark Donaldson won his VC, at least two other SAS troopers deserved decorations for bravery which have yet to be awarded. It is probably time to review the system."



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Page 1 of 2

WAR HERO MEDAL REVOLT

Fellow Diggers question VC for soldier in Afghanistan

Alex Mitchell

AN AUSTRALIAN soldier investigated for bullying in Afghanistan could be awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery, but the top-brass proposal has become mired in politics and recriminations.

Some senior officers and NCOs have declined to write citations in support of the as-yet-unnamed candidate for the nation's highest military award.

They argue that other members of his elite unit shared equally in the extreme dangers of forward operations and say his valour was no more nor less than that of his comrades-in-arms.

"If he gets the VC then the rest of the team should too," one of the soldiers told friends while on leave in Australia.

Adding fuel to the controversy, the soldier under consideration for the award is unpopular with some members of his unit and he has faced complaints of bullying.

Nevertheless, there has been pressure "from above" to fast-track the presentation of a recommendation for a VC, according to



impeccable sources who have contacted *The Sun-Herald*.

One reason suggested for the haste is to boost the morale of Australian defence personnel in the Afghan war zone after a parliamentary and public debate that has questioned the purpose and effectiveness of the NATO-led mission.

Secret cables sent from the US embassy in Canberra – and released by WikiLeaks – show diplomats, politicians and defence experts held grave concerns about the nine-year war

that has claimed the lives of 21 Australian soldiers. When he was prime minister, Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd reportedly said the outlook in Afghanistan "scars the hell out of me".

Under existing protocol, Governor-General Quentin Bryce awards the Victoria Cross of Australia, a new award created in 1991 to supersede the British VC, with the approval of the Queen on the recommendation of Defence Minister Stephen Smith.

The soldier in contention is from Mr Smith's

Continued Page 2

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Diggers query VC award for soldier in Afghanistan

From Page 1

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Canberra author Robert Macklin, who wrote *Bravest: How some of Australia's greatest war heroes won their medals* and the just-published

SAS Sniper, said: "It is not unusual for VC winners to be unpopular with the chain of command; they are often strong personalities who chafe against authority.

"But in a battlefield like Afghanistan, it is sometimes almost impossible to pick out the most deserving soldier for a gallantry award. Indeed, in the action where Mark Donaldson won his VC, at least two other SAS troopers deserved decorations for bravery which have yet to be awarded. It is probably time to review the system."



WikiLeaks

Mistrust undermines
alliance in

Afghanistan. Pages 24-25



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VC honour stirs up internal controversy

Alex Mitchell and Robert Macklin

PLANS to award the nation's highest military honour to a member of the elite SAS regiment who has faced accusations of bullying have caused a firestorm of controversy in Canberra's political and defence establishment.

An award ceremony is being coordinated with the official opening of the Australian War Memorial's newly completed Hall of Valour on February 23.

The \$4.5 million project, designed by architect Richard Johnson, is home to 66 Victoria Crosses that have been donated or lent to the War Memorial.

Following *The Sun-Herald's* revelation that the Victoria Cross for Australia candidate had been reported for bullying, politicians and the top brass adopted the tactic of closing ranks and brushing aside criticism.

Details of the operation – and the actions of the soldiers involved – cannot be revealed for security reasons, but reliable army sources said the Australians engaged a war party of Taliban militants at a remote location outside Oruzgan Province, the prin-

cipal area of Australian responsibility.

The soldier, a member of the SAS Regiment stationed at Campbell Barracks in Perth, was taking part in a joint action of Australia's Special Forces that included elements of the 2nd Commando Regiment, formerly known as 4RAR.

Two members of the regiment have also been recommended in the past to receive the VC for Australia.

The soldier in contention for the second Victoria Cross of Australia ever awarded is the son of an eminent member of the Perth establishment.

By coincidence, Defence Minister Stephen Smith, who has responsibility for recommending the honour, is also from Perth, while the city's billionaire television mogul Kerry Stokes bought three VCs and donated them to the Hall of Valour.

Another complaint by service personnel, some on their sixth tour of duty, is that all the men in the operation shared the danger and showed exceptional bravery in the face of the enemy.

"If he gets the VC then the rest of the team should, too," a soldier said.

► **Foe to friend** – Page 22