

The Victoria Cross Roll of Honour ~ Union Jack Club, London

Patron-in-Chief

His Majesty the King

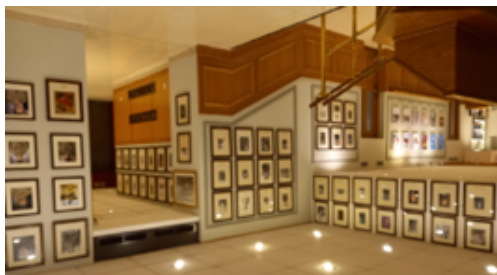
(A tribute to Honorary WO1 Bill (Willie) Apiata, formally New Zealand SAS)

By WO John Littlefield Royal Navy Retd



Section of the VC Roll of Honour

excellent support from the Union Jack Club in London, the New Zealand High Commission in London, and the New Zealand Chief of Defence Forces office in Wellington. Throughout this process, I was unfortunately unable to participate fully due to some personal health challenges. In short, our efforts culminated on March 20, 2025, when Bill's portrait was finally mounted in the Union Jack Club, proudly displayed among his fellow Victoria Cross recipients. Coincidentally, this date was my Diamond Wedding Anniversary, the beginning of astronomical spring, and an important milestone for the celebration.



Part of the UJC collection of portraits of VC holders



Corporal Bill Apiata VC, NZSAS, as displayed at the Union Jack Club, London

THE UNION JACK CLUB IS LONDON'S PREMIER CLUB for enlisted and veteran members of the armed forces. At the heart of the Club is the Victoria Cross Roll of Honour. This unique and complete display names all recipients, a book of remembrance opened each day of the year, and an extensive collection of accompanying photos and portraits. Behind each award is an inspiring tale of courage and daring, each achieving almost mythical status. The Roll of Honour is a source of great pride to Club members, and visitors are reminded of the extraordinary acts of bravery and sacrifice of British and Commonwealth military and civilian personnel.

As a regular visitor to the Club, I often select names from the board and link them to their portraits and citations. In early May 2023, I noticed the name of one of the more recent recipients, Corporal Bill (Willie) Apiata, NZSAS. However, when I tried to associate a face with the name, I was disappointed to find no portrait. Little did I know that my idea to resolve this issue would spark a two-year global endeavour. I was helped by my long-time good friend Neal Catley, RNZN, with whom I attended the UK Royal Navy Radio Communication Instructors course in 1973 at HMS Mercury. We received

A total of 1,358 Victoria Crosses have been awarded since its inception in 1856. Major Arthur Martin-Leake received the VC twice, first as a surgeon during the Boer War in February 1902. He received a bar to his cross for bravery on the Western Front in November 1914. Captain Noel Chavasse of the Royal Army Medical Corps was awarded the VC in August 1916 on the Somme, and a posthumous bar for gallantry in August 1917 in Flanders. Captain Charles Upham, 20th Canterbury and Otago Battalion, New Zealand Expeditionary Force, won the VC for his actions on Crete in May 1941 and a bar for bravery in Egypt in July 1942.

Since WW2, most Commonwealth countries have created their own honours systems, introducing their own decorations for gallantry and bravery, replacing British decorations such as the Victoria Cross with their own. In 1991, Australia created its own VC. Although it is a separate award, its appearance resembles its British counterpart. Canada followed suit in 1993. The Victoria Cross for New Zealand was established in 1999. While the New Zealand and Australian VCs are technically separate awards, the decoration is identical to the British design, including being cast from the same gunmetal as the British VC. The Canadian Victoria Cross also includes metal from the same cannon, along with copper and other metals from all regions of Canada.

There have been five recipients of the of the Victoria Cross for Australia, four for action in Afghanistan and one awarded for action in WW2 following a review. The Victoria Cross for New Zealand has been awarded once, to Corporal Bill Apiata, New Zealand Special Air Service (NZSAS), on July 2, 2007.

As published in the New Zealand Gazette of 5 July 2007, his citation reads:

“Lance Corporal (now Corporal) Apiata was, in 2004, part of a New Zealand Special Air Service (NZSAS) Troop on patrol in Afghanistan, which laid up in defensive formation for the night. At approximately 0315 hours, the Troop was attacked by a group of about twenty enemy fighters, who had approached by stealth using the cover of undulating ground in pitch darkness. Rocket-propelled grenades struck two of the Troop's vehicles, destroying one and immobilising the other. The opening strike was followed by dense and persistent machine gun and automatic rifle fire from close range. The attack then continued using further rocket-propelled grenades and machine gun and rifle fire. The initial attack was directed at the vehicle where Lance Corporal Apiata was stationed. He was blown off the bonnet by the impact of rocket propelled grenades striking the vehicle. He was dazed, but was not physically injured. The two other vehicle crew members had been wounded by shrapnel; one of them, Corporal D, was in a serious

condition. Illuminated by the burning vehicle, and under sustained and accurate enemy fire directed at and around their position, the three soldiers immediately took what little cover was available. Corporal D was discovered to have sustained life-threatening wounds. The other two soldiers immediately began applying basic first aid. Lance Corporal Apiata assumed command of the situation, as he could see that his superior's condition was deteriorating rapidly. By this time, however, Lance Corporal Apiata's exposed position, some seventy metres in front of the rest of the Troop, was coming under increasingly intense enemy fire. Corporal D was now suffering serious arterial bleeding and was lapsing in and out of consciousness. Lance Corporal Apiata concluded that his comrade urgently required medical attention, or he would likely die. Pinned down by the enemy, in the direct line of fire between friend and foe, he also judged that there was almost no chance of such help reaching their position. As the enemy pressed its attack towards Lance Corporal Apiata's position, and without thought of abandoning his colleague to save himself, he took a decision in the highest order of personal courage under fire. Knowing the risks involved in moving to open ground, Lance Corporal Apiata decided to carry Corporal D singlehandedly to the relative safety of the main Troop position, which afforded better cover and where medical treatment could be given. He ordered his other colleague, Trooper E, to make his own way back to the rear. In total disregard of his own safety, Lance Corporal Apiata stood up and lifted his comrade bodily. He then carried him across the seventy metres of broken, rocky and fire swept ground, fully exposed in the glare of battle to heavy enemy fire and into the face of returning fire from the main Troop position. That neither he nor his colleague were hit is scarcely possible. Having delivered his wounded companion to relative shelter with the remainder of the patrol, Lance Corporal Apiata re-armed himself and re-joined the fight in counter-attack. By his actions, he removed the tactical complications of Corporal D's predicament from considerations of rescue. The Troop could now concentrate entirely on prevailing in the battle itself. After an engagement lasting approximately twenty minutes, the assault was broken up and the numerically superior attackers were routed with significant casualties, with the Troop in pursuit. Lance Corporal Apiata had thereby contributed materially to the operational success of the engagement. A subsequent medical assessment confirmed that Corporal D would probably have died of blood loss and shock, had it not been for Lance Corporal Apiata's selflessly courageous act in carrying him back to the main Troop lines, to receive the immediate treatment that he needed."



*Bill Apiata VC, promoted to Honorary Warrant Officer Class One (WO1)
Image courtesy NZDF website*

On May 22, 2024, Bill Apiata was appointed a Special Representative to the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) and promoted to Honorary Warrant Officer Class One (WO1). The appointment and promotion was carried out in front of family and colleagues at Papakura Military Camp, home of New Zealand's Special Forces, by outgoing Chief of Defence Force, Air Marshal Kevin Short. Honorary WO1 Apiata is the first person appointed as a Special Representative. The holder of this new role will work across international, New Zealand and Defence Force activities to contribute to the mana of the NZDF. The position enables the NZDF to provide enduring support and care to WO1 Apiata and any future recipients of the Victoria Cross. "It is a privilege to be appointed to this new role," WO1 Apiata said. "As a recipient of the VC, I represent the NZDF every day and this appointment formally recognises that relationship. It is a great honour to be awarded the Victoria Cross and it comes with much pressure on the recipient. This sets a path not just for me, but for those who might be awarded the VC in the future."