

## A STRANGER TO FEAR

VC Tank Killer of Colito

### FAR RIGHT:

Nigel Gray Leakey (1913-1941). The only member of the Kenya Regiment to be awarded the Victoria Cross during the Second World War.

### MAIN IMAGE:

Italian tanks operating in the rugged terrain of Abyssinia in 1941.

**T**HE HUNT went on amid a tangle of thorn bushes and gnarled trees sprouting from giant ant hills as shadows crept across the body-strewn battlefield on the banks of the Billate river. It was late afternoon on May 19, 1941 and stunning victory in the so-called Battle of the Lakes, the struggle to free southern Ethiopia from Italian occupation, had given way to an increasingly desperate search.

British officers and non-commissioned officers joined with African askari in a frantic effort to find the man who had single-handedly defeated an enemy armoured attack armed only with a service revolver.

Having already captured one tank, Sergeant Nigel Leakey, a 28-year-old mortar detachment commander with the 1/6th King's African Rifles, was last seen clinging to the turret of a second one as it careered back through the bushes.

Dusk cut short the search when the troops were pulled back to help consolidate the vital river bridgehead near the village of Colito. By the time

they resumed their quest the following morning it was too late. Overnight bands of Ethiopian irregulars, known as 'Shifta', had swarmed across the vacated ground, looting vehicles and stripping all of the bodies of clothes and equipment.

By the time Leakey's mortar officer, John Pollard, ventured across the river there was no sign of the 'missing' sergeant anywhere. Parties of the 2nd Nigerian Regiment had already "made a good job of clearing up". The dead, with friend and foe indistinguishable from one another, had been buried mostly en masse.

"There wasn't much else to see," observed Pollard, except for an abandoned tractor, several ammunition

Armed only with a revolver, Nigel Leakey single-handedly took on a squadron of tanks to turn the tide of battle 75 years ago. **Steve Snelling** charts a story of unbelievable bravery during the Abyssinian campaign and the subsequent struggle to recognise his gallantry.

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trucks and, as he put it, the “grim spectacle” of one of Leakey’s tank victims lying abandoned in the bush, “a dead Eyetie caught in the track”.

The fate of the ‘tank-killer of Colito’ remained a mystery when the 1/6th KAR moved out from the Billate in heavy rain two days later. As they resumed their long march towards the Italian strongholds of Soddu and Jimma, they did so in the hope that they would shortly be reunited with the man whose extraordinary exploit was already the talk of the units making up 22nd East African Brigade.

To his comrades as well as his senior commanders it seemed a foregone conclusion that his magnificent bravery would be marked by the highest of

martial honours. The only question in their minds as the battlefield of Colito faded from view was whether or not the award would be a posthumous one. For the time being at least, they remained optimistic. As Brigadier Charles ‘Fluffy’ Fowkes, later wrote: “We... hoped that we should find Sgt Leakey in enemy hands...”

### ‘I’M NOT FINISHED YET’

Nigel Gray Leakey was no stranger to struggles against the odds. Fearless, forthright and formidably self-reliant, his character and outlook were shaped during a childhood growing up in the wilds of northern Kenya surrounded by hyena, lions, leopards, zebra and the occasional elephant. >>



*Nigel - Just before joining KAR.*

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**BELOW:**

An artist's impression of men of the King's African Rifles wading a river during the Abyssinian campaign. It was after one such crossing near Colito that the 1/6th Battalion staged a full-blooded bayonet charge that broke Italian resistance on the banks of the Billate.

Born in Nairobi on New Year's Day 1913, the eldest son of early settlers, Arundell Gray Leakey and his wife, Elizabeth (née Laing), he learned to shoot and hunt at an early age - one time facing down a lion to allow his two brothers and sister to get away before making his own escape.

In a boyhood crammed with adventure and no little tragedy, he overcame serious illness, the early death of his mother and enforced separation from his family and the country he loved.

Shipped off to live with his father's sister and her husband, who was a housemaster at Bromsgrove School, he struggled to conform to what seemed an alien way of life. "Like me," his sister Agnes later recounted, "he felt confined and constricted in England after the freedom of our life in the wide open spaces of Kenya." He nevertheless shone as a member of the school's OTC shooting team and impressed with his spirited boxing performances.



His aunt recalled one fight that was stopped to avoid him taking further punishment.

"He was indignant," she recalled. "I'm not finished yet," he complained." It prompted the school's boxing trainer to remark: "He never knows when he is beaten."

Socially awkward and academically backward, he came into his own during family summer camps, astonishing his cousins by his field craft and his skill at snaring rabbits and snakes. Back at school, he floundered. In the end, he left without gaining his final certificate

**'THE MOST HAZARDOUS FEATS'**

His farming days ended abruptly with his call-up a week before the outbreak of war in September 1939. As a member of the Kenya Regiment since its inception two years earlier, he was among the first in the colony to find himself in uniform. Originally raised with the idea of providing instructors and junior leaders for the region's premier unit, the King's African Rifles, the new volunteer force made up mostly of white farmers and the sons of farmers quickly fulfilled its role.

Within days of hostilities beginning,

Leakey found himself posted as a sergeant to the 1/6th Battalion, KAR, which had only just moved to Nanyuki, on the western slopes of Mount Kenya, from its base at Dar-es-Salaam in Tanganyika. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Colin Blackden, a no-nonsense South Wales Borderer, the unit formed part of a small, over-stretched force tasked with guarding a thousand square miles of semi-desert from the Sudan to the Indian Ocean bordering Italian-held territory in Abyssinia and Somaliland.

After months of relative inactivity, the 'cold war' finally turned 'hot' in June 1940 when Italy sided with

Germany. Almost immediately Italian forces laid siege to the small frontier fort at Moyale, one of a handful of strong-points freckling the northern frontier. It was here, a few weeks later, that Nigel Leakey began to acquire a reputation for fearlessness in keeping with his bravery displayed as a child growing up in Kenya and as a junior boxer in the ring at Bromsgrove.

He was among a volunteer patrol that set out on the night of July 13/14 to create a diversion to enable the invested garrison to slip away. Over the coming months, his desire to be at the forefront of any action would come to typify his approach to soldiering.

As Captain George Robson, his patrol leader at Moyale, later attested: "It was characteristic of Sgt Leakey to volunteer for anything of this sort." To Second Lieutenant John Pollard, who served with him in the mortar platoon, he was "without exception, the bravest man I ever knew". Remembering him years later, he wrote: "A complete stranger to fear, he was prepared to perform the most hazardous feats without regard to personal danger.

He was also an excellent soldier in the technical sense. His mortar detachment was always the most efficient and best led. Only once did he clash with the CO in regard to turn-out, when he came across an abandoned iron bedstead and put it in his lorry for future use. The regimental mind was naturally outraged. But this minor lapse was soon forgotten after his feats in battle." >>

**FAR LEFT:** Robert, Agnes, Rea and Nigel Leakey with their parents and pet dog, Buster, around 1920. Arundell Gray Leakey served with the Carrier Corps during the First World War in Africa.

**LEFT:** Nigel, left, with two of his cousins during a summer camp while he was at Bromsgrove in the late 1920s.

**BELOW LEFT:** Nigel Leakey, left, with his father and step-mother, at Nyeri, in Kenya, in 1937. Arundell and Bessie Leakey were murdered by the Mau Mau in October 1954. Nigel's posthumously awarded VC was later recovered from the family home by his brother Rea.

**BELOW:** Nigel Leakey, seated far right middle row, as a cadet member of the Bromsgrove School rifle team that shot at Bisley in 1929.



because, as his sister put it, "he was so impatient to get back to Kenya".

Rejoining his father in Nyeri where he had remarried and taken a new farm, he took a variety of jobs, working on sisal and coffee estates, before branching out on his own. For a number of years, he and a small team of African workers operated a mobile sisal decorticating service. By 1939, he appeared set fair. With his profits from the sisal business, he acquired a 382-acre farm at Londiani, built himself a temporary two-room house and began growing pyrethrum - a natural insecticide. However, his hopes of making a success of the venture were destined to be dashed before he'd hardly begun.



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**ABOVE:** Nigel Leakey with some of his African workers in 1938.

**RIGHT:** A scout car carrying the brigade major of 22nd Brigade enters Addis Ababa on April 6, 1941.

**BELOW:** Nigel, Robert and Rea Leakey. All three brothers served in the army during the war. Rea earned a DSO, MC and Bar and Czech Military Cross with the Royal Tank Regiment.

More difficult to fathom was his strange obsession with biblical prophesy that led some in the battalion to regard him as something of an oddball if not a religious crank. As a British Israelite, he believed among other things that the modern Celto-Saxon nations could claim literal descent from the Children of Israel and he was not adverse to airing his views. According to Pollard, he "ruined his chances" of a commission by "talking a lot of nonsense about the British Israelites" at his East African OCTU. "On one occasion, he told me that the Nile would flow backwards and other absurdities." Another time, added Pollard, "he forecast that the war would go worse for us before it went better... and the Russians would join the Germans in North Africa against us! I was naturally depressed by all



this and devoutly trusted that there might be some error in his calculations."

Not surprisingly some of his colleagues in the 1/6th KAR thought him "mad", but Pollard and others closer to him were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. Pollard later wrote: "Madness, of course, is close to genius... He was soft-spoken and the calmest person I ever met. I never saw him in a rage. He was always in control of himself..." In short, he considered him just "the kind of stuff that VCs are made of".

### 'EFFECTIVE SUPPORT'

It was an opinion reinforced by Leakey's behaviour when a combined South African, West African and East African force commanded by Lieutenant General Alan Cunningham went on the offensive, taking the war from the Northern Frontier District of Kenya into the very heart of Mussolini's East African empire.

Pollard recalled an incident during the advance on Addis Ababa when an armoured car unit came under attack from Italian artillery in the Arba Pass. "I went forward with George Robson, who was commanding A Company, together with Sgts Leakey and Malan

with their mortar detachments in the rather vain hope of engaging the enemy who naturally far out-gunned us. "Not to be outdone, Leakey went forward and, by reducing the angle of the mortar barrel, considerably increased its range."

Following the fall of Addis on April 6, 1941, Leakey continued to display all his customary energy and enterprise as 1/6th KAR spearheaded 11th East African Division's push to open the route into Kenya by clearing the Italian forces from the inhospitable terrain around the Great Lakes south of the Abyssinian capital.



**ABOVE:** Soldiers of the West African Frontier Force dismantle Italian border signs on the outermost frontier of Mussolini's East African empire.



**ABOVE LEFT:** The fort at Moyale on the Kenyan frontier was the scene of Leakey's baptism of fire in July 1940, a month after Italy's entry into the war.

The advance blocked by a powerful enemy position along the Little Dadaba river, the battalion's four mortar detachments kept up a night-long harassing bombardment while another unit attempted an outflanking movement. Torrential rain was falling and the 1/6th KAR came under heavy shell and machine-gun fire. Leakey, however, was undeterred. According to Pollard, he "distinguished himself by climbing a vertiginous tree" from where he directed both mortar and artillery fire onto the enemy positions. Although exposed to the enemy's fire,

Leakey held on until dawn, reporting enemy movements "by observing the headlights of lorries and AFVs".

After the action, there was talk, wrote Pollard, of him being mentioned in despatches.

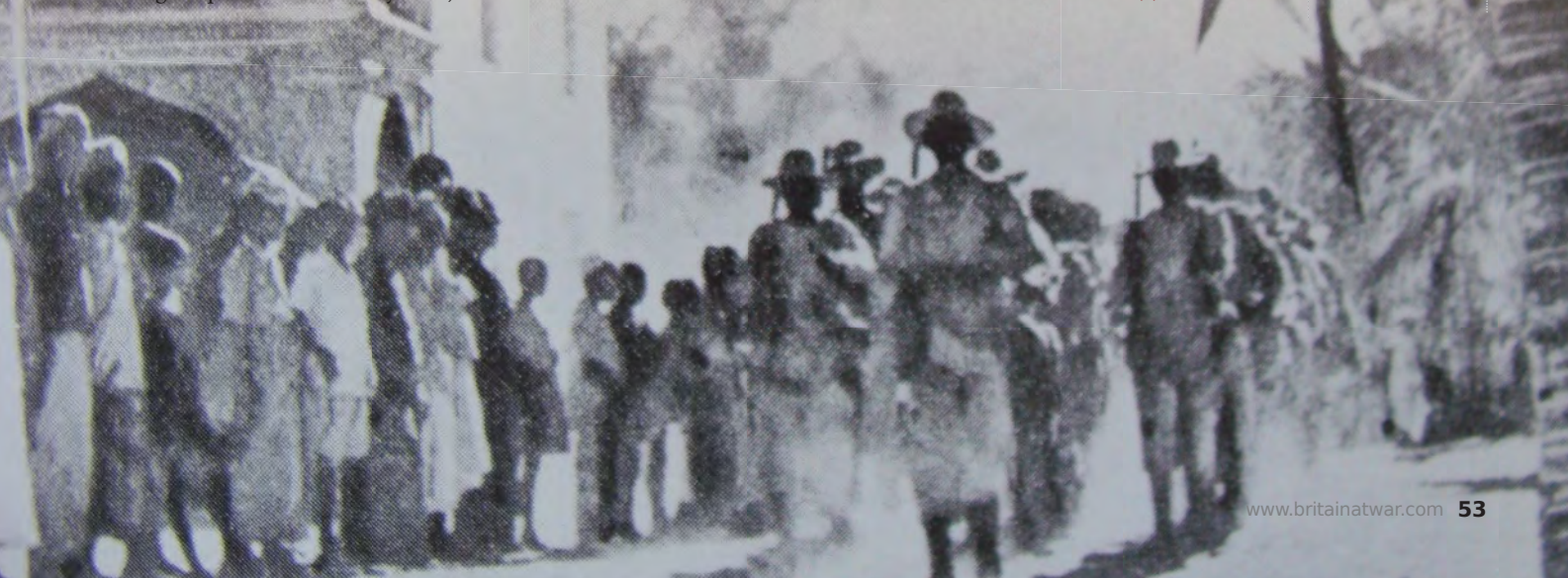
A few days later he was part of a small force commanded by Captain Richard Creswell, comprising a company of infantry, seven armoured cars and a mortar detachment, sent to locate what was thought to be a strong enemy position near the village of Colito east of the Billate river. Twice the reconnaissance

was halted by heavy shelling and machine-gun fire, the troops and vehicles withdrawing under cover of Leakey's mortars which, in the words of the battalion war diary, "gave very effective support" throughout. In the course of the operation, Creswell had been fatally wounded having apparently mistaken white artillery flags for offers of surrender. It was a tragic loss but there was little doubt that the force had been spared heavier losses by Leakey's well-directed intervention.

"When the patrol returned," wrote Pollard, "everyone was ecstatic about Leakey's bravery and it was suggested that he be put up for a Military Medal."

No such award was made by simple virtue of the fact that his exploit near Sciasciamanna was about to be overshadowed by an altogether more spectacular feat of individual daring performed just two days later in what would prove the decisive encounter of the Battle of the Lakes. >>

**BELOW:** Men of the King's African Rifles enter Kismayu, on the Somali coast, in February 1941.



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**RIGHT:** Brigadier Charles 'Fluffy' Fowkes giving orders during 22nd Brigade's advance. Fowkes strongly endorsed Leakey's VC recommendation in 1941 and again in 1945.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Second Lieutenant Philip Thorne was seconded from the Royal Scots to 1/6th KAR. Wounded in the forefront of A Company's assault, he was subsequently awarded the Military Cross, one of four given to officers of the unit for the Billate river action.

**BELOW:** This artist's impression of Leakey's action appeared in a Kenyan newspaper in 1945.

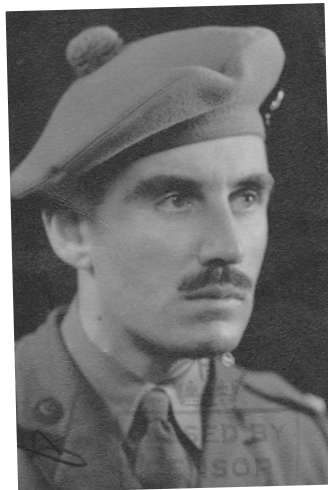
### 'HEARTY BRITISH CHEER'

As with the earlier action, Nigel Leakey's intended participation in the struggle to seize a bridgehead over the Billate river was by way of a supporting role. His detachment of 3-inch mortars were detached to offer covering fire to A and C Companies, respectively commanded by Lieutenant Ted Onslow and Second Lieutenant Roger Swynnerton, as they pushed forward towards Colito shortly after dawn on May 19. They made quick progress at first. The Italians, having demolished the only bridge, had abandoned the west bank and were hunkered down in well-camouflaged trenches and machine-gun posts cut in and around a plethora of tree-shrouded ant-hills studding the far side of the river. Their strength was unknown, but it was apparent they were well-covered by a number of exposed artillery pieces which opened fire as the vanguard of 1/6th KAR approached the river.

What happened next is unclear.

According to some, the unit's CO, Colin Blackden, immediately issued orders to his two leading companies to press on across the river and "sweep up the Italians on the other side".

Others, however, credit the decision to follow up their early success to Major 'Lucy' Field, the battalion's second in command who was up front with A and C Companies. Either way, with the rest of the battalion taking up a covering position some 400 yards back from the river and the guns of an Indian mountain battery



reinforcement. Things then moved fast. His sergeant, sent back to report, found an easier ford nearer to the bridge and shortly after midday he returned with the rest of A Company, together with C Company and the battalion's second in command. "The next thing I knew," recalled Thorne, "I was getting 'blown out of the water' by him saying, 'What the hell are you doing staying here - we're just going in with the bayonet'." Moments later Thorne and his handful of askari had joined with the others.

"They lined up," he recalled, "and went in with the bayonet and a hearty British cheer... I went in with 'em and the Italians popped out of every blinking bush." From an artillery observation post on the other side of the river, John Pollard, who had been with the CO at the start of the action, glimpsed Leakey and his mortar team firing away for dear life. "Then came the sound of a charge," he wrote, "and Ted Onslow's voice bawling "Come on A Company. Come on A Company."

### MOMENTARY CONFUSION

Surprised both by the direction and ferocity of the attack, the Italians began surrendering in droves. But for many it was too late. Discarding their rifles in favour of machete-like knives known as pangas, the askari literally hacked their way through the Italian position



replying to the Italian artillery, an initial crossing was made by a single platoon out of sight of the enemy positions to the north of the bridge. Part of A Company, it was led by Second Lieutenant Philip Thorne and consisted of a British sergeant and fewer than 20 Askari. Covered by fire from the other side of the river, they were to advance along the eastern bank as far as the bridge, mopping up any Italian positions along the way. Thorne later called it "a damn silly plan", but for a while it seemed to work, even though the bush was so thick they could not see the enemy and, at times, they found themselves under fire from friend and foe alike.

Accompanied by a handful of Africans who showed "fantastic bravery", he silenced at least one well-concealed enemy machine-gun post before deciding they were too few to continue much further without

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as the charge descended into chaos and carnage. Thorne found himself surrounded by Italians “begging” to be taken prisoner rather than face the wrath of the knife-wielding Africans. “There was an awful lot of people milling about,” he recalled. A flutter of white handkerchiefs was observed from the other side of the river as Italian resistance buckled and Second

Lieutenant John Pitt recalled having to draw his revolver on his own men to stop them “taking pot shots at the surrendering enemy”.

With the main position captured, A and C Companies maintained the momentum of their electrifying advance, pushing on over ground thick with thorn bushes and trees as far as the enemy’s motor transport laager some 1,200 yards south of the bridge. From the left, the sound of the remnants of the Italian force being mopped up carried back to the heart of the enemy position where Pitt, having found his way over the river by way

of shattered bridge timbers, had begun rounding up prisoners.

By 1600, it appeared to be all over. The fighting had all but ceased and the victors were in the process of consolidating and gathering in a harvest of enemy arms and equipment when suddenly the general din was interrupted by a new more menacing noise. To John Pollard, it was “a sharp multiple sound like that of a naval pom-pom”. At that moment, the artillery forward observation officer alongside him shouted, “Tanks!” >>>

**ABOVE:** The Victor edition of June 29, 1963 featured the story of Nigel Leakey VC on its front and back cover under the heading ‘The Tank-killer of Colito’.

**BELOW:** Soldiers of the KAR training in Kenya.





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**RIGHT:** Lieutenant General Alan Cunningham, commanding East Africa Force. He lobbied the War Office to re-open Leakey's case and submitted a second recommendation with additional information at the end of the war.

**BELOW:** Italian light tanks, guns and lorries captured during the advance through Abyssinia.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Leakey's original recommendation was rejected as being not up to the 'required standard for the Victoria Cross'.

There was a momentary confusion as around seven M11 medium tanks were reported rumbling along the road leading towards ground occupied by Ted Onslow's A Company. With no anti-tank weapons, Lieutenant John Martin, whose platoon had led the way during the last push, ordered his men to withdraw. "I went back through the bush and my troops went faster," he later recalled.

Further back, Pitt and his men sought cover in some riverside gullies, while others scattered. Thorne, meanwhile, was convinced he was about to die. Wounded in the hip during the latter stages of the action, he lay on a stretcher in a roadside ditch directly in the path of the tanks with "dirt" flying all around. Moments later, he saw Nigel Leakey "flitting" past him. He was unclear what he was doing there, but he was headed in the direction of the tanks.

### 'I'LL GET THEM ON FOOT'

Leakey had no need to put himself in harm's way. In fact, as John Martin later observed, he needn't have been anywhere near the sharp end of the action. But having exhausted his supply of mortar bombs, he had sought and gained permission to accompany



Onslow's A Company as it advanced through the enemy position. In Martin's words: "He just loped along with Ted, with his revolver and grenades, eager for action."

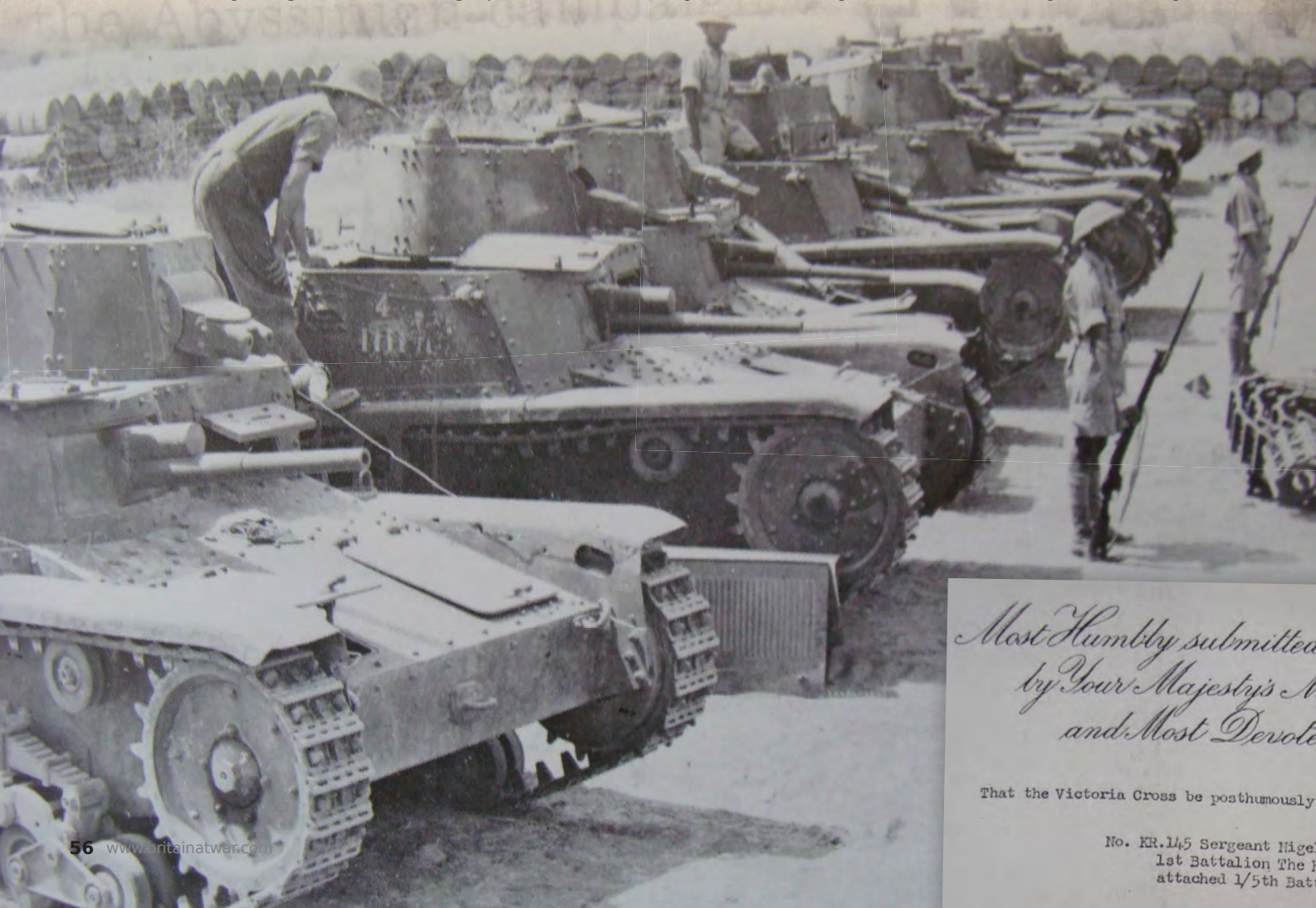
Together with some of his askari mortar men, Leakey was still up front with Onslow at the farthest point of the enemy position when they suddenly heard a tank starting up in thick bush behind them. "We went back a little way," wrote Onslow, "and saw an enemy tank coming towards us."

It was about 50 yards away and it rumbled forward, "firing its cannon and machine gun", before coming to a

halt behind a bush. Leakey reacted immediately. Without waiting for orders or support of any kind, he made straight for the tank armed only with his service revolver. It was an outlandish stroke bordering on the suicidal. Although almost all of the enemy position had been mopped up, there was, according to Onslow, "still medium machine gun and small arms fire coming at us from the flank".

To reach the tank, Leakey knew full well he would have to run a potential gauntlet of enemy fire and no sooner had he set off than they were sprayed with "heavy fire" from other enemy tanks.

The Kenyan sergeant, however, was not to be denied. He coolly stalked his prey, crawling some of the way but mostly doubling from one bush to another until he was right beside it. Then, almost as if the crew were suddenly aware of his presence, the tank lurched forward, all guns blazing. Several of Onslow's men were hit, and one non-commissioned officer killed, but Leakey, ignoring the danger, leapt onto the front of the tank. "The tank went mad," Onslow later told a war correspondent. "It came out into the open, then on to the road, and went off like blazes, firing all that it had got..



*Most Humbly submitted  
by Your Majesty's  
and Most Devote*

That the Victoria Cross be posthumously

No. KR.145 Sergeant Nigel  
1st Battalion The King's  
attached 1/5th Bat

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"Leakey was straddling the machine-gun, one leg on either side, and there he was, quite happy on top of the tank, struggling with the lid of the turret. "After the tank had gone, I suppose, a hundred yards, I saw the lid of the turret come up. I then saw Leakey poke his revolver inside and fire four or five shots rapid."

Leakey had killed two of the crew but stopped short of shooting the driver as, even then, in the heat of combat, a plan was forming in his mind. From a short distance away, Onslow watched in amazement as the tank stopped and Leakey dragged the dead two crewmen out before climbing inside and forcing the driver - "a miserable specimen" - to manoeuvre the tank under cover.

Hauling out the driver, an exultant

Leakey was already contemplating the next stage of his ambitious plan. "By God," he called to Onslow, "we'll get the others - with this tank we've got 'em absolutely cold." Sadly, it was not to be.

Despite his best efforts, he could not get the gun to work. "It was no good asking the driver," added Onslow. "He was so frightened that he was hardly a human being." By then, Onslow's men were taking casualties as more enemy tanks closed in. But Leakey, undismayed by the failure of his original plan, refused to be beaten. Turning to Onslow, he simply remarked: "I'll get them on foot." And with that he was gone. Onslow's last sight of him was moving forward into the bush, followed by his orderly Lance Corporal Saidi Muhumi, mortar man Private Alois Sunjibujosi and



A Company sergeant major Yona Onyango.

What followed was a desperately gallant and ultimately tragic attempt to repeat his earlier success that is best described in the words of one of the three men to witness his final act of bravery.

"After going a little way," recalled CSM Onyango, "we heard the tanks coming down the road towards us. We hid in the bush and soon saw four tanks in line ahead coming towards us. Sgt Leakey let the first two tanks pass and then jumped on the third tank. "He managed to open the turret and kill one of the crew when the fourth tank opened fire with a machine gun and shot Sgt Leakey off the tank..." >>

**TOP:** Italian light tank crews pose for the camera in Abyssinia.

**ABOVE:** Ted Onslow, left, at the 1946 Victory Parade in London. He received a Military Cross for his part in the fight at Colito and added a Bar to it in Burma.

C.I.C.S.  
P.U.S.

The Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, recommends the award of the Victoria Cross to No.145 Sergeant Nigel Grey Leakey, 1/6th Bn. The King's African Rifles, in recognition of most conspicuous gallantry during an Italian counter-attack with tanks at Colito in May 1941.

The statement of services occasioning the recommendation is enclosed at LB.

This N.C.O. is now reported as missing believed killed.

Will you kindly let me know whether you support the award of the Victoria Cross to Sergeant N.G. Leakey, K.A.R.

I do not consider this to be up to the required standard for the Victoria Cross and I suggest that if it transpires that Sergeant Leakey is still alive he should be awarded the D.C.M.; if dead, a posthumous "Mention". In any event it will be necessary to hold this case in abeyance until definite information as to whether he is alive or dead is received.

*A. Flynn - Deland*  
M.S.

10.7.41.

awarded to  
Nigel Grey Leakey  
Kenya Regiment,  
1st Battalion The King's African Rifles.

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**RIGHT:** Arundell Gray Leakey proudly displays his eldest son's Victoria Cross after a Buckingham Palace investiture in 1946. Accompanying him were his younger son, Lieutenant Colonel Rea Leakey, far right, who received his Distinguished Service Order at the same ceremony, his daughter, Agnes, third from the left, and her future husband, Bremer Hofmeyr, fourth left, and Nigel's godmother and aunt, Clare Gillibrand, second from the left.



*Palace investiture VC - Dr Bremer - Mrs Gillibrand (aunt) Agnes Leakey, Bremer Hofmeyr*



### LEGACY OF VALOUR



Memories of Nigel Leakey's astonishing bravery on an Abyssinian battlefield were stirred a year ago when the London Gazette announced the award of the nation's highest martial honour to another member of his family.

Joshua Leakey, a 27-year-old lance-corporal serving in the 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, was decorated for his outstanding heroism at Bar Nowzad, in Helmand Province, Afghanistan on August 22, 2013.

The official account of his award, which was gazetted in February 2015, bore remarkable similarity with his forebear's Second World War action, though this time there were no tanks involved.

Like his second cousin twice removed before him, Josh Leakey was credited with single-handedly turning the tide of battle by his repeated acts of bravery in which he showed a "complete disregard for his own safety".

Part of a joint British-American patrol deployed deep in Taliban-controlled territory, he took effective charge after a US Marine officer was wounded and the command group pinned down on an exposed hillside by rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine-gun fire.

Three times he ran the gauntlet of fire to treat the injured officer and recover machine-guns before turning them on the 20-strong force of insurgents to break up their attack.

Inspired by his desperate courage, the rest of the patrol fought back with renewed vigour, beating off the Taliban, who suffered 11 dead and four wounded, and allowing the safe evacuation of the wounded marine.

Leakey, who was praised for his display of "gritty leadership well above that expected of his rank", later confessed: "The only thing I was scared of was letting the cap badge down."

light machine-guns, approximately 300 rifles, 15 lorries and three tanks - at least two of which were victims of Nigel Leakey's startling intervention.

That night the 1/6th KAR mess was abuzz with post-battle excitement. Pollard recalled: "Lucy' [Field] was full of C Company's exploits with the panga. But the CO wasn't listening. 'I think,' he said, 'that we'll try and get old Leakey a VC.'"

The initial recommendation was submitted eight days later after prisoner interrogations revealed that one of the men killed in the first tank was the 25th Division's armoured force's commanding officer, Colonel De Cicco, who had only recently taken charge. Endorsed by Lieutenant General Cunningham, GOC East Africa Force, and Brigadier 'Fluffy' Fowkes it credited Leakey with single-handedly halting "a most dangerous enemy counter-attack which

threatened to destroy all our infantry who had crossed the river".

But it suffered from being hurriedly written up and gave only the scantiest idea of the remarkable nature of the action. The recommendation was consequently rejected as not being up to "VC standard". One member of the army's honours and awards committee, Lieutenant General Arthur Floyer-Acland, suggested that if Leakey was found to be still alive he should be awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal and if dead a posthumous mention in despatches. He further observed: "Although Sergeant Leakey certainly displayed great gallantry, I regard his action as of the spontaneous nature, lacking the elements of long sustained courage and endurance which tell of the highest form of self-sacrifice."

Cunningham, Fowkes and Leakey's KAR colleagues profoundly disagreed and persisted with their efforts to have

## SGT. LEAKEY'S SUBERB COURAGE AT COLITO RECOGNISED

Sergeant Nigel Gray Leakey has been posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery in action at Colito on May 19, 1941, during the Abyssinian campaign.

Sergeant Leakey before the war was a farm manager on the Muthari Estate, Thika. He enlisted in the Kenya Regiment in June 1937 and was called up a week before the outbreak of hostilities. A week later he was posted to 1/6 K.A.R., with whom he was serving when he was killed, at the age of 28.

had not been securely fastened and shot the driver and other occupants.

He then climbed into the tank with the object of driving it and getting the Italians' own guns into action against the enemy. He was unable to do this, however, but exclaiming, "Never mind, I'll get them on foot," he went forward against the other tanks.

The Italians were forced to withdraw, and Sgt. Leakey was last seen on top of one of the retreating tanks. He was never heard of again.

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P.U.S.

General Cunningham the award of a V.C. to Sergeant Leakey was put up minutes 13, 14, 15) and the but the King did not consid

General Cunningham case, as originally put up, since obtained more informat citation. The essential di original one are underlined in 27.A.

As the case was originally submitted to the King on the original citation, it seems to me that the fresh citation does not alter the War Office view in the matter. It is for consideration whether it should be re-submitted to the King.

If you agree, I will see Lascelles whether it would be worth while to re-open the matter. You will see from 19 that the King evidently explained the reasons to the late S. of S.

9.10.45.

*A.C. Cunningham*  
M.S.

Revised  
V.C. kills  
tank  
FROM O

Under the distinguished Patronage of His Excellency Sir Henry M. M. Moore, G.C.M.G., and General Sir William Platt, G.B.E., V.C.B., D.S.O., G.O.C.K., IN C, E. A. Command.

"AN EAST AFRICAN DREAMS"

A MILITARY PAGEANT

by

LORNA SWINBURNE-WARD

on the

NAKURU RACE COURSE

February 25th and 26th 1944

Programme:

Sh 1/-

**FAR LEFT:**  
A note to Chief of the Imperial General Staff dated October 9, 1945, underlines General Cunningham's persistent efforts to see Leakey's heroism recognised.

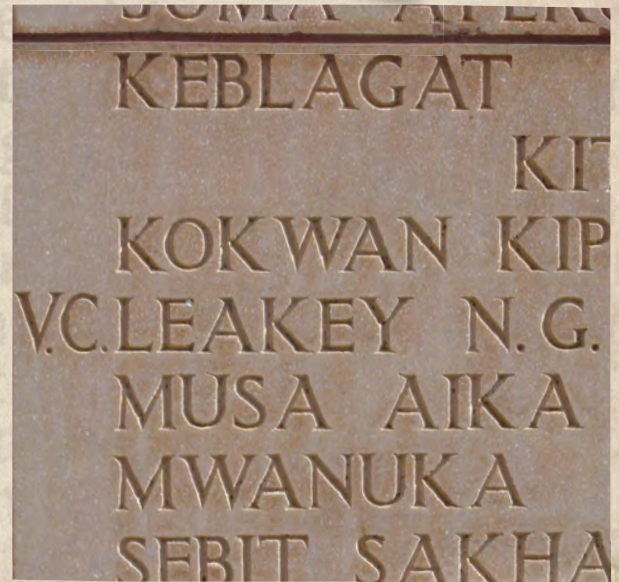
**NEAR LEFT:**  
Even before the Victoria Cross was granted, Leakey's valour was feted in his native Kenya. A reconstruction of his action was staged as part of a military pageant at Nakuru in 1944.

his bravery properly recognised even after the war had ended. Armed with "new information" which included, for the first time, testimony from CSM Onyango, a second recommendation was made that revealed the outrageous risks taken by Leakey and the far-reaching consequences of his action on subsequent operations. "The superb courage and magnificent fighting spirit which Sgt Leakey displayed, facing almost certain death, was an incentive to the troops who fought with inspiration derived from witnessing the gallantry of this NCO's remarkable feat," wrote Cunningham, "and succeeded in retaining their positions in face of considerable odds."

Two months later and almost 4½ years after the action, the London Gazette of November 15, 1945 finally drew a line under the enduring controversy with the announcement that, at the second attempt, Nigel Gray Leakey had been posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. One

question, however, remained unresolved: how had 'the tank killer of Colito' met his death? CSM Onyango was of the opinion that he was almost certainly "killed outright" in attacking the second tank. But since his body was never found no one could be sure. A fellow member of the mortar platoon, Second Lieutenant (later major general) Rowland 'Toto' Mans, was not alone in fearing he may have fallen victim to the so-called 'Shifta' who plundered the battlefield in search of loot during the night after the fighting. "It was our belief at the time," he wrote, "that perhaps the local Ethiopian irregulars had found him perhaps wounded or dead and confused him for an Italian." Either way, he had almost certainly been hastily buried in a grave shared by the men he'd fought so hard to defeat.

Whatever the truth, it was an unceremonious end ill-befitting one of the bravest individual actions of the Second World War. ☉



**ABOVE & BELOW:**  
Having no known grave Nigel Leakey VC is commemorated on the East Africa Memorial in the Nairobi War Cemetery.

