



Captain Pip Gardner, VC

Army officer who described himself as 'no soldier' yet won the Victoria Cross for a daring rescue at Tobruk

CAPTAIN PIP GARDNER, who died on Thursday aged 88, won the Victoria Cross while serving with the Royal Tank Regiment at Tobruk, in Libya, in 1941.

On November 23 of that year, Gardner was ordered to take two tanks to the rescue of a pair of armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards which were out of action and under heavy fire.

"Gardner set off in what he called his 'battle buggy', and found the two cars halted 200 yards apart. They were being smashed to pieces by the weight of enemy fire. Ordering the other tank to give him covering fire, Gardner manoeuvred his own close to the nearest car, dismounted under heavy anti-tank and machine-gun fire, and secured a tow-rope to the car.

Then, seeing an officer lying beside it with both legs blown off, Gardner lifted him into the car. "As luck would have it," Gardner later wrote to his parents, "the rope broke, and before I could stop the driver we had gone some distance. So I went back again and got the poor chap out of the car and on to the tank and set off again."

Despite being hit in the arm and leg, Gardner had carried the wounded officer back to his tank, placed him on the rear engine ladders and climbed alongside to hold him on. While the tank was being driven back to the British lines, it came under intense fire; the loader was killed.

In a letter to his father from a field hospital Gardner wrote, "Don't get alarmed and think I am badly wounded. Just a few odd bits and pieces in my leg, neck and arm, nothing serious." After describing how he had collected "this little packet," he added: "I was spared by a miracle and have to thank God for a mighty deliverance."

The citation for his VC declared: "The courage, determination and complete disregard for his own safety displayed by Captain Gard-



Gardner being presented with the ribbon of the VC by General Claude Auchinleck in North Africa in April 1942

ner enabled him, despite his wounds and in the face of intense fire at close range, to save the life of his fellow officer in circumstances fraught with great difficulty and danger." Gardner was invested with the VC by King George VI at Buckingham Palace on May 18 1945.

Philip John Gardner, always known as "Pip", was born on Christmas Day 1914 at Sydenham, south London. He was educated at Dulwich, where he played rugby for the school and blew the bugle on Armistice Day. He chose rifle-shooting in preference to cricket and practised on the ranges at Bisleigh. At 17 he joined J Gardner and Co, the family engineering firm. When he was 19 the company sent

him to Hong Kong for two years, entrusting him with the drawing work for the installation of heating and ventilating equipment at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank.

In 1938 Gardner joined the Westminster Dragoons, TA, confiding to a friend in a letter: "I must do my duty, but I'm no soldier."

In March 1940 Gardner was commissioned as a subaltern into the Royal Tank Regiment. In September he spent four weeks at the Irregular Warfare School at Lochailort on the west coast of Scotland, where Lord Lovat was in charge of the fieldcraft course. In January 1941, Gardner embarked on the troopship *Highland Princess*, bound for the Middle East. In April he was

posted to 4 RTR at El Tahag, near Ismailia, and served with them in the Western Desert.

Gardner was awarded the MC in June 1941 for an action near Hal-faya Pass, in Libya. His tank and several others, including that of Lieutenant Rowe, the senior troop leader, had run on to a minefield. Their tracks had been blown off and they were immobilised. Rowe had left his tank to inspect the damage to the others when he stepped on a mine.

Immediately jumping from his own tank, Gardner walked through enemy shelling and machine-gun fire to where Rowe was lying. On finding that the officer was severely wounded, Gardner attended to him

as best he could. He then went back across the minefield to his own tank to get morphia, before returning once more to administer it. For the fourth time he crossed the minefield to get help from the infantry to carry the wounded man. But Rowe was dying, and Gardner remained with him, under heavy machine-gun fire, until the end. Then he led the crews back along the line of the tank-tracks to headquarters.

In June 1942, after the encirclement and surrender of Tobruk, Gardner was interned at Chieti PoW Camp in Italy. In April 1943 he was moved to Fontanellato, near Parma. He and two comrades got away when the Italians capitulated in July, aiming to get to the Allied lines several hundred miles to the south. With the help of the partisans, they had been on the run for four months when they were arrested by the Gestapo in a flat near the Vatican.

Gardner was sent to Oflag 79, near Brunswick, where he remained until the end of the war in 1945. Here he was a prime mover in helping to raise £13,000 by pledges from fellow PoWs to start a boys' club. A site was purchased at Fulham and building work completed in 1948. The Duke of Edinburgh opened the Brunswick Boys' Club the following year.

After the war, Gardner was appointed joint managing director of the family firm; he became chairman in 1955. Fifteen years ago he sold the air-conditioning side of the business, but remained chairman of J Gardner Holdings, the property management company, until only two years ago.

Pip Gardner was a private man, of genuine modesty, who never sought the limelight. He gave much of his spare time to charity work, and was a strong supporter of the Brunswick Boys' Club.

He married, in 1939, Rene Sherburn, who survives him with their son.

Picture: THE TANK MUSEUM