

First Among Equals

By the time this issue of CONTACT hits the shelf, New Zealand's latest Victoria Cross winner will probably be walking out of the Urewera Ranges with a pig draped over his shoulders. That's because Corporal Bill 'Willy' Apiata VC would rather be in the hills hunting wild boar, or in the mountains of Afghanistan on the Taliban's tail, than face the media throng that hunted him on Monday 2 July.

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Lance Corporal Willy Apiata in Afghanistan.

It was about 3.15am, sometime in 2004, when the flash of an RPG detonating into an NZ SAS vehicle in southern Afghanistan, turned night into day. Machinegun fire ripped into the air from the darkness of the Afghan hillside.

While a stunned but unhurt then Lance Corporal Apiata was thrown off the bonnet of the vehicle, one SAS soldier, his upper right arm shredded by shrapnel, bled profusely and lapsed in and out of consciousness.

The patrol had laid up in defensive formation for the night so the operators

could shelter from the harsh conditions. But, under the cover of darkness, about 20 insurgents had crept over undulating ground to get close enough to launch an assault.

When a second soldier was wounded, but less critically, Apiata told him to break contact and make his own way to the others, 70 metres away, while Apiata hefted the critically injured corporal on his back and ran across the machinegun- and RPG-raked ground back to relative safety and medical help.

His burning vehicle lit his path, but it also illuminated the pair as Apiata dodged over uneven ground in the middle of a two-way

gun battle between the Taliban and the New Zealand patrol.

To the amazement of those familiar with the type of skirmish they were involved in, neither man was further injured and the wounded man was delivered to the patrol medic who rendered life-saving medical assistance.

Not content with just rescuing his mate, Apiata picked up his M4 and joined the battle. Though heavily outnumbered, it took only 20 minutes for the patrol to vanquish the Taliban.

WHO IS WILLY APIATA, VC?

Born on 28 June 1972 in the small Waikato forestry and hydro-scheme town of Memgokino, his birth certificate lists his first name as Bill, but most know him as 'Willy'. Except his mates, that is. To them, the man they share a beer with or head off to the back blocks of the Bay of Plenty hunting pigs, he's not Bill 'Willy' Apiata VC - he's just 'Mudguts'.

Willy has three sisters and is the third youngest in the family. His parents (father Maori, mother Pakeha) split up when he was young, but he remains close to his mother.

Before he left, however, his dad taught him to hunt, almost as soon as the kid could walk, and today, Willy is utterly at home in the bush.

Spending his early years in Northland, Willy moved to the settlement of Te Kaha in the eastern Bay of Plenty region of New Zealand's North Island. Leaving the Whanacua-Apanui Area School when he was 15, Willy went to live with relatives in Auckland when he was 16. At age 17 he joined the Tauranga-based 6 Hauraki Battalion, a part-time territorial unit, as an infantryman.

On completing basic training, the first person he showed himself to was his grandfather, Jimmy Clarke, who had fought in World War Two.

"One of my proudest moments was wearing my uniform to show him," he says.

While serving as a part-time soldier, Willy held down a number of farming, hunting, horse-breaking and shoeing jobs. He also tried working on a fishing boat and delivering bread.

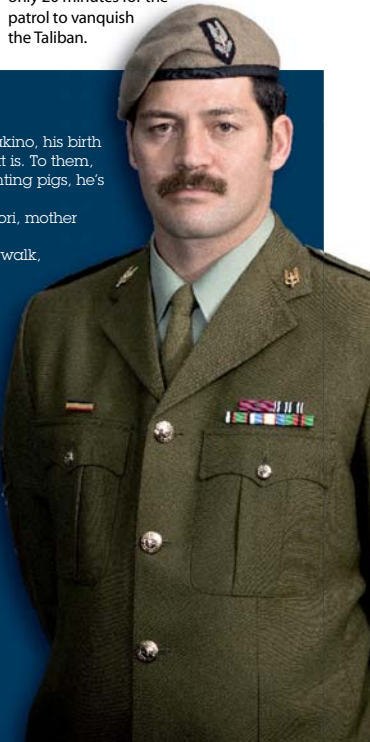
"I'll take anything on. I was just enjoying life, taking things as they came," he says.

Along the way he moved to Wellington with his childhood sweetheart. They are now separated but the couple have a four-year-old son to whom Willy says he is devoted.

In 2000, Willy deployed to East Timor. On return, he decided to have a crack at SAS selection, but fell short. Undaunted, he joined the regular force and, at age 29, signed on for another selection and passed.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

A member of the SAS contingent to Afghanistan in 2004, he was to be the first ever serving SAS member to receive a Victoria Cross, the first recipient of the Victoria Cross for New Zealand, and the first Kiwi to be awarded the VC since World War Two.



Corporal Willy Apiata receives the US Presidential Unit Citation.

The assault was broken up and the numerically superior attackers were routed, suffering significant casualties.

A later assessment of the corporal's injuries concluded he would have died of blood loss and shock were it not for the prompt action of Apiata. Instead, he has made a full recovery and is back on duty with the NZ SAS.

Describing his actions, the man known to his mates as 'Mudguts', says he was only doing his job - "I was doing what I was trained for".

Though the only Victoria Cross to ever be awarded to a serving member of the SAS anywhere in the Commonwealth, it wasn't the only decoration awarded to members of the 1st NZ SAS Group announced at the 2 July press conference. One SAS captain and a corporal received the New Zealand Gallantry Decoration while another corporal was awarded the New Zealand Gallantry Medal.

None of the other recipients were named, for security reasons, but Defence Chief Lieutenant General Jerry Mateparae, himself a former SAS man, said Apiata's award was too big to go unheralded.

While the public received the news on Monday, the man on whom New Zealand's highest bravery award was bestowed was informed the morning before, through three letters - from the Governor General, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence.



NZ Chief of Defence Lieutenant General Jerry Mateparae congratulates Corporal Willy Apiata VC



VICTORIA CROSS FACTS

VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS

- The VC has been awarded 1356 times.
- Corporal Bill Apiata is the first serving SAS recipient anywhere in the Commonwealth.
- 13 VCs have been awarded since World War Two - Korea, four British (two posthumous); Borneo, one British; Vietnam, four Australian (two posthumous); The Falklands, two British (both posthumous); Iraq, one British; Afghanistan, one British (posthumous), 1 New Zealand.

MANUFACTURE

VCs are cast in gunmetal from guns captured during the Crimean War. The metal is chemically treated to give a dark bronze finish. The rank, name and unit of service of the recipient are engraved on the reverse of the suspender bar and the date of the act or acts for which the cross is awarded is engraved on the central portion of the reverse. The Victoria Cross for New Zealand is manufactured by London jewellers Hancock and Co, who have made the VC since its inception.