



COURAGE BEST

Alexander Fiske-Harrison, Britain's only bullfighter and veteran bull runner, pays homage to British stoicism and bravery

The most laconic tale of British bravery in combat is arguably Lord Uxbridge's sang froid remark after being struck by cannon shot at the Battle of Waterloo: "My God, Sir, I've lost my leg."

To which the Duke of Wellington replied:

"Yes, Sir, so you have."

One doesn't need to be a Kenneth Tynan to recognise this as a performance, even if made unconsciously, with understatement used to say infinitely more than the words themselves. It does not make much difference if the story is apocryphal: the mere fact that the story has survived in popular consciousness in this form tells us exactly what the British perceive their own particular brand of bravery to be.

It is also hardly surprising, then, that I grew up with the Charge of the Light Brigade as my model, as it was to the British Army. Indeed, it is from the cannon captured that day that most of the Victoria Cross medals are cast (more of the VC later).

Compare this form of courage with a tale from my adopted country of Spain. In 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, the medieval Alcázar fortress of Toledo was under siege to little effect, when the attackers captured the son of the colonel of the garrison. They reconnected the severed telephone lines and summoned

the colonel to the parapets so he could watch as his son was handed the telephone to tell him that he would be executed unless the fortification surrendered. The colonel told his son that 'he knew what to do'. Father and son saluted one another, the son turned and told his captor to shoot him, which he duly did, before he turned to salute the father, who returned the salute.

The tales of Uxbridge and the Spanish colonel are extreme examples of courage. But like a cocktail mixed with alien versions of similar ingredients, the latter's is somehow un-British. Nevertheless, we recognise the resemblance.

Seneca, the father of Roman Stoicism, was a Spaniard born in Córdoba, hence the Hispanic flair in his pronouncements on this subject. "A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave," he wrote. It was no idle theorising, for within twelve months the Emperor, his former pupil, falsely accused him of conspiracy. Seneca duly took his own life, remarking, with more than a hint of caustic Britishness: "After murdering his mother and brother, it only remained for Nero to kill his teacher and tutor."

One of the reasons I came to Spain was to witness an echo of such bravery outside of war. Ernest Hemingway gave a similar reason for coming to watch bullfights one hundred years ago. I remember when I first

Above: In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) the Black Knight dismisses his severed arm: "'Tis but a scratch." The severing continues.

went to Pamplona to run with the bulls, I witnessed the boiling mass of 300 tonnes of humanity fleeing four tonnes of *toros bravos*, Spanish fighting bulls. The mass of people shattered and fled like a medieval rabble under a heavy cavalry charge. This was a sight few people in the modern era will ever see: a populace put to flight through its own streets, as though a siege had been broken, a city wall breached. Of course, I am aware that the event itself, and even talking about having done it, is all rather un-British.

But back to British courage. It was while doing some historical research that I came across a compendium of true Britishness: the citations for the award of the VC. I had begun with the Gough brothers and son – great-grandfather and great-uncles to my own uncle-by-marriage – who won theirs in the Indian Mutiny and Somaliland. However, their stories were historically distant and awarded in circumstances which today are viewed as somewhat politically complicated.

The accounts that stuck me far more were those of Captain Charles Upham. He was born in New Zealand, but five days before it transitioned from colony to dominion status, so I think we can claim him as one of our own.

Upham remains the only combat soldier – and one of only three men in history, the other two being military physicians – to receive the award twice, the unicorn of gallantry: VC and Bar.

His first award, as cited in the London Gazette for an action in Crete in 1941, contains much of what one would expect: he fired and was fired upon; he was blown up; injured by shrapnel; etc, etc... Certain terse disclosures stand out: "He also received a bullet in the foot which he later removed in Egypt." Most powerful of all was his reaction to the award: "It's meant for the men."

I would argue that a defining feature of British bravery might be found in details such as that. For it is not just the switch from 'flight' – or 'freeze', the other adrenal option – to 'fight' that defines the highest human capabilities under such circumstances: a fighting bull, as its name suggests, will do that quick enough. There is a fourth option one might call 'finesse', meaning the ability to rise above the situation to find an even grander form of response.

Returning to Upham: four years later, he was awarded his Bar for his actions at El Alamein in 1943. Shot twice, he

"destroyed a German tank and several guns and vehicles with grenades"; shot again he was taken to "the Regimental Aid Post but immediately his wound had been dressed returned to his men, remaining with them all day long under heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire, until he was again severely wounded and being now unable to move fell into the hands of the enemy".


Upham then spent the rest of the conflict as a prisoner of war, constantly escaping or trying to escape, and all recounted in his extraordinary biography, *Mark of the Lion*, by Kenneth Sandford. It is during that period that we find the zenith, the apotheosis, the quintessence of British bravery – of courage on parade: his broad-daylight attempt to climb the fences at Camp Oflag 5A in Weinsberg. Thinking he could simply scale the barrier and then leap from one fence to the other over the rolls of razor wire beneath, he misjudged the quality of German engineering when the top wire detached from its post. Falling short, he found himself wrapped in serrated steel. The prison guards ran towards him and levelled their rifles as their corporal, enraged and shouting, put a loaded pistol to his head.

Technically, it was only legal to shoot a PoW during the act of escaping itself, so, very slowly, while lying tangled, trapped and bleeding, he took out a cigarette, lit it, and began to smoke.

As he put it to his biographer, "the moment of killing was lost", but even so he continued to lie there as his fellow PoWs began chanting his name. Several minutes later, still between the two fences and smoking, the senior British officer arrived and asked him what he was going to do.

"Nothing, They can damn well come and get me. And I refuse to be shot by a bloody corporal. Tell 'em to bring an officer."

If ever there was an example of finesse, this was it. It's just a shame we don't have an English word for it.

It is to honour Captain Upham that when I run with the bulls nowadays – which is usually escorting paying clients, from the Board of Directors of NASCAR to Hollywood producers – and those around me turn paler and paler as we wait in the street until the mass of cattle and humanity hurtle towards us, as though pursued by the devil himself, I say to my companions, "hold on a moment" and I slowly light a cigarette. Admittedly it's not one I ever get to finish. 

Alexander Fiske-Harrison's *Into the Arena: The World of the Spanish Bullfight* (second edition) is out now

Sergeant Jack Hinton (1909-1997, left) and Captain Charles Upham (1908-1994) are awarded the Victoria Cross (VC), at Buckingham Palace, 11 May 1945.

