

Captain Raymond Harold Stevens
Born 7th November 1917, Wandsworth, London.
Died 24th September 1944, Oosterbeek

Remembered on the memorial in St Peter's Church, Seaview and by his family



Father: Arthur Harold "Dodie" Stevens M.C. (WW1) (1886-1974)
Mother: Clarinda Napier "Clara" Stevens, née Harrower (1890-1978)
Seaview Yacht Club members, Regatta President, and Seaview lovers.
Raymond spent many happy days as a child in Seagrove bay with his brother Edwin and with sisters Monica and Helen (Simonds and Holbrook).
Monica was in the WAAFS, briefly stationed up on Culver Down early warning radio station, Isle of Wight.

The Stevens Family 1944



Helen – Monica – Raymond – Clara – Patsy Kneeshaw – Harold – Edwin

Education; Cobham House, Stowe School.
He left Stowe in April 1936 and went on to Trinity College, Cambridge. Raymond Stevens was engaged to Patsey Kneeshaw in 1943, they never married.

Raymond joined the Territorial Army (Artists Rifles) after the Munich Crisis in 1939, later the 156th Parachute Regiment.

His initial army training was after a long day's work at Moyses Stevens, the family flower business, at the Honourable Artillery Company, Finsbury Pavement.

In January 1940 he passed out from the Officers Cadet Training Unit in Aldershot, was drafted to 225 Brigade, and sent to France.

In May 1940, he fought the rear-guard action from the Albert Canal in Belgium to Dunkirk and remained firing artillery to defend the northern flank until the final evacuation.

They were then posted to Egypt with the 4th Royal Horse Artillery, 7th Armoured Division (Desert Rats) where on May 25th 1942 he was wounded near El Alamein and sent to Baragwanath Hospital, in Johannesburg, South Africa.

[Duncan Simonds](#) also in the 4th R.H.A. fought and was wounded in North Africa, though they never knew each other.

Raymond returned to England weighing only 9 stone and having largely lost the use of his left leg from above the knee. Partly recovered, he was posted to 81/9 Medium Regiment Southern Command in Felixstowe, Suffolk.

Promoted Captain in December 1943.

He re-applied for active service and successfully completed his parachute training at RAF Ringway in Cheshire on course number 111, 10 to 17 April 1944 and was attached to HQ 156 Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, 1st Airborne Division.

In September 1944 in 'Operation Market Garden' the battalion was dropped in and around Arnhem, Holland where he commanded a platoon of infantry in the 'Battle of Arnhem' a doomed attempt at capturing an essential bridge over the river Rhine.

Badly wounded by machine gun fire whilst leading a futile counter attack, he took shelter with Mr & Mrs Valkenburg at 13 De La Reyweg, who at huge personal risk, nursed him hidden in their basement until he died on 24th September. He was initially buried by the Dutch Red Cross in the grounds of the Hemeldal Sanatorium, near Oranjeweg on 2nd October, then in the Oosterbeek War Cemetery on 13th August 1945.

His father and mother Harold and Clara Stevens became lifelong friends and supporters of the Valkenburg family after the war. Their daughter Riecky went to convalesce with the Stevens family in Kingston, before becoming the nanny to Raymond Simonds, Captain Raymond's namesake & nephew.

The Valkenburg family
Riecky and her parents c1950



By extraordinary coincidence a 1st cousin of [Duncan Simonds](#), [Major John Mellor Simonds](#), led his battalion into Arnhem on the same day, as Second-in-Command to OC HQ Company, 2 South Staffordshire Regiment, who had also tried and failed to reach Arnhem, then retreated to defend the church area in the Oosterbeek enclave.

Regimental records show that he was wounded on the 19th. Then following surgery he discharged himself, insisting he get back to his Battalion HQ. He was killed by mortar fire on the 23rd. The same day that Raymond was mortally wounded nearby.

He has no known grave and is commemorated on Panel 5 of the Groesbeek Memorial.

This is an extract of the Commonwealth War Graves commission entry:

Name: RAYMOND HAROLD STEVENS

Rank: Captain

Cemetery: ARNHEM OOSTERBEEK WAR CEMETERY

The Arnhem Oosterbeek War Cemetery was established in 1945 and is home to 1759 graves from the Second World War.

His namesake Raymond Simonds has visited several times.

Researching this certainly reminded us how very grateful we should be to our previous generations and that our own generation never faced another world war.

Prepared by; Raymond & Colin Simonds for the 75th Anniversary of VE Day on May 8th 2020

Captain Raymond Stevens RA

Service No: 117204

Killed in action at Arnhem, September 24th 1944

Extracted from '**Men at Arnhem**' by Geoffrey Powell

Published in 1976, 1986 & 2003, his Commanding Officer at Arnhem.

(See explanatory notes at the end)

The landing of 156 Battalion, The Parachute Regiment and 'O' Group was under Lt. Colonel Sir Richard des Voeux.

The General was Roy Urquhart.

The Brigadier was Shan Hackett, later General Sir John Hackett.

Raymond was Gunner F.O.O. (Forward Observation Officer)

with the 4th R.H.A. and attached to the Headquarters Staff of 156 Battalion.



Day 1. Monday 18th September (His first day of action)

Was the 2nd day of 'Operation Market Garden' and the 2nd massed drop of airborne troops. The 1st Parachute Brigade having dropped from their Dakota aircraft the day before. Our operation was delayed 4 hours by fog and went wrong very quickly when the 600 strong Battalion was fired on by German troops waiting for them on the ground. Nine men were killed or wounded before they landed and 11 more by nightfall as they started the 8 mile hike in full kit to reach Arnhem & the bridge.

Day 2. Tuesday 19th September

Next morning the determined attempts of the lightly armed paratroopers to advance towards the bridge were met by a heavily armed German SS Division astride the main road. By the end of the second day they were already short of ammunition and equipment because the German troops had overrun the drop zone. Besides which almost 2/3rds of the battalion had been lost in the futile attacks and subsequent retreat, leaving just a couple of hundred men fit to fight. Any hope of fighting their way through to relieve those in the 1st drop who had reached the bridge had long been abandoned.

Day 3. Wednesday 20th September

Was no better. They tried to make their way to Oosterbeek, to join up with another British force but were again decimated in the process and again forced into a rapid retreat but with nowhere to go because they appeared surrounded. By mid-afternoon, they were reduced to 150 men with just six officers, including the Brigadier and Raymond Stevens. following intense fighting and a desperate bayonet charge on German lines to escape encirclement, just 59 men made it to the British lines at Oosterbeek. They were now so short of officers that Raymond Stevens, an artillery officer with no infantry experience, was put in charge of one of the two remaining infantry platoons. They had received no food since leaving their camp in the UK almost 3 days before. They found an abandoned house and billeted themselves there, stealing food from abandoned houses for a small meal and some intermittent rest.

Day 4. Thursday 21st September

In the morning they re-organised and were rearmed from dwindling reserves at H.Q. then stationed in one corner of the small area backed by the river still held by Allied troops, with orders to defend it. They took over three sturdy houses, Raymond Stevens had already earned respect from his troops and established himself firmly at the head of his platoon, quite a feat given their disparate service backgrounds. His platoon was stationed to the rear of the others. Following consistent attacks with mortars and sniper fire and more casualties, they were forced to retreat to a new perimeter line, comprising houses closer to the river. That evening they managed to scrounge a little food from mostly abandoned Dutch houses around them for a meagre meal.

Day 5. Friday 22nd September

Enemy attacks were less concentrated with no casualties but they found no food. During the night they heard German armoured vehicles and tanks ominously moving up towards them.

Day 6, Saturday 23rd September

Started with a morning mortar bombardment and a determined infantry attack, that was driven back whilst inflicting numerous casualties. The Germans then sent the largest of all their tanks, Tigers, into the streets, destroying houses with their big guns as they went, before retiring after being attacked by soldiers running out and throwing 'Gammon bombs' (bags of plastic explosives with a detonator) onto their turrets! But the infantry attack still followed. Raymond Stevens was hit by Spandau machine-gun fire, whilst leading his platoon in a counter attack across a street swept by machine gun fire, so the remaining men were forced back another few yards and believing him dead left him where he fell, to hastily construct new slit trenches for a little protection from the mortars. It was another night with no food but they did receive some fresh ammunition and the news that only a hundred or so Polish troops had managed to cross the river under heavy fire to provide reinforcements. During the night, they discovered that Raymond had been taken in by a Dutch family and managed to visit him as he lay dying with multiple chest wounds.

Day 7, Sunday 24th September

Started in the usual way with a mortar bombardment followed by infantry attacks. That evening there were just 37 men still fighting.

During the night they received orders that the next evening they were to pull back to be evacuated across the river Rhine during the night. So the battalion had been all but annihilated and the whole operation had failed in its objective to provide the much-needed bridgehead for the second army to cross the bridge at Arnhem.

Day 8. Monday 25th September

Started eerily quiet, without a bombardment. That evening the remnants of the battalion walked and crawled just yards from German lines and through almost constant fire to the bank of the river where they were eventually picked up by Canadian sappers in very small landing craft. Just 3 officers and 43 soldiers made it to safety. It was the shattered 156 Battalion's first and last action.

Explanatory notes:

When Geoffrey Powell first published this book in 1976, which he wrote from memory, he sought to conceal the names and identities of his colleagues, to spare their families from the memories & the details. However it soon became clear that survivors could identify many of the characters and he then added an explanation in the revised edition of 1986 to explain the aliases that he had used. I have shown these key pages below by way of explanation.

The day numbers in the extract correspond to the day numbers in the book, which started on Day 2 of the attack. In my extract from the book above, I have not shown any names besides my uncle Raymond Stevens, since my main objective was to put his actions & death into the context of the battle.

His only brother Captain Edwin Stevens RA had indeed been killed, at Rimini on September 5th.

Another book, 'Arnhem the Complete History' supports this story. Relating Raymond's last hours slightly differently, which is not surprising given that the author of 'Men at Arnhem' wrote this several years later. It reports: "The next position on Stationsweg was defended by 156 parachute Battalion who came under attack at midday, first by what was reported as a Panther tank that was disabled by paratroopers using their last PIAT. It was replaced by a StuG that systematically demolished the houses that the paratroopers were defending, causing considerable casualties. At 14:00 Major Powell ordered a withdrawal to a line 50 yards behind. A counter-attack an hour later led by Captain Raymond Stevens was repulsed by heavy fire, with Captain Stevens reported killed. In fact, he was badly wounded in the arm & abdomen and over several hours managed to crawl to house occupied by Lt Stevenson & Sgt Maurice Riches of Reconnaissance Squadron's 'A' Troop, where he died in the early hours of 24 September despite the best efforts of Sgt Riches and a Dutch family, sheltering in the cellar."

This personal story was extracted from Geoffrey Powell's book 'Men at Arnhem', by Raymond Simonds in June 2020

The book was first written with aliases – then in the 2nd edition revised to clarify the real names of participants.

It was largely written from memory.

Of the nine British airborne battalions that fought at Arnhem the 156 Parachute Battalion suffered the highest percentage loss of life.

PREFACE

Leo Cooper first suggested that I should write this book in the early seventies. However, as we both agreed, the trial chapters were far from a success: I had found it too inhibiting to describe what were my personal experiences of the battle. So we decided to hide my identity under the name 'Tom Angus' and also conceal that of my battalion. After this my pen moved rather more freely.

Because the ruse was a hopeless failure, there was no reason for using the pseudonym when Buchan & Enright published a second edition ten years later. In it I also revealed that it was the story of the first and last major battle of 156 Battalion The Parachute Regiment.

The essence of the story, as I wrote in 1976, was true. But after thirty years, memory had been fallible. I had kept no diary and was able to do little more than walk the ground and refresh my recollections from the official rec-

ords in the Public Record Office, which included my own brief Battalion War Diary.

Nevertheless, and to the best of my belief, the incidents portrayed all happened, but not necessarily in the order described. Nor, of course, are conversations verbatim recordings; some are quite imaginary (an example is that described on page 77. At times my memory was utterly mistaken. For example, our Doctor, John Buck, denies that it was he I saw in the Breede Laan, his arms bloodied to the elbow (p 112). Only recently have I discovered that, during the attack on the Tuesday morning, A Company had penetrated an appreciable distance across the Dreijensche Weg until they were stopped with terrible losses, including every officer killed or wounded (p 72); nor did the German air attack occur after the Battalion's assault had been halted but when it was taking place (p 74). On the other hand, I am quite sure that my own reactions to the events, all etched in my mind, are accurate.

All the names are imaginary. David Unwin was Michael Page, my closest friend. The book is a tribute to him and to the other hundred or so members of the Battalion, most of whose graves lie in the Oosterbeek cemetery. Our Colonel, that fine soldier and even finer man, was Dickie (or Sir Richard) des Voeux, while his Regimental Sergeant Major and fellow Grenadier was Dennis Gay MBE, afterwards a captain. The Brigadier was Shan Hackett, later

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the famous General Sir John Hackett, distinguished as soldier, broadcaster, academic and writer. In his moving book, *I Was A Stranger*, he recounted his escape from the German-occupied hospital to which he had been taken, the way the courageous members of the Dutch resistance cared for him and helped him to escape back to our own lines.

Of the rest, my Company Sergeant-Major Huggins was in reality Bill Sykes and Colour Sergeant Bower was Tony Thomas, later a major and an MBE (but never a Scot). Although Jimmy Gray was a wholly imaginary person, the part he played during the perimeter battle was that of Lieutenant the Hon Piers St Aubyn MC, the Battalion Intelligence Officer. Luke Tyler was Lieutenant W.S. Donaldson, and Orderly Room Sergeant Whitehouse was our excellent chief clerk, Warrant Officer R.G. Badger; Sergeant Weiner was Corporal Rosenberg MM, Corporal Day was our young Mechanical Transport Sergeant F.G. Hayes, whose namesake, Sergeant W. Hayes DCM, was killed in the battle and is represented by Sergeant Nesbitt. The French liaison officer, whose role I never discovered, was Aspirant Y.W. Hacart, another who died there. The wounded officer, whose life I watched the Brigadier

save (p 118), was Lieutenant-Colonel Derick Heathcote-Amory, later Chancellor of the Exchequer and afterwards Lord Amory. Hugh Elkins was Lieutenant & Quartermaster Tom Bush, while John Simmonds was Captain Raymond Stevens RA, whose only brother had been killed three weeks earlier in the Royal Air Force. My batman, Private Harrison, is Fred Tracey, who remains a very good friend. Our general was, of course, Roy Urquhart.

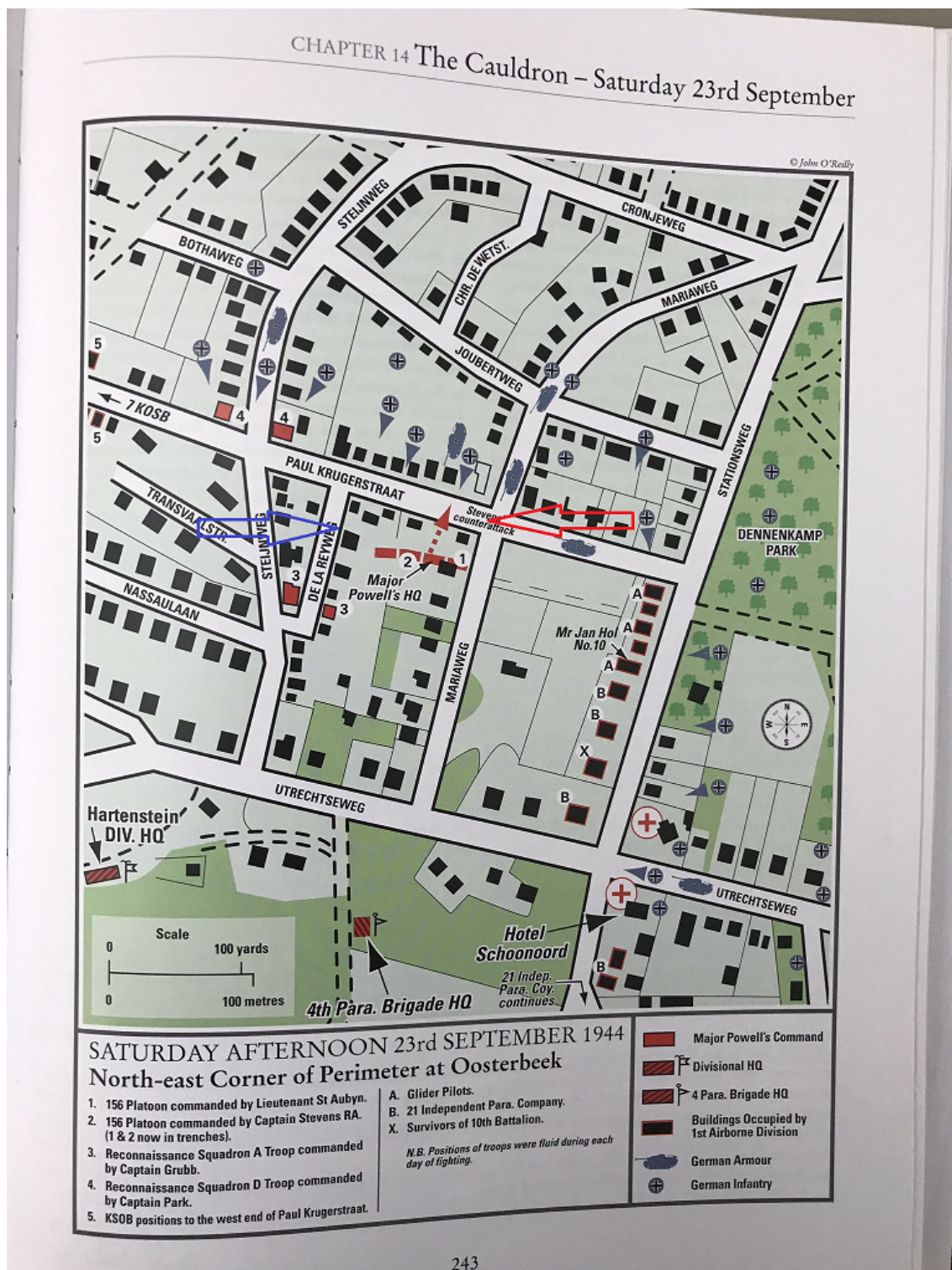
All the other people, among them Harry Bates, Robert Watson, Sergeant Major Kelly, Sergeant Bartholomew, Sergeant Prior and Private Oswald are fictional, although some are an amalgam of people half-remembered, hard exactly to place. Some I deliberately disguised.

In my vain attempt to hide my identity, I exchanged the roles of A and B Companies during the assault on the Dreijensche Weg. This I have now corrected as best I can, but so confused was the engagement that even today many details are still fuzzy. The platoon designations originally used, although inaccurate, have been left as they were.

When writing this book I did not try to depict or analyse Market Garden, the code word for the complete operation. This I attempted later in *The Devil's Birthday: The Bridges to Arnhem*.

Further information from another book, 'From Delhi to Arnhem: 156 Parachute Battalion', by John Patrick O'Reilly and published in 2009 and sometimes regarded as the definitive book about the 156 para, supports the overall story, but varies in some detail, particularly:

- Raymond was shot on the evening of the 23rd [not the afternoon]
- It also has a very detailed map of the action



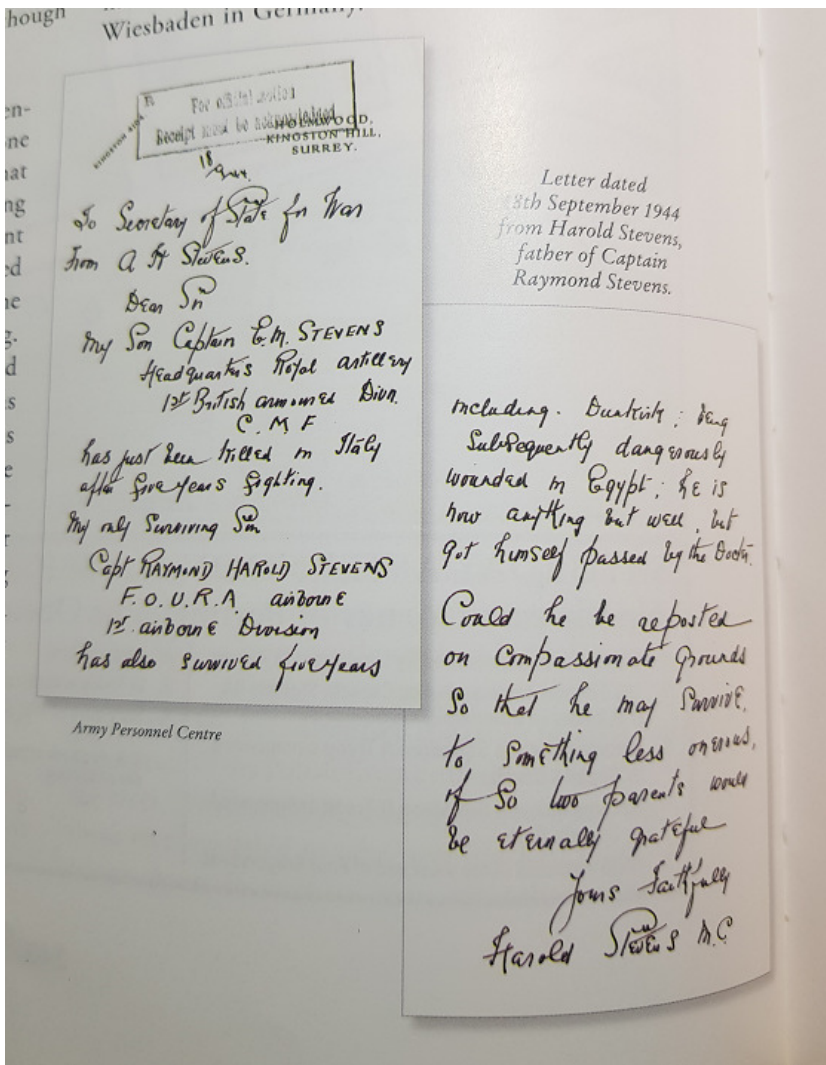
The remnants of Raymond's platoon were trying to hold the 3 houses shown in red '2'

Raymond was shot leading the counter attack across Paul Kruegerstraat, trying to recapture a house, as shown by the dotted red arrow.

He crawled to 13 De La Reyweg and was taken in.

- The book showed a letter written by Raymond's father and poignantly dated September 18th 1944, the same day that Raymond dropped into action.

Here is the letter and text:



Holmwood,
Kingston Hill.
Surrey.

To: Secretary of State for War
From: A H Stevens

Dear Sir
My son Captain E.M. Stevens,
Headquarters Royal Artillery
1st British Armoured Divn. C.M.F.
Has just been killed in Italy after five years
fighting.

My only surviving son,
Capt. Raymond Harold Stevens,
F.O.U.R.A. 1st Airborne
1st Airborne Division
has also survived five years including,
Dunkirk; being subsequently dangerously
wounded in Egypt. He is anything but well,
but got himself passed by the Doctor.

Could he be re-posted on compassionate
grounds. So that he may survive, to
something less onerous, if so two parents
would be eternally grateful.

Yours faithfully
Harold Stevens M.C.

Although there is no source quoted, the book goes on to relate that;

- Captain Raymond Stevens had wanted to emulate his father who had also been a Captain and had won the MC. Those who fought alongside him had thought no accolade sufficient for this brave artilleryman, who had volunteered to be Forward Observation Officer – one of the most dangerous jobs – and he was considered to be one of the 'mob', one of their own, by those who were with him.