



## **Rick Stroud with a tribute to Victor Gregg on VE Day**

Hello, my name is Rick Stroud, and I'm a filmmaker and a historian. And 10 years ago I met a really extraordinary man who was at that time 90 years old, called Victor Gregg. And I met him because I was trying to research how you lived in the desert during the war. What it was like to fight in the desert. And I met a man who'd been his commanding officer, who said *you've got to go and meet Vic: he can talk the hind leg off a donkey.*

And I went to see him. And when I arrived at the station I couldn't see him. He said he'd meet me there, but he wasn't there. I waited for about five minutes at Winchester, and I suddenly saw a car right down the road, and it flashed its lights. It was Vic. What I didn't realise at that time was that Vic, apart from being a soldier, had a history of being a spy, and he would never get into a situation that he couldn't get out of, even meeting me on a purely informal basis. Anyway, he didn't trust me at first, and I went to a pub with him and we talked, I asked him the questions that I'd got set out, and eventually something clicked, and he said *why don't you come back with me?*

And I went back to his house where his wife made us a cup of tea and a cheese sandwich, and the whole atmosphere relaxed. And as I was leaving after a couple of hours, he said *oh, by the way, I've written this book for my children.* And he gave me the manuscript, which was all over the place. It needed a lot of work. But in it was a very exciting story about a young man born in Kings Cross in London, who had had right through his life a most interesting time, and I want to spend the next fifteen minutes on the Big Book Weekend telling you about Vic. And I hope that this will be a sort of tribute to Vic, because Vic is still alive, he's firing on all cylinders, and he's now a hundred. He recently stopped driving, he still communicates by computer, but last year his wife died, and he said *it knocked the stuffing out of me, Rick.* And so he's more frail than he was.



Anyway, in tribute to Vic, who's become a very good friend of mine, I'm going to tell you about him. And I'll just show you this. This is the book that resulted from that first manuscript, recently reissued with more material that I've got out of Vic in the ten years that have gone by. We've also written about four or five other books between us. All to do with his life.

Vic was born in Kings Cross. He had a very, very rough upbringing. He said *the thing is, Rick, you could tell the posh people because they were the ones that had doors on their houses*. He was brought up in I think it was two rooms in a house east of Judd Street, just south of Kings Cross station. And his schooling was really the streets around that place, Covent Garden, Soho.

He left school at fourteen, and the only thing that had happened to him that was culturally good and was an opportunity was that he had the chance to go to music school. But his parents – or rather his mother because his father had run away – just couldn't afford it. So Vic never went to music school. Although music has played a very big part in his life.

He spent his teen years after leaving school in Soho, running with some pretty dodgy types. At one point he joined a band called De Hot Club De Kings Cross. He worked in Covent Garden Market, and there the woman that he worked for, who was about fifty, I think, when he was a young man of sixteen or seventeen, was called Maisy. And she became a sort of mother to him. She ran a wholesale grocery stall mainly selling big sacks of potatoes. Vic heaved the potatoes around, was very fit and he did amateur boxing. He saw the black shirts running around London. He saw Mosley and he didn't like them, and he sort of did his best to fight Mosley. He was in some of those street fights. But basically he was running with some very dodgy, crooked people, carrying money for illegal organisations, and running very close to the law. And I think if what happened to him next hadn't happened, he would have been arrested and gone to prison.



But one day, on his eighteenth birthday, he was walking along Whitehall watching the changing of the guard or something, some military thing, and this big drill sergeant came up to him and said: *Hello, son. What you doing then? It's pouring with rain, come with me and I'll give you a cup of tea and a wad. That'll be nice, won't it?* So Vic went with the magnificent drill sergeant, and he was examined by a medical man, he was given five pounds, I think it was, and the next thing he knew he'd got a train ticket to Winchester, where the Rifle Brigade headquarters was, and he never got the cup of tea and the wad. But he had joined the army. And for the first time in his life he encountered a disciplined, ordered society, and he liked it a lot. It really changed his life. And all the energy that he'd had, that had gone into illegal things and into rather desperate boxing could now be channelled into his life in the army. And he was still what they call a right little tinker in the army. And there was one moment when they were all parading on the parade ground, rehearsing how they were going to get into trains. The army sergeants had drawn train carriages on the tarmac, and Vic was dying for a pee. And he couldn't help it. So he had to have a pee. And the colonel of the regiment came storming over and said *What the bloody hell are you doing?!* And he said *Oh, sorry, guvnor, I'm relieving meself out the window.* And that was the sort of man that Vic was.

The first thing that happened to him was that he was sent to the Middle East, to Palestine, and he sort of worked as a soldier there. But then the big deal happened, the Second World War broke out, and Vic found himself in the Western Desert. And the first major event that he took part in was at a battle that became – that not many people know about – at a place called Beda Fomm. And the British Army, and the Rifle Brigade in particular, which was only six hundred men, were chasing the Italians across the desert towards Tripoli, and there was a desperate fight at Beda Fomm, which was the first time, Vic said, that he had encountered or taken part in hand-to-hand fighting. And his descriptions of that are quite harrowing. He said *Look, Rick, when you kill a man with a machine gun, and he was a Vickers Machine Gun gunner, he said it's easy. You see him there three hundred yards away and you just fire away and they fall like dogs. If you kill a man close up you can smell his breath, you can look him straight in the eye, and you see him die right in front of you.*



And that's a pretty amazing memory to have. He had many of those memories.

I once took Vic to meet a lot of senior officers, and he made the same speech in front of these colonels and brigadiers and generals, and none of them had experienced warfare in the way that he had. That battle ended in a victory, and a young Rifle Brigade colonel took twenty thousand Italians prisoner.

The next thing that happened to Vic was that people knew he was very good at moving around the desert. Somehow he always knew where he was. And when I said to him *well, Vic, how do you know? I'd get lost.* He said *Oh, Rick, it's easy.* He said, *you've got the great depression in the south, you've got the Mediterranean in the north, you've got the Southern Cross up ahead of you, what's the problem? You can't get lost.*

Well, a lot of people did get lost, but they found out about Vic, and they got him to join for a short period of time a thing called Popski's Private Army, which was run by a sort of freelance called Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Paniakov. And Vic would drive wounded soldiers up and down the Western Desert on his own for thousands of miles from the place where they'd been wounded to the medical stations nearer the home lines. And Paniakov, whose nickname was Popski, Popski's Private Army taught Vic some of the things about survival that he would use for the rest of his life. Including when he first met me. Popski's Private Army was disbanded, Vic was made to join the long range desert group, and he did the same thing for them. And he re-joined his men in time for the Battle of Alamein.

Just before the Battle of Alamein a friend of his called Frankie Bad [??? - 9'30"] was driving up to the front line in a lorry, passed Vic, said *Hi, Vic, how's it going?* And Vic went *Oh, great, mate, great.* That lorry drove on and a hundred yards later it blew up, and Vic to this day doesn't know whether it was a mortar bomb that hit it or whether it ran over a mine, but he saw Frankie sitting in the cab of the lorry, ran up to him, grabbed him, pulled him out and said *Come on, Frankie.* And the whole of



Frankie's bottom half fell away, and Frankie was stone cold dead. And Vic went mad for about three weeks. He was just desperate to get at the Germans and kill them.

Anyway, the Battle of Allemagne happened, and Vic survived it. And a few days after the Battle of Allemagne, he took part in an action called Snipe, where elements of the Rifle Brigade, the Second Battalion, the Rifle Brigade went forward at night, they hunkered down, and when they woke up in the morning they found themselves in the middle of eighty German tanks, which were being repaired and engineered. And the most enormous battle broke out. The Rifle Brigade only had – I think they had about six, six-pounder guns – which were very effective. They knocked a lot of the tanks out. And the Colonel, a guy called Turner, won a Victoria Cross helping to reload the last firing gun. And there's a painting that the Rifle Brigade commissioned, which I've just printed out here. Vic Gregg, if he was in this picture, he would be just to the right, he's just out of the frame to the right of the shot. And as you can see there's a tank there. So he was very lucky to survive that.

The next thing that happened to him was that volunteers were called for the Parachute Regiment. And they said *if you join the Parachute Regiment we'll give you as much leave as you want*. And Vic thought this was great. And then they said *but the thing is you've got to jump out of aeroplanes*. And Vic thought that was a completely mad idea. And then they offered them more pay, and eventually he said *well that's all right then, it's a legit, nice easy number*. And one of the things that he did when they were training was that they were being dropped out over the [garbled - 11'47" - over the ??? lakes] and they thought this is not very good because we could drown. So they developed a technique for landing whereby they got rid of their parachute harness, held on to the webbing, and then, ten or so feet about the ground, let go of the webbing and just dropped down into the water. And Vic later fought at Arnhem, and he said this technique saved his life.

Arnhem was a big battle to capture three market garden. It was a big battle to capture three bridges over the Rhine, one of which was Arnhem. The paratroopers were told *it'll be a piece of cake, don't worry*. Vic said, as he stood in the door of the



aeroplane, he looked down, and he could see smoke, he could hear loud bangs, and he thought *this is not going to be a piece of cake*. He jumped out, he used the same technique, his parachute drifted away, he was on the ground, in a little hollow, and he survived until the last day of the battle, when he was captured. He was in the rear guard and he'd been firing this Vickers machine gun. He should have died. Twelve men who'd helped him fire the gun were killed. And he survived. He said *I don't know how I did it, Rick. I'm like a cat*.

As a result of this Vic ended up in a work camp, and he managed to sabotage a soap factory. And the penalty for sabotaging the soap factory was death. And he said he was walked in front with his mate, who'd helped him sabotage the soap factory, they managed to set fire to it, and a German SS officer said *right, you will now die. You're going to go to Dresden, and you'll be held there overnight in a big holding area with four hundred other men, and in the morning you will be shot*. And it was the first time in his life Vic thought *oh, crikey, this is it*.

So he was taken to Dresden, put in the holding area, and that night, as he was waiting to be executed the next morning, we bombed it. And we bombed it ferociously. And what happened was that Vic was blown out – a huge bomb went off outside the holding area, which saw some sort of library, Vic's mate died, Vic was blown out of it and survived, and spent the next three days surviving the bombing. And he said *Rick, I'm used to killing men, but nothing had prepared me to see women and children being sucked up into the air with their heads on fire*. And that event affected the rest of Vic's life.

He eventually escaped. He spent the next ten days after the bombing helping to clear up Arnhem, and then he thought *things have calmed down. If I don't get out of here they'll shoot me*. And he left and he joined the Russians, because he could only go to the east. He spent the last six weeks of the war with the Russians. The army, rather stupidly, when Vic finally got home said *why were you with the Russians?* And he said *I didn't make a choice, it was just what happened*. And they



said well you can't join the army, you can't stay in the army, and that's all Vic wanted to do. It was as though his family had rejected him.

I've just tried to give you now a very, very quick flavour of what this brave man did. After the war, he became a spy, and his life reads like a cross between *Tinker, Tailor...* the John Le Carre novel, and the film *The Italian Job*. By the time he was seventy, Vic was the Guest of Honour at the Hungarian Democratic Forum, cutting the barbed wire that was the barrier between the east and the west, and that, a few weeks later, became the fall of the Berlin Wall. So Vic, little Vic Gregg, has played a significant part in the history of the 20th Century.

I'd just like to end by reading you two things, one of which is Vic's Discharge Certificate, which is what you get when you leave the army, an officer writes *XY has done this, that, and the other...* It says – Vic's Discharge Certificate, which I have seen and held, and I wish I still has it, says: *During an exceedingly colourful career, this rifleman has served long and continuous periods in active operations in front-line units. He's an individual of great courage, capable of applying himself to a task when the need is greatest.* Ie, when the chips are down, and as at Snipe, you think *there's no way out of this.*

And finally, I'll leave the last word to Vic, which is in his book. Vic wrote: *Looking back on my life, I know that I have been lucky. I've got out of endless scrapes because I'm an incurable optimist, and that is one of my better characteristics. I believe that when things are getting rough, take a breather and brew up the tea, it'll all come out in the wash.*

And that, I think, is rather apposite for the circumstances that we find ourselves in today. Calm down: it'll all come out in the wash.