

John Bowler, National Serviceman awarded an MC during fierce action in Korea – obituary

He was proud of the family hat-making heritage, which dated back to his great-grandfather's design of the original Bowler hat

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Bowler in Korea 1951

John Bowler, who has died aged 90, was awarded an MC during the Korean War; as a second lieutenant National Serviceman in the 1st Battalion The Welch Regiment (1Welch), he accompanied the battalion to Korea. North Korean military forces had invaded South Korea in June 1950 and, four months later, Chinese forces of the People's Volunteer Army entered the war.

In November 1951, 1Welch disembarked at the South Korean port of Pusan. They became part of 29th British Infantry Brigade, 1st Commonwealth Division, and within 72 hours they were ordered to take over a reserve sector of 1 Glosters, who had won renown and two VCs the previous April for their heroic stand on the Imjin River.

Bowler's battalion had to endure four bitterly cold winter months – in hillside temperatures down to 45 C of frost – and arduous patrols not unlike those on the Western Front in the First World War. Men slept in their bunkers under constant shelling and mortaring.



Outside Buckingham Palace, 1952

On the night of May 3 1952, Bowler was in command of a fighting patrol whose task was to raid an enemy position. It was almost two miles from the battalion's forward lines and nearly half a mile deeper into enemy territory than any patrol had penetrated for many months.

The approach to its objective was along 800 yards of a feature which had not been previously reconnoitred, but lively opposition from the Chinese was expected. When the patrol was 200 yards short of the position, Bowler, taking one man with him,

crawled forward in the moonlight across open country to within 20 yards of the position to make a close recce and plan their attack.

The enemy was taken by surprise and the assault was successfully carried out with great dash. The Chinese were in platoon strength and reinforcements were coming in; during the patrol's withdrawal the enemy tried to work around them and cut them off, but were driven back.

John Leslie Bowler was born at Worcester Park, Surrey, on May 26 1932. His father, Captain Leslie William Harold Bowler, served in the trenches in the First World War and was awarded two MCs, two Mentions in Despatches and was twice wounded.

Bowler was educated at Cranleigh and, aged 16, joined Jay Hats, the family hat-making business. Based at Southwark in a five-storey factory, it employed 500 people. The young man blocked felts, packed and delivered hats, helped entertain millinery buyers and travelled throughout the country with his father when he presented the spring and winter ranges.



At the Korean War Memorial in Victoria Embankment Gardens, London

In June 1951, he was commissioned into the Welch Regiment and posted to 1Welch. During his service in Korea, he led many fighting patrols and was involved in several sharp engagements.

In December 1951 he led a daylight patrol to a tactically important hill feature to report on the enemy positions and movement. He came under mortar fire and was shelled by a self-propelled gun. He was in open country, but refused to move to a safer position until he had identified the mortar and SP gun positions. He then directed artillery fire on to them until they were both silenced.

Three soldiers in Bowler's platoon were killed in Korea. On one occasion, he himself had a narrow escape from a mortar shell, but one of his men, Corporal Greaves, took the full blast and died in his arms. Bowler knew that the man had a young family, and asked his father to visit the widow, which he did, reporting that she had a strong family and was receiving a lot of support.



John Bowler, Master Feltmaker, 1981

The award to Bowler of an Immediate MC was gazetted in July 1952. The citation paid tribute to his coolness under fire, his sound judgment, tactical ability and inspiring leadership. His battalion embarked for Hong Kong in November.

After his National Service, Bowler left the Regular Army and joined Allardye Palmer, the London advertising agency, and subsequently ran his own advertising and marketing agency until he retired.

He was immensely proud of the family's hatting heritage dating back to the original design of the Bowler hat in 1849 by his great-grandfather and he was the last of the Bowlers to be actively involved in the millinery industry.



Bowler with his Jack Russell, Pip

In 1959, he joined the Worshipful Company of Feltmakers. His grandfather and great-grandfather were both past masters of the company and he became Master in 1981. In retirement, he lived in rural Oxfordshire and took an active part in local affairs. He had also joined the British Korean Veterans' Association and became president of the Surrey West Branch.

Bowler welcomed the opportunity to talk about the conflict in Korea, the so-called "forgotten war", and he was instrumental in ensuring that the fallen were commemorated with a dedicated war memorial. This was placed on Victoria Embankment in London in 2014 and he wrote the commemoration that was inscribed on it. He took pride in marching past the Cenotaph each year.

John Bowler married, in 1961, Gillian Fielder. It was the cricketing season and there many jokes about a Bowler marrying a Fielder. His wife survives him with their son and two daughters.

John Bowler, born May 26 1932, died March 19 2023