

## The Man behind the Medal

This is a sad story of two brothers who died whilst serving their country.

Ivan and Victor Cockcroft were the sons of Clem and Audrey Cockcroft of Purdoo, Peddie District, midway between East London and Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. On a trip to the U.K. in 2001 I came across these medals and bought them, as I believed they belonged back in South Africa.

**194040 Sapper I. L. Cockcroft**  
**Group of 6 – 1939-45 Star; Africa Star; Italy Star; War Medal;**  
**Africa Service Medal; Defence Medal**



Ivan Lewellyn Cockcroft was born in Grahamstown on 15 October 1918. He enlisted for service in the South African Engineering Corps on 28 October 1941, giving his occupation as a Miner. He saw service in North Africa from 26 December 1941, before landing in Italy in mid-1943 after Italy had capitulated and signed a treaty with the Allies on 3 September 1943. Germany moved rapidly by attacking Italian forces as they felt betrayed. The Italian forces were quickly defeated, and most of Italy was occupied by German troops, who established a puppet state, the Italian Social Republic. The king, the Italian government, and most of the navy, escaped to territories occupied by the Allies.

In the period from June to August 1944, the Allies advanced beyond Rome, and the South African Engineering Corp played a major role in repairing roads and bridges. Cockcroft served with the 13<sup>th</sup> Field Company who in addition to repair work were responsible for clearing mines left by the Germans.

Cockcroft died on 16 July 1944, from wounds received, probably from the task of clearing mines, as there is no clear reference to him in either the books 'Salute the Sappers' by Neil Orpen or the book 'Nine Flames' by Ken Anderson.



He is buried in the Assisi War Cemetery in Italy.

Also, on page 138 of 'Salute the Sappers', there is the following reference to casualties – *"Under heavy artillery and mortar fire in frightful weather, Troop 1 of 8 Field Squadron had lost 3 killed and seven wounded in trying to open the way through an area heavily mined and booby-trapped."*

The only references that I can find to what might have happened to him are on page 207, in the book 'Nine Flames', where there is a story of a wife who had received a letter from her husband saying that his next letter will be from the town of Assisi.

It never arrived as he was killed in a mine accident –

*"He had been blown up by a mine while going to the assistance of Sapper Meiring who had also been killed by a mine planted near the power station at Chiusi, about 9 miles outside Rome on the main road to Assisi.....Corporal Renou was buried with 12 other soldiers near the burnt out power station at Chiusi".*

*Ivan Cockcroft's grave in the Assisi War Cemetery in Italy*



Historic Information on the Assisi War Cemetery states – *"The site was selected in September 1944, and burials were brought in to the cemetery from the surrounding battlefields. A high proportion of them date from June and July 1944, when the Germans were making their attempt to stop the Allied advance north to Rome."*



**172783 Pupil Pilot V.T. Cockcroft**  
**Group of 2 – War Medal; Africa Service Medal**



Victor Trevor Cockcroft was born on 26 April 1920. He attested for service on 1 August 1940, as a refuelling attendant and saw service at Baragwanath until 23 March 1941 when he transferred to Youngsfield in the Cape. At the time he enlisted he was working for the Vacuum Oil Company of South Africa in Johannesburg. He stayed in 'fuelling', as a Trainee Flight Sergeant until October 1941, when he was accepted as a Pupil Pilot.

On 16 October 1941 he commenced his basic (classroom) training for the Pupil Pilots course at 100 Air School at Voortrekkerhoogte, before moving to 75 Air School, Lyttleton, Pretoria. On 28 February 1942 he transferred to 3 Air School, Wonderboom, where he commenced with flying training on a Tiger Moth.

On 2 March 1942 he transferred to 25 Air School which was based in Standerton and the planes that were used for training were the Hawker Hart, first brought into service in 1930 and the Hawker Hind and the Harvard, first brought into service in 1935.

The only reference I have been able to find on the accident is a "*Serial 2132 – Dated 8.9.42*" which states "*25 Air School – 08-45hours.....Roberts Drift Both Killed.....Collision in mid-air. Died instantaneously.*"

There is no 'available' record as to what aircraft he was flying, but from what is recorded – "*collision in mid-air – both killed*", it could be concluded that he and a fellow pilot were both flying solo and had a collision. Could they have been practicing flying in formation?



Victor is buried in the Standerton Cemetery.

Most of the airmen buried in this cemetery came from Air Training Schools established in the area.



*Victor Cockcroft's grave in the Standerton Cemetery*

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**Allan Gordon**