

## An evening with Johnson Beharry



1W Steve Cant and I were privileged to be invited to an evening with Dr Johnson Beharry VC COG on 2<sup>nd</sup> March. It was a pleasure to be there (albeit via Zoom).

Many will recognise the name Johnson Beharry as 'that soldier who was extremely brave'. Fewer may know that he is the only living recipient of the VC, and fewer still may

understand why this signal honour was awarded. You can read his citation – gratis of Wikipedia – [here](#).

Johnson 'JB' Beharry was one of 8 children born in Grenada to a disabled mother and alcoholic father. His life up to the age of 8 years sounds like a hard scrabble. When he was adopted by his uncle it became much easier – but he returned to his birth parents at 15 because he was being stifled by lack of opportunity. One dead end job after another eventually led him to visit relatives in England for a holiday. He described arriving here and immediately having a bucket of iced water thrown over him. He complained to his cousin, who had travelled with him – "That's rain!" he was told. "Get used to it!" In Grenada, said JB, it rained and 15 minutes later you were warm and dry. In England it rained and you still weren't dry 15 years later. Nonetheless he stayed, recognising that he would have more opportunities here, and started college.

The opportunities he found, however, turned out to involve selling drugs, smuggling and other criminal activities. What seems to have turned him around is fear of what his beloved grandmother would think if she found out, so – aged about 17, dreadlocked, physically unfit and on the wrong side of the law – he decided to join the army. It took several attempts, but he finally made it – his 'first success in life'.

And it made him. At 19 years old he was in Iraq – having already served in Northern Ireland and Kosovo – as a private, driving Warrior tanks. It was here, on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004, that under withering enemy fire and with his head stuck out of his tank (his periscope had been put out of action) he steered his tank, with its incapacitated crew, to safety, leading five other tanks in his rear. He bears the scars on his head to this day, and at that point could have returned to the UK, but stayed on. Thus it was that on 11<sup>th</sup> June – barely 6 weeks later – he found himself again driving the lead Warrior into an ambush. He described noticing something large and dark approaching him: it turned out to be a rocket propelled grenade which hit the tank just 6 inches from his head. Despite appalling injuries he was able to drive to safety before losing consciousness. He lost 40% of brain volume to his injuries that day – the scars are on the other side of his head, and he came close to having his life support switched off – and was still in rehab when he was awarded the VC.

Despite this, JB was an articulate, interesting and very engaging speaker, very matter-of-fact about his experiences (some of which he has been told rather than being able to remember them). His passion today is his charitable foundation – [www.JBVC-foundation.org.uk](http://www.JBVC-foundation.org.uk). Rather than helping veterans, which other charities exist to serve, he focuses on helping under 25s – mainly, but not exclusively male, and predominantly those leaving prison – to walk away from the gangs and criminal underclass that so nearly claimed him, and realise their ambitions (which for many unfortunately seem to start as ‘be a rapper’, or ‘get rich’) and secure steady and fulfilling employment. The charity has so far achieved an impressive 80% success rate, with no re-offenders. It costs about £4.5k a year to work individually with each person, usually starting to attempt engagement (JB describes this as the biggest challenge) as they leave prison, and he fears that the pandemic’s influence on normal funding streams are likely to seriously impact the work his foundation is doing.

*Cathy Cant – March 2021*