Two British military bomb disposal experts, one of whom gave his life in the line of duty, have been awarded one of the UK's highest awards for gallantry, the George Cross.

At a special ceremony in London today, Chief of the Defence Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup confirmed that Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes and his fallen colleague the late Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid are to have the gallantry award bestowed upon them.

SSgt Hughes and Mrs Christina Schmid, SSgt Schmid's widow, were present at the ceremony today, where they were both personally congratulated by Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, and Secretary of State for Defence Bob Ainsworth.

The George Crosses will be presented in a Royal investiture at a later date.

These honours are part of Operational Awards List 34, the remainder of which will be announced tomorrow, Friday, 19 March 2010.

The George Cross ranks alongside the Victoria Cross as the nation's highest award for gallantry. It is awarded "for acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger."

Announcing the award of the two George Crosse's Chief of the Defence Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup said:

"As one of our top two operational honours, the George Cross is awarded only rarely; its recipients must have displayed the very highest levels of gallantry.

"The actions of Staff Sergeant Hughes and the late Staff Sergeant Schmid meet this most demanding test in full measure.

"Their selfless commitment, unswerving devotion to duty and unsurpassed courage are both awe-inspiring and humbling. The nation will rightly take enormous pride in their service; it owes them and their families an enormous debt of gratitude."

Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes and the late Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid, both from the Royal Logistic Corps were deployed to Helmand Province as part of 19 Light Brigade, which was deployed to Afghanistan on Operation HERRICK 10 between March and November 2009.

The Brigade's deployment saw noticeable UK progress in Helmandlargely as a result of Operation PANCHAI PALANG (Panther's Claw), a counter-insurgency operation which saw an area the size of the Isle of Wight seized from insurgent control enabling security and governance to develop.

The insurgency however was far more intense and lethal than on any previous HERRICK operation and particularly in their use of IEDs.

As High Threat Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD) operators, Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes and Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid were at the forefront of trying to neutralise this lethal threat.

SSgt Hughes's actions are described in his citation as "the single most outstanding act of explosive ordnance disposal ever recorded in Afghanistan."

A particular incident on the 16 August 2009 is referred to when he was tasked to provide close support to the 2 RIFLES Battlegroup during an operation to clear a route, south west of Sangin.

In preparation for the operation, some soldiers deployed early to secure an Emergency Helicopter Landing Site and isolate compounds to the south of the route as part of the inner cordon. During these moves a soldier was very seriously injured by an IED and as he was being recovered another IED exploded killing two personnel outright and resulting in four more very serious casualties, one of whom later died from his wounds.

The area was effectively an IED minefield, over-watched by the enemy and the section were stranded within it.

SSgt Hughes and his team were called in to extract the casualties and recover the bodies.

Without specialist protective clothing in order to save time, SSgt Hughes set about clearing a path to the injured, providing constant reassurance that help was on its way.

On reaching the first badly injured soldier he discovered a further IED within one metre of the casualty that, given their proximity, constituted a grave and immediate threat to the lives of all the casualties.

SSgt Hughes calmly carried out a manual neutralisation of the device; any error would have proved instantly fatal. This was a 'Category A' action only conducted in one of two circumstances; a hostage scenario where explosives have been strapped to an innocent individual and a mass casualty event where not taking action is certain to result in further casualties. Both place the emphasis on saving other peoples' lives even, if necessary, at the expense of the operator. His citation states "It was an extraordinary act."

With shots keeping the enemy at bay, SSgt Hughes coolly turned his attention to reaching the remaining casualties and retrieving the dead. Clearing a path forward he discovered two further IEDs and, twice more, carried out manual neutralisation enabling all the casualties to be extracted and the bodies recovered.

After this the Royal Engineers Search Team (REST) detected a further four IEDs in the immediate area and stoically, like he had on over 80 other occasions in the precious five months, SSgt Hughes set about disposing of them too. His citation stated:

"Dealing with any form of IED is dangerous; to deal with seven IEDs linked in a single circuit, in a mass casualty scenario, using manual neutralisation techniques once, never mind three times, is the single most outstanding act of explosive ordnance disposal ever recorded in Afghanistan.

"That he did it without the security of specialist protective clothing serves even more to demonstrate his outstanding gallantry. Hughes is unequivocally deserving of the highest level of public recognition."

SSgt Schmid's citation described how he personally dealt with 70 confirmed improvised explosive devices.

He was deployed to Helmand from June 2009 until his death in action on 31 October 2009.

His disposal of IEDs involved him typically having to deploy on foot, thereby precluding the option of specialist protective equipment and severely limiting the use of remote controlled vehicles.

He spent long periods of time in close proximity to IEDs and in the gravest personal danger. Before his death in action he responded to 42 IED tasks, personally dealing with 70 confirmed IEDs.

Amongst these incidents was an 11 hour clearance which took place when an infantry company based in Wishtan province was isolated by a substantial minefield and the infamous Pharmacy Road, the only resupply route, was blocked by a medium wheeled tractor and another vehicle, both blown up by very large IEDs.

Intelligence, unenviable first-hand experience and numerous unexplained explosions from the area indicated that the area of the stricken vehicles was laced with IEDs.

At 0800hrs on 9 August 2009, as temperatures soared past 45°C, SSgt Schmid started work. Within only a hundred metres he found and cleared an IED and once within 100 metres of the vehicles he deployed an remote controlled vehicle that struck an IED and was destroyed.

SSgt Schmid then moved forward and, well inside the most lethal arc of any device, manually placed explosive charges, clearing a route to within five metres of the vehicles.

His team then moved to clear a compound adjacent to the stricken vehicles to drag them off the road. When a second IED was found, SSgt Schmid made another manual approach and rapidly got rid of it.

A new approach to the vehicles from the compound was explosively created for the hulks to be dragged clear. SSgt Schmid painstakingly cleared up to both vehicles and his first trip took an hour.

He was relying on his eyesight and his understanding of enemy tactics alone. Despite the

threat, SSgt Schmid again decided against explosive clearance; time was critical so he placed heavy and cumbersome chains onto the stricken vehicles, the riskiest of enterprises given the very high likelihood of booby traps, and the vehicles were finally dragged clear.

As light started to fade, SSgt Schmid then personally led a high risk clearance of the road where the vehicles had been, manually disposing of two further IEDs.

The clearance had lasted 11 hours. It was physically, mentally and emotionally draining, but the road was open and the company resupplied. The resounding success of this battlegroup operation was entirely due to the heroic, selfless acts of SSgt Schmid.

On another occasion, on 8 October 2009 SSgt Schmid was tasked in Sangin District Centre to deal with an artillery shell. On arrival he immediately realised that the many unsuspecting civilians around him in the bustling bazaar were in peril.

Time was not on his side. He quickly assessed that the shell was in fact part of a live Radio Controlled IED intended to cause maximum casualties in a well populated area. The nature of the device also meant it was almost certainly over-watched by the bomber controlling it.

Without any consideration for his own safety SSgt Schmid immediately decided to neutralise the IED manually. To do this he knew he was employing a render safe procedure that should only ever be employed in the gravest of circumstances and which is conducted at the highest personal risk to the operator.

In an instant, SSgt Schmid made the most courageous decision possible, consciously placing his own life on the line in order to save the lives of countless Afghan civilians and demonstrating bravery of the highest order and well beyond the call of duty.

SSgt Schmid was killed during an operation near Forward Operating Base JACKSON. Having dealt with three IEDs already that day, he and his team were transiting to another compound when a searcher discovered a command wire running down the alleyway they were in.

SSgt Schmid and his team were trapped in the alleyway with no safe route forward or back as they did not know in which direction the IED was situated. Knowing that his team were in potential danger, he immediately took action to reduce the hazard.

SSgt Schmid eventually traced the wire to a complex command wire IED in that it incorporated three linked buried main charges. He was killed whilst dealing with the device.

His citation states:

"Schmid's actions on that fateful day, when trapped in an alleyway with no safe means of escape, probably saved the lives of his team.

"These occasions are representative of the complexity and danger that Schmid had faced daily throughout his four month tour.

"His selfless gallantry, his devotion to duty, and his indefatigable courage displayed time and time again saved countless military and civilian lives and is worthy of the highest recognition."

The eulogy for Staff Seargeant Olaf Schmid is available here