

PART 11

For Valour: Victoria Cross and George Cross winners from Volunteer Reserve Units within Greater London



Victoria Cross and George Cross

Introduction

The Victoria Cross was founded by Royal Warrant on 29th January 1852 and is awarded for acts of conspicuous bravery in the face of the enemy. The decoration is in the form of a Maltese Cross made from the bronze of cannons captured at Sevastopol during the Crimean War. Originally the ribbon of the Victoria Cross was blue for the Navy and dark red for the Army, however in 1918 the colour was changed to the current crimson for all 3 services.

The first Victoria Cross was awarded to Charles Davis Lucas, an Irishman serving with the Royal Navy, on 26th June 1854 some 19 months prior to the institution of the Royal Warrant. Lucas was serving aboard HMS HECLA during the Crimean War when a live Russian shell landed on the Ship's Deck. Lucas picked up the shell and threw it overboard where it exploded. This prompt action saved the Ship and its crew from certain destruction.

The first Territorial Officer to win the Victoria Cross was Second Lieutenant Geoffrey Woolley of the 9th (County of London) Battalion The London Regiment (Queen Victoria's Rifles) on Hill 60 in the Ypres sector of Belgium, on the night of 20th April 1915. This was followed 41 days later by the first Territorial from the Ranks to win the Victoria Cross, Lance Sergeant Douglas Belcher of the 1st/5th (City of London) Battalion The London Regiment (London Rifle Brigade) for a deed of gallantry, also in the Ypres sector.

During the Great War there were two double Victoria Crosses, awarded to Territorial RAMC Officers, Captain Arthur Martin-Leake and Captain Noel Chavasse. Captain Chavasse served with the 1/10th The King's Liverpool Regiment and Captain Martin-Leake served with 5th Field Ambulance.

The George Cross was instituted in 1940 by King George the VI. At the time the United Kingdom was engaged in total war and therefore acts of Gallantry by civilians, members of the Emergency services and the Armed Forces in circumstances other than in combat situations would need to be recognised. At the same time the George Medal was instituted. This medal would be awarded more freely than the George Cross however, the standard would be high.

Prior to 1940 there were 3 National medals awarded for outstanding gallantry by both civilians and the military. They were: The Empire Gallantry Medal, The Albert Medal, The Edward medal (specifically for bravery in industrial accidents).

On the 24th September 1940 the date of the issue of the George Cross warrant, recipients of the Empire Gallantry Medal were required to exchange their award for the George Cross. On the 21st October 1971 recipients of the Albert and Edward Medal were invited to exchange their medals for the George Cross should they so wish.

The George Cross has been awarded collectively on two occasions. On 15th April 1942 to the people of Malta and on 23rd November 1999 to the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

In 1985, Sergeant Barry Smith, 289 Commando Battery RA (V) was awarded the George Medal, after he chased two armed raiders during which he was shot in the chest and twice in the groin. Despite his injuries he caught the raiders and held them until the police arrived.

Victoria Cross Holders from The Reserve Forces of Greater London



Belcher, Douglas Walter, Lance-Sergeant

1st/5th (City of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (London Rifle Brigade)
Ypres Salient, Belgium, 13th May 1915

Award Citation

On 13th May 1915, south of the Wieltje-St Julien Road, Belgium, Lance-Sergeant Belcher was in charge of a portion of an advance breastwork during continuous bombardment by the enemy. The Lance-Sergeant, with very few men, elected to remain and try to hold his position after the troops near him had been withdrawn and with great skill he succeeded in his objective, opening rapid fire on the enemy, who were only 150-200 yards away, whenever he saw them collecting for an attack. This bold action prevented the enemy breaking through and averted an attack on the flank of one of the Divisions.



Borton, Arthur Drummond, Lieutenant Colonel, CMG DSO

2/22nd Battalion, The London Regiment (Queen's)
Sheria, Palestine, 7th November 1917

Award Citation

In darkness and in unknown country, he deployed his Battalion and at dawn led his companies against a strongly-held position. When the leading waves were checked by withering machine-gun fire, Lieutenant Colonel Borton moved freely up and down his lines under heavy fire. Reorganising his command, he led his men forward and captured the position. He later led a party of volunteers against a battery of field guns in action at point-blank range, capturing the guns.



Christie, John Alexander, Lance Corporal

1/11th (County of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (Finsbury Barracks)
Fejja, Palestine, 21/22nd December 1917

Award Citation

A former London and North Western Railway parcels clerk based at Euston Station, he enlisted in September 1914 and served in Gallipoli, where he was wounded at Sulva Bay. Returning to action in Palestine, he took part in actions to repel the enemy from retaking captured positions at Fejja, near the port of Jaffa. During the action he single-handedly attacked the enemy lines to prevent recapture of the British positions.



Cloutman, Brett Mackay, Major (later Lieutenant Colonel)

12th London Regiment (Rangers), Royal Engineers

Pont-sur-Sambre, 6th November 1918

Award Citation

Whilst Acting Major in command of the 59th Field Company, Royal Engineers, Cloutman was awarded the Victoria Cross for the most conspicuous bravery on 6th November 1918, at Pont-sur-Sambre. Major Cloutman, after reconnoitring the river crossings, found the Quartes Bridge almost intact but prepared for demolition. Leaving his party under cover he went forward alone, swam across the river, and, having cut the 'leads' from the charges, returned the same way, despite the fact that the bridge and all approaches thereto were swept by enemy shells and machine-gun fire at close range. Although the bridge was blown up later in the day by other means, the abutments remained intact.



Cruickshank, Robert Edward, Private (later Major)

2nd/14th (County of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (London Scottish)

Egypt, 1st May 1918

Award Citation

On 1st May 1918, east of Jordan, Palestine, Private Cruickshank volunteered to take a message to company headquarters from his platoon which was in the bottom of a wadi, with its officer and most of the men casualties. He rushed up the slopes but was hit and was so badly wounded that he could make no further attempt. He lay all day in a dangerous position, being sniped at and wounded where he lay, but displayed great endurance and was cheerful and uncomplaining throughout.



Dean, Donald John, T/Lieutenant (later Colonel)

8th Battalion, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment

Lens, France, 24/26th September 1918

Award Citation

During the period 24/26th September 1918 north-west of Lens, France, Lieutenant Dean with his platoon held an advance post established in a newly-captured enemy trench. The post was ill-prepared for defence and the Lieutenant worked unceasingly with his men consolidating the position, under very heavy fire. Five times in all the post was attacked and on each occasion the attack was repulsed. Throughout the whole of this time, Lieutenant Dean inspired his command with his own contempt of danger and set the highest example of valour, leadership and devotion to duty.



Haine, Reginald Leonard, Second Lieutenant (MC*) (later Lieutenant Colonel)

1st Battalion, Honourable Artillery Company

Gavrelle, France, 28/29th April 1917

Award Citation

On 28/29th April 1917, near Gavrelle France, when British troops were holding a salient which was being repeatedly counter-attacked by German forces, Second Lieutenant Haine organised and led six bombing attacks against a German strong point and captured the position together with 50 prisoners and two machine-guns. The enemy at once counter-attacked and regained the lost ground, but Second Lieutenant Haine formed a 'block' in his trench and for the whole of the following night maintained his position. Next morning he again attacked and recaptured the position. His splendid example inspired his men during more than 30 hours of continuous fighting.



Harvey, Jack, Private (later Corporal)

1st/22nd (County of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (Queen's)

France, 2nd September 1918

Award Citation

On 2nd September 1918, north of Peronne, France, the advance of his company was held up by machine gun fire. Private Harvey dashed forward a distance of 50 yards alone, through the barrage and in the face of heavy enemy fire and rushed a machine gun post, shooting two of the team and bayonetting another. He then destroyed the gun and continued his way along the enemy trench. Single-handed he rushed an enemy dug-out which contained 37 Germans and compelled them to surrender. The two acts of gallantry saved the company heavy casualties and materially assisted in the success of the operation.



Keyworth, Leonard James, Lance Corporal (later Corporal)

1/24th Battalion, The London Regiment

Givenchy, France, 25th May 1915

Award Citation

After a successful assault on the German position, the 24th Battalion The London Regiment tried to follow up their success with a bomb attack, during which 58 men out of 74 became casualties. During this fierce encounter, Lance Corporal Keyworth stood on top of the enemy parapet for two hours, throwing about 150 grenades among the Germans, who were only a few yards away. Later that year, Keyworth was fatally wounded. In 1919, a street in Southwark was named after him.



Knight, Alfred Joseph, Sergeant (later Second Lieutenant)

2/8th (City of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (Post Office Rifles)
Ypres, Belgium, 20th September 1917

Award Citation

On 20th September 1917, at Alberta Section, Ypres, Belgium, when his platoon came under heavy fire from an enemy machine-gun, Sergeant Knight rushed through our own barrage and captured it single-handed. He performed several other acts of bravery single-handed, all under heavy machine gun and rifle fire and without regard to personal safety. All the platoon officers of the company had become casualties before the first objective was reached, and this NCO took command not only of his own platoon but of the platoons without officers and his energy in consolidating and reorganising was untiring.



Lafone, Alexander Malins, Major

1/1st County of London Yeomanry (Middlesex Duke of Cambridge's Hussars)
Karm, Palestine, 27th October 1917

Award Citation

Major Lafone's squadron of the Middlesex Yeomanry was ordered to hold the flank of the allied line against the Turks. They did so for over seven hours against vastly superior forces. When only three of his men were left unwounded, Major Lafone ordered those who could withdraw to a trench slightly to the rear. When finally surrounded he stepped into the open and continued to fight until he was killed.



Mitchell, George Allan, Private

1st Battalion, The London Scottish (London Highlanders)
River Garigliano, Italy, 23rd January 1944

Award Citation

On a very dark night, Private Mitchell repeatedly charged and silenced machinegun posts which had the advantage of position on a steep and rocky hillside. Even after his ammunition was spent he still led the way into a final enemy strongpoint. His courage and determined example were instrumental in the last of the Germans being taken prisoner. A few minutes later, one of those who had surrendered picked up a rifle and shot Private Mitchell through the head.



Pollard, Alfred Oliver, Second Lieutenant, MC DCM

1st Battalion, Honourable Artillery Company
Gavrelle, France, 29th April 1917

Award Citation

Heavy casualties from shellfire disorganised units on the left of Lieutenant Pollard's Battalion. A subsequent enemy attack caused further confusion and retirement with hostile forces in close pursuit. Pollard realised the seriousness of the situation and dashed up to stop the retreat. With only four men he counter-attacked, regaining all the ground that had been lost and more. The enemy retired in disorder, sustaining more casualties.



Tisdall, Arthur Walderne St. Clair, Sub-Lieutenant

Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (Anson Battalion, Royal Naval Division)
V Beach, Gallipoli, 31st March 1916

Award Citation

On 25th April 1915, at V Beach, Gallipoli, during the landing from HMS RIVER CLYDE, Sub-Lieutenant Tisdall heard wounded men on the beach calling for help. He jumped into the water, and pushing a boat in front of him, went to their rescue. He found, however, that he could not manage alone, but with the help from other naval personnel he made four or five more trips from the ship to the shore and was responsible for rescuing several wounded men under heavy and accurate fire.



Train, Charles William, Corporal (later Sergeant)

2/14th (County of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (London Scottish)
Near Jerusalem, Palestine, 8th December 1917

Award Citation

When his company was unexpectedly engaged by an enemy party with two machine guns, Corporal Train attacked with rifle grenades. With bomb and rifle he put some of the enemy out of action before going to the assistance of a comrade who was bombing their position from the front. He shot one who was carrying the second gun out of engagement. Undoubtedly he saved his Battalion heavy casualties, and enabled them to advance on their objective.



Woolley, Geoffrey Harold, Second Lieutenant, OBE MC

9th (County of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (Queen Victoria's Rifles)

Hill 60, Ypres, Belgium, 21st April 1915

Award Citation

During the night of 20th/21st April 1915, on Hill 60, Belgium, Second Lieutenant Woolley was the only officer on the hill. However, with very few men he successfully repelled all attacks on his trench, and continued throwing bombs and encouraging his men until relieved. His trench during this time was being heavily shelled and bombed.

George Cross Holders from The Reserve Forces of Greater London



Fraser (later Barry), Harriet Elizabeth, Miss

Staff Nurse, Territorial Force Nursing Service

31st January 1919 (Awarded Albert Medal in 1919; surrendered for the George Cross in 1972)

Award Citation

Early in the morning of 1st October 1918, a serious fire broke out in No. 36 Casualty Clearing Station at Rousbrugge in Belgium. At the time, some of the patients were undergoing serious operations in the abdominal and general operating theatres, the walls of which were composed of wood. The first intimation of danger in the theatres was the extinction of the electric light accompanied by volumes of smoke, and almost immediately the wooden walls burst into flames. The two Sisters and Staff Nurse Fraser helped to carry the unconscious patients to safety and then returned to the burning wards to help the other patients. During this time ether bottles and nitrous oxide cylinders were continually exploding, filling the air with fumes and fragments of steel.



Harris, Roy Thomas, Captain

The Queen's Royal Regiment, Croydon Home Guard

Thornton Heath, Surrey, 18th September 1940

Award Citation

His year of birth was believed to be 1903 and he died at Wolverhampton on 18th August 1973. He was a member of the Queen's Royal Regiment Home Guard Battalion in Croydon. At the time of his award, Harris was a member of Croydon ARP Engineers' Service. He was awarded the George Cross for dismantling unexploded bombs at Langdale Road School, Thornton Heath, Surrey, on 18th September 1940. The problem was a new one to Captain Harris who at that time was Chief Combustion Engineer to Croydon Corporation. He showed conspicuous bravery in dealing with these exceptionally dangerous devices. He later joined The Royal Engineers and attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.



Spillett, Brian, Lance Corporal

Other Decorations – Bronze Medal of Carnegie Hero Fund Trust

29th June 1965

Award Citation

At 5.30am on 9th January 1965, a fire broke out in a house at Waltham Cross, Hertfordshire. Mr Spillett, attracted by the shouting, arrived there only partially dressed and was told that a man was still trapped in the house which was now blazing furiously. Despite attempts to hold him back, Mr Spillett insisted on going into the house, but he failed to get the man out and he himself died a week later from his injuries.



Tollemache, Anthony Henry Hamilton, Flying Officer (later Squadron Leader)

600 Squadron, Auxiliary Air Force. ADC to Field Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis,
Governor General of Canada, 1946

6th August 1940

Award Citation

On 11th March 1940, at Manston, Kent, Flying Officer Tollemache was the pilot of an aircraft which carried a passenger and an air gunner and was engaged on a searchlight co-operation exercise. When approaching the flarepath to land, after completing the exercise shortly before midnight, the aircraft struck a tree and crashed into a field where it immediately burst into flames. Flying Officer Tollemache was thrown clear of the wreckage and his air gunner also escaped. However, realising that his passenger was still in the aircraft, and despite the intense heat and the explosion of small arms ammunition, Flying Officer Tollemache tried to break through the forward hatch and rescue him. He persisted in his efforts until his own clothing was ablaze and he had suffered injuries which nearly cost him his life.



Williams, Sidney, Sergeant

1/6th Battalion The London Regiment

30th August 1918 (Awarded Albert Medal in 1918; surrendered for the George Cross in 1972)

Award Citation

On 4th January 1918, in France, a soldier dropped a lighted match in a dug-out which had been used as a store for gunpowder. Although most of the gunpowder had been removed, there was a considerable amount scattered on the floor which caught fire. The soldier was overcome by the fumes, and in spite of the volumes of smoke issuing from the dug-out, Lance-Corporal Williams went in and rescued the soldier, who was by then badly burnt and unconscious. The Lance-Corporal, who was severely burnt himself, had to carry the man up twenty steps, and if it had not been for his prompt action, the man would have lost his life.