

THE VICTORIA CROSS & THE ROYAL MARINES

A Royal Warrant of 29th January 1856 brought the Victoria Cross into being; an award to be 'highly prized and eagerly sought after' as the Queen's approval was expressed. The preamble noted that there had been no way of 'adequately rewarding the individual gallant services either of officers or the lower grades in our naval and military service, or of warrant and petty officers, seamen and marines in our Navy, and non-commissioned officers and soldiers in our Army'.

All persons were to be on a perfectly equal footing if being considered as a recipient ... 'neither rank, nor long service, nor wounds, nor any other circumstance or condition whatsoever, save the merit of conspicuous bravery.' This was to be the first British medal for which the only necessary qualification was valour.

Although Victoria's name and endorsement were essential to the instigation of the medal, the evidence points to the Duke of Newcastle as the originator of the idea shortly after the costly Franco-British victory over the Russians at the battle of Alma in 1854. As Secretary of State for War, Newcastle conversed with Prince Albert to gain the Queen's consent for an official award for gallantry for which the private soldier was eligible. The French had instituted the Legion of Honour in 1803, and the Prussians, the Iron Cross, in 1813, of similar qualification.

The Queen's interest extended to personally approving the design, wording, size and material of the cross, with all drawings going before her for scrutiny. It was originally to be worded "For the Brave", but Victoria felt this would imply that those not awarded the medal were not brave, so had the legend altered to "For Valour".

The inauguration of the new medal took place in front of around 116,000 people, troops, and seated guests at Hyde Park on Friday June 26th 1857,

with Victoria personally presenting the award to 62 Officers and men whose names and deeds had been cited in the London Gazette.

Interestingly, despite the occasion being the first time ever that officers and men had been at the same investiture, or awarded the same decoration, the much vaunted 'equality' as stated in the preamble, did not make much impression on the traditional British military system. The 'democratic spirit' that was to see 'all recipients standing shoulder to shoulder, regardless of rank' as quoted by the press at the time (and still in some works now) did not find its way into the line of recipients on the park that day. The Navy and Royal Marines representatives received their awards ahead of the Army, whose newest regiment, The Rifle Brigade, being last to collect, regardless of the chronological dates of the heroic deeds. Even within each service or regiment, the officers were awarded before the men. For the Royal Marines this put Lieutenant Dowell RMA, thirteenth in line on the day, ahead of his Bombardier companion Wilkinson, despite the latter's earlier citation date. Corporal Prettyjohns was on active service so was not present.

The cross itself is intrinsically worthless (quoted as fourpence- halfpenny in 1889), being cast in bronze cut from the cascabels (the spherical pieces at the end of the barrels) of Russian cannons captured at Sebastopol during the Crimean War. It is often (even in the warrant!) wrongly described as a Maltese Cross, when it is a 'Cross Patte', or debateably, a 'Cross Formee' (the passing resemblance to the German Iron Cross may well be hint of Prince Albert's involvement). Even at the time it was not regarded a 'handsome' medal; one wag wrote of it,

"Here's Valour's Cross, my man, 'twill serve,
Though rather ugly – take it.
John Bull a medal can deserve,
But can't contrive to make it;"

However this, and the metal chosen, has been said to have been a deliberate design feature, to present a common symbol for uncommon valour to Officers and men alike, and thereby focus on the deed, and not the adornment. The more cynical would suggest the scenario of pinning a precious metal on what

Wellington had described his Soldiers, as 'the very scum of the earth' would result in the medal being sold for its base value: "these men will only spend it on drink.." the Duke had said of an Army pay rise, for example.

As if to compensate, the award carried a £10 annuity for non-commissioned recipients, but this did not make a sufficient pension alone. Bombardier Wilkinson's headstone was paid for by the RMA, his wife only made a paupers' grave the following year, and the Officers' Mess purchased the medal from the surviving family in 1918. The annuity was only increased to £100, tax free, in 1959 by the then Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan.

The medals, traditionally always made by the same firm Hancock's, hung on ribbon 1½ inches wide, red for Army recipients, blue for Navy. On the formation of the RAF as a separate organisation on 1st April 1918, no extra colour for this service was deemed acceptable. So the interdepartmental committee, that had formed in the following August advised King George V that henceforth all Victoria Cross's would be presented with red ribbons only. The committee had also opened up the award to women and civilians; a move that the king was adverse to, but signed the amendments on condition they were not published until the country was at peace. This was to prevent retrospective awards, and in the event, the new warrant was not seen until 1920.

Visitors to the Royal Marines Museum who view the ten Royal Marine Victoria Cross's will notice that some of the pre-1918 recipients' medals have red ribbons. This was because surviving recipients were allowed to change their ribbons after that date if they so wished. In the case of Major Lumsden, his VC was won as an Army Staff Officer.

The awards and citations themselves depended in the first place upon eyewitness accounts; notoriously subjective sources, especially when clouded by fog of war. For example, when researching the Royal Marines Victoria Cross citations, the remaining evidence for Gunner Thomas Wilkinson's award, hinges on one report from a 'Commanding Officer of

The Right Attack' and a couple of newspaper despatches; whereas for Corporal Walter Parker RMLI, a full investigation of all reports was entered into before any recommendation for award went to the Admiralty. No citation can be taken as entirely reliable, in fact, Captain Lewis Halliday, (whose award features in these pages) later challenged his own!

Since the original warrant, various amendments and additions have evolved, notably in 1881 when "in the presence of the enemy" was introduced. The first posthumous Victoria Crosses were awarded in 1907 with the Royal Marines first contributing to this criterion in 1916 with Major Francis Harvey at the battle of Jutland, and later with Corporal Thomas Hunter at Lake Comacchio in 1945. Throughout all the changes however, the fundamental principle of the award remains unaltered.... 'For Valour'.

The following Royal Marines have been awarded the Victoria Cross. All the VCs awarded to Royal Marines are on display in the Royal Marines Museum at Eastney, Southsea.

CORPORAL J PRETTYJOHNS RM

The Battle of Inkerman 5th November 1854.

Successfully led a section which dislodged Russian marksmen from some caves.

GUNNER T WILKINSON RMA

The Siege of Sevastopol 7th June 1855.

Repaired damage to the advanced battery's revetments under heavy fire.

LIEUTENANT G D DOWELL RMA

The Baltic 13th July 1855.

Rescued the crew of a rocket boat under intense 'grape and musketry' fire.

CAPTAIN L S T HALLIDAY RMLI

The Siege of Peking 24th June 1900.

Led the way into some burning Legation buildings under heavy small arms fire.

LANCE CORPORAL W R PARKER RMLI

Gallipoli 30th April 1915.

Displayed conspicuous bravery in rescuing wounded in daylight under heavy fire.

MAJOR F J W HARVEY RMLI (Posthumous)

The Battle of Jutland 31st May 1916.

Ordered the flooding of his turret's magazines although mortally wounded, thereby saving his ship.

MAJOR F W LUMSDEN DSO RMA

France 3rd April 1917.

Led a party to recover six enemy guns under heavy fire.

CAPTAIN E BAMFORD DSO RMLI

The Raid on Zeebrugge 23rd April 1918.

Led his company with initiative and daring in the face of great difficulties (by ballot).

SERGEANT N A FINCH RMA

The Raid on Zeebrugge 23rd April 1918.

Maintained continuous covering fire from the exposed foretop, although severely wounded.

CORPORAL T P HUNTER RM (Posthumous)

The Battle of Comacchio 3 April 1945.

Advanced alone over open ground to save his Troop by offering himself as a target.

The following member of the Royal Army Medical Corps was awarded the Victoria Cross while attached to 'A' Troop 45 RM Commando:

LANCE-CORPORAL H E HARDEN RAMC (Posthumous)

Montforterbeek, Holland 23rd January 1945

Attended to and recovered a wounded Lieutenant and two Marines of his section, under fire before being wounded and then killed.