



“Getting to Know My  
Grandfather”

Victoria Cross Online  
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## EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the July edition of the Victoria Cross Online magazine. This month's feature article is by guest author Sarah Dean, whose piece on "The Grandfather I Never Knew" is extremely heartfelt and poignant and is a testament to the memory of William John Symons VC, a Lone Pine VC from World War I. I am indebted to Sarah for a lovely article.

Secondly, there is the latest news on Steve Davies, Military Grave Restorer, who has been north of the border for his latest two projects.

Thirdly, is the news that research has revealed that Thomas Flynn VC's story is not what it seems.

Finally, is a new contributor in Tom Lewis OAM, whose article "Loneliest VCs" examines Australian VC recipients with no known grave.



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# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN



As a young girl growing up in rural South West of England in the sixties with parents who were both artists, we were a family who just got on with life; never discussing what had gone before and what was to come. I got on with the general task of growing up with frequent visits to see my mother's mother who lived on the coast in Devon. She had an old cottage looking out to sea where, during the Second World War a Hungarian chap who she had taken in went through a morning routine of exercises at the window. He was spotted by the village policeman wheeling his bicycle up the hill. It was so strange to see anyone exercising in those days and a foreigner to boot that the policeman promptly arrested him for signalling to the enemy out to sea! This was, for years, the only War story handed down to me.

# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN

There was a little dining room in the cottage, where, above the window, hung a profile portrait of a young man in a military uniform. I was told that it was my grandfather, William John Symons VC. No further information offered. He had died eleven months before I was born.

Looking back through the passage of time: take a young girl growing up in the early fifties; take a grandmother who was respected as grandmothers should be; take an old sepia photograph of a handsome, uniformed young man in profile hanging on a cottage wall in Devon. Toss all this together and you have the recipe for my fascination with my maternal grandfather which, like a yeast mixture, just grows and grows – the more warmth you give it, the more it becomes a personal experience.

As I grew up, the business of finding my own way in life overcame any latent interest I might have had in my grandfather. The only reference occasionally made about him alluded to my phobia about spiders and I was told, when hysterical, if I had seen an eight-legged beast in a gorse bush or behind the wardrobe, to pull myself together as my grandfather was a VC!

As I grew older I wanted to know more about the man I had missed in life by one year. He had died in 1948 a week before my parents married (they had no wedding reception as a result). I was born in 1949.



# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN

By the time I became aware of the enormity of his bravery, I discovered that his Victoria Cross had been sold in the 60's – I had never seen this and now it felt that I would never see it. My feelings had absolutely nothing to do with the value of the medal. I was a teenager at the time with the usual reaction that whatever had gone before was a personal affront, and a sense of guilty outrage persisted until I grew up a little.

Once I got to adulthood and started to understand the complexities of life, I was much more philosophical about it and realised that if it hadn't been sold it, it may even have got mislaid in the general movement of family life over the generations; or it could have sparked a bitter feud as to ownership. How much better is it that it is looked after beautifully by the War Memorial in Canberra, Australia representing a nation which bristles with pride over its military achievements in the country of my grandfather's birth. I have since had the opportunity to hold it to my chest with an overwhelming sense of pride – an everlasting memory. It's a very masculine medal – undecorated and plain – made, as they all were - of bronze from two captured Chinese cannons held at Woolwich Barracks, London. It was the first medal to recognise outstanding bravery in the ordinary soldier – whatever his rank – and newspapers at the time of its design called it “poor looking and mean in the extreme”. However, Queen Victoria loved it and she added the letter “V” to link the medal ribbon to the medal itself. Medal ribbons for the VC were red for the Army and blue for the Navy. Later the colours were mixed to achieve the maroon ribbon that we know today.

# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

Courtesy of Australian War Memorial

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I began to respect this medal and when the family started to get invited to Victoria Cross celebrations and commemorations at Westminster Abbey in London in company with the Queen and other members of the Royal Family, it occurred to me that this was something special. Australian soldiers were always present at these gatherings and I got to recognise the colour of the uniform to seek them out and talk about my grandfather at Gallipoli. I also got to know the living recipients from Australia who always welcomed me for a chat. It was from then on that I suffered from ‘family research’ malady, wanting to discover all I could about this enigmatic man so close to me in descendency.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/william-john-symons-vc/>

# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN

Of course, delving into a past life brings excitement, disappointment, surprise, incredulity and above all, the constant feeling of “what if” we had actually met. The bonus effect is that you end up knowing as much as you will ever know about a person – maybe – as in my case - even more so than if you’d actually met that person. It’s a driving force to find out who YOU actually are and to document it.

With the advent of the Internet it’s so much easier to discover things. Symons’ daughters remember their father lovingly with his grey eyes, curly hair and the very fresh approach a young, brave Australian must have brought to their lives as children in the austere period between the two World Wars. They also remember him coughing every night due to the effect of poison gas on the battlefields in France – the consequent damage to his lungs eventually contributing to his death, together with a brain tumour, at the age of 58. They say he never complained and to them, as children, he never seemed affected by all the terrible things he witnessed.

Back in 2015, I had the good fortune to be invited by the British Government to visit Gallipoli as a VIP in company with many heads of state including Prince Charles and Harry and the Turkish President. I was the only ANZAC representative in the group and felt very proud as Symons’ story was featured in the official programme for the centenary Service of Remembrance at the Helles Memorial. Since that visit, I have learned so much about that tragic campaign and the hell-hole that was the Battle of Lone Pine and I stand amazed that anyone could have survived such cruel combat and then have to go on to fight on the Somme in France as did most of the Australian boys who were lucky enough to survive – a bitter-sweet turn of events if ever there was one!



# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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William – a third generation Australian from Cornish mining stock - was born and grew up in Eaglehawk and attended the school when the existing building was brand new. His father (William Sampson Symons) and his mother (Mary Emma Symons nee Manning) are buried at Eaglehawk along with many of their own forebears there and at Tarnagulla. William’s father was born at Tarnagulla – he was a Miner and then a Mine Manager and a Methodist Lay Preacher. Mary moved to Brunswick after the early death of her husband, due to the inhalation of quartz dust whilst working in the gold mines. William was 14, leaving him to help her care for his four younger brothers who were 12, 10, 4 and 1 taking on the mantle of the man of the house. This formed a lifelong bond with his mother which remained strong until her death.



During his early life at Eaglehawk he attended Eaglehawk Primary School, the Eaglehawk West Methodist Sunday School and Band of Hope and as a lad, he drove a grocer’s cart and horse for Mr. W. J. Washington at Sailor’s Gully Road.

In Brunswick he was a travelling salesman and signed up for the Militia for eight years before enlisting in 1914.



# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN

As soon as War broke out, he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force at Carlton in (17<sup>th</sup> August) 1914 and was posted to “A” Company 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Broadmeadows. From then on, the course of his life changed forever – and all of our lives too. I can’t help thinking how much his mother must have missed him from here on.

He was described as 5' 9" tall, weighing 11st, with fair complexion, grey eyes, brown hair: his religious denomination was Protestant. He was known as “Curly” Symons because of his curly hair. He became a Colour Sergeant on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1914 and embarked for the Middle East with the 7th Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 1st Division from Melbourne on the SS 'Hororata' in (18<sup>th</sup> October) 1914 eventually arriving in Mena, Egypt where he was appointed Temporary Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant.

The company sailed for Gallipoli and landed at dawn on that historic day 107 years ago. Symons was immediately commissioned Second Lieutenant on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1915 to compensate for Lieutenant Leslie Blick, “C” Company, who had been killed in action. A disturbing prophesy of things to come.

Symons took part in the second Battle of Krithia with his fellow soldiers, having hardly any experience of warfare – the savagery must have been shocking to the extreme. He was then promoted Lieutenant on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1915 at Lemnos – his rapid promotions being testament to the terrible loss of life in all ranks.

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When you think of what was to follow – both at Gallipoli and on the Western Front – it’s remarkable that my grandfather was spared – his Guardian Angel must have been working overtime – I often reflect that one bullet at this time would have come between me and my entire existence.

As it happened, an enemy bullet struck his rifle butt, shattering it and causing wood splinters to penetrate his hand.

There was an unsuccessful attempt to blow a mine at Tunnel D21 on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1915. Symons moved into the tunnel to assist, together with four machine gunners, but owing to a slight kink in the tunnel near the forward end, the gun tripod was mounted at the bend whilst the gun and one belt were taken forward into the crater. It was decided that a soldier would move forward, following a protective burst from the machine gun, with a prepared explosive to be lodged just inside the Turkish entrance. The plan, after deposit of explosive, was for all to withdraw, mount the gun on its tripod and hold this position against any enemy penetration after the explosion. Strict silence was imposed, any orders transmitted by whispering in the ear. When all was nearly ready, Symons was seen to be shaking violently.



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A soldier, with explosive charge in his hands, was ready, and the machine gunner, Harold Barker, was alongside the gun waiting to give the fire order. Suddenly, Symons whispered into Barker's ear, "Don't fire," and without another word grabbed the explosive from the soldier, jumped over and lodged it at the enemy entrance, and with a rush was back again. Not a shot was fired from the Turks, and Symons and his crew withdrew to their holding position. However, Symons' audacious action went unrewarded as the lit explosive charge failed to detonate!

Preceding the VC action, Symons was positioned on the parapet taking shots at the Turks with his pistol. His men were imbued with the offensive spirit after that, announcing that if it was good enough for Curly then it was good enough for them! They obviously had a great admiration for him and he most definitely led from the front.



# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Harold “Pompey” Elliott

As we all know, he took part in the fighting in the Lone Pine Trenches on 8<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> August 1915 when in command of the right section. He successfully repelled several counter-attacks in Jacob's Trench by throwing improvised grenades made of slabs of gun-cotton attached to a small wooden boards and held his position until about 5 am the following morning when the enemy again attacked and recaptured the post, a vulnerable section of trench known as Number 1 Post, in the southern part of the sector. Six officers were killed or severely wounded in succession.

The Commanding Officer of the 7th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Harold Edward 'Pompey' Elliott, recalled Symons, and in a theatrical gesture, withdrew his own revolver from its holster and handed it to him, sending him to try again to take back Jacob's Trench. Elliott explained the situation to Symons and provided him with a party of ten men. "Goodbye Symons," Elliott concluded "I don't expect to see you again, but we must not lose that post." He effectively sent Symons off to his death.



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Symons shook hands, saluted and led his men away. He was immediately bowled over by an exploding bomb, which would have maimed him if a comrade had not curbed its impact by flinging a couple of sandbags on it just in time. Symons picked himself up and then led a charge and retook the lost sap under heavy fire, shooting two Turks with his revolver. He then withdrew to a position some 15 yards away at a spot which offered some overhead protection and proceeded to build a sand barricade, all the while under heavy fire. The enemy set fire to the fascines and woodwork of the barricade, but Symons extinguished it and rebuilt the fortifications. There was fierce hand to hand combat which haunted Symons for the rest of his life but the enemy eventually gave up their attack.

He was evacuated very sick with gastro enteritis on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1915 and was admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital (on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1915), arriving there in an enfeebled state, having lost four stones in weight. He spent two months in hospital and one month in a convalescent home, and it was while recovering from this sickness that he learned of his recommendation for the VC by his Commanding Officer, ‘Pompey’ Elliott, for conspicuous gallantry.

He received the honour from King George V at Buckingham Palace on 4<sup>th</sup> December. As the King pinned it on his chest, he remarked to Symons that the intrinsic value of the medal was very small but it was what it stood for and he hoped that Symons would live long enough to enjoy wearing it. Symons said that he was immediately sending it to his mother in Australia as he wanted her to be the second person to pin it on his chest.



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BY SARAH DEAN

Seven V.C.'s Together The Wonderful Scene In London Yesterday.



Corporal Pollock, V.C. Major Hanson, V.C. Capt. Tubb, V.C. Lt. Symons, V.C. Pte. Haynes, V.C. (inset). Lt. Throssell, V.C. Pte. Hamilton, V.C. Never before has there been such a wonderful collection of heroes as was to be seen yesterday at Buckingham Palace. After the King's reception there were no fewer than seven V.C.s in the outside the Palace. Here are the seven, all photographed at the same time by the *Sunday Herald*.

"The Sunday Herald," 5th December, 1915.

After this, he was sent to Egypt, arriving at Tel el Kebir station on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1916.

He embarked for Australia on the 'Arama' on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1916 where he arrived (on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1916) for a much-needed rest, reunions with his friends and family and civic receptions at Eaglehawk and also Brunswick/Bendigo.

He – unlike so many others – was lucky to return at all – although he nearly died of dysentery, was superficially wounded in both hands and head and eventually gassed which ultimately led to his discharge from the AIF.



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BY SARAH DEAN

He always seemed to have a Guardian Angel over his shoulder. Even at one point when he stood unhelmeted on the parapet of a French trench shooting with his revolver and urging his men to come and join him – just plain mad – or a natural leader of men? Make your own decision.

The towns people of Brunswick feted Symons with a huge banquet held in Brunswick Town Hall – we are lucky to have a photograph of this event and I often wonder if the older lady sitting opposite him is his mother – my great grandmother.

Apart from that photo, there is a wonderful gilded leather memorial book presented to him by the citizens of Brunswick on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1916 offering him the Freedom and of the City and signed by the Mayor and Aldermen; beautifully hand tooled and illustrated.



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BY SARAH DEAN

He also made a point of visiting his old primary school at Eaglehawk.

There is a newspaper report (dated 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1916) of this visit.

“The next place of call was at the Eaglehawk State School where he received his education. The scholars were formed up in the grounds and when the “old boy” appeared, a mighty cheer went up. Just inside the gate Lieut. Symons espied the tree he planted on the first Arbor Day held at the school. He humorously remarked that he and Fred Young, a boy mate, received prizes for digging trenches that day. It was his first experience in trench digging.

The Mayor and Councillors accompanied the party to the school. Addressing the scholars the Headmaster reminded them that Lieut. Symons had spent his boyhood days in Eaglehawk. They were delighted to know he had returned from the war a VC recipient – the first in this district. There was loud applause and the children loudly cheered.

Lieut. Symons said he was pleased to be back again in his old town. It had brought back to him pleasant memories. He was delighted to stand in the old school grounds once again, to see the old class rooms, and especially the tree he had planted. He thanked the Headmaster and the scholars for their fine reception which had pleased him immensely.



# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

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I am told unfortunately that the tree by the gate has now gone, so it makes it even more appropriate that the school should have a tree in its present grounds which is derived from the actual pine tree left growing in the middle of the battlefield of Lone Pine at Gallipoli. My grandfather would have loved that.

After this visit, Symons was promoted Captain on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1916.

There then followed the second phase of his military career which is often overlooked. Symons embarked on (3<sup>rd</sup> June 1916 on) HMAV 'Persic' (see below) for the United Kingdom as Company Commander, "A" Company, 37th Battalion, 10th Brigade, 3rd Division. They arrived at Plymouth, Devon in (25<sup>th</sup>) July 1916 and moved to Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire for military manoeuvres.





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The re-grouping of the AIF Battalions is where Symons parted company with the 7<sup>th</sup> – with quite a few regrets I expect.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1916, the 37<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked at Southampton, Hampshire for Le Havre, France. They must have had huge private misgivings as they would have known what to expect and the horrors they had to face second time around.

They saw action at, amongst other places, Armentières where William was Mentioned in Despatches for his participation in the Big Raid by the 10th Brigade in (27<sup>th</sup>) February 1917. One of the Big Raid's objectives was to capture a German medic for his equipment hopefully containing gas gangrene serum. Medics were easy to spot in the field as they carried big first aid boxes around with them.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN



Symons and his men were unfortunately caught up in uncut barbed wire entanglements in front of Bavarian trenches near Pont Ballot, Houplines. The wire had been cut previously by the allies but the Bavarians repaired it prior to the main assault and many of Symons’s men were killed or wounded. He was slightly wounded in the hand or wrist and because of growing casualties in the Company, he decided to withdraw. However, a group eventually fought their way through the wire and made it to the first line of Bavarian trenches. Unfortunately it is reported that the medic who was captured was carrying the wrong type of serum.

After this, Symons was granted leave in France in May 1917. On 7<sup>th</sup> June 1917, he was gassed near Messines and evacuated to Hayling Island, England for hospitalization. It was while he was recuperating there that he met his future wife – a local girl who had cycled past the rehabilitation unit. He had said to a friend that he “wanted to marry that girl” and this he did, just before the end of the War – strange things happen in times of War that probably wouldn’t happen any other time!

Eventually he rejoined his unit on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1918 at Aldershot Camp, Neuve Eglise and took part in operations on The Somme, including Ribemont.

# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

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This was the last of his active service. He was granted leave in Paris in (March) 1918 and posted to the School of Musketry, England later. (in June 1918).

In (the 16<sup>th</sup>) August, he embarked for Australia at his own expense with his new bride to connect with S.S. 'Makura' at Vancouver, Canada. Despite pleading his lack of money, he was refused the cost of this passage back to Australia, thus indicating that there was no preference in those days for VC holders. This dangerous trip was conducted during war time and there was the ever-present danger of an attack by German U-boats.

His appointment with the AIF was terminated on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1918.

Symons saw service as a Captain in the 2nd Battalion, 59th Infantry Regiment (later the 59th Battalion) prior to being transferred to the Reserve of Officers. (on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1922).

During the Second World War, he served in the British Home Guard as commander of the 12th Battalion, Leicestershire Home Guard, with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel; an appointment he held for four years. There is a silver inkstand given to him by the Leicestershire Regiment Home Guard on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1943 in recognition of his services during the Second World War. I donated to the AWM the British Defence Medal relating to this service to complete his medal group in the Hall of Fame.



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Isabel, his new English wife, couldn't have come from a more different background to Symons with a genteel upbringing in Hampshire and an exotic pedigree descending from Montezuma the last King of Mexico. Her own great grandfather was the Brazilian Ambassador to London. Here were two young people in love – they were married on Hayling Island on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1918 three months before the end of the War. Symons was obviously keen to introduce his new bride to Australia and the day after their wedding they commenced the long sea trip home, dodging U-Boats – again investing heavily in the Guardian Angel. Once back in Australia they lived at Middle Brighton, Melbourne where my elder aunt was born, and subsequently my mother.

Their third daughter was born back in England as Isabel could not settle in Australia and yearned for her life back home. So, in 1923, Symons was left with no option but to say “goodbye” to his beloved Australian family and his heritage – not knowing that he would never see any of them again – and especially his mother who gradually went blind due to diabetes and who died in 1934 after no longer being able to read his much-anticipated letters for herself.

His daughters always remember their father being quick with figures (something I do not inherit!) and having beautiful handwriting – this he always put down to his first-class education at Eaglehawk School.

# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN



Over the years, my mother and my aunt shared little snippets as to who my grandfather was, what he had done and what he was like as a father. I treated these personal recollections with great respect as it was clearly difficult for his daughters to talk about him as they had loved him fairly and squarely and he had died far too soon. My own biggest regret is that I never knew him; this young man from the other side of the world who ‘did something heroic’.

In recent years, before she died, my mother had always wanted to instigate some sort of lasting memorial to her father at his primary school in Eaglehawk. So it was that in collaboration with the Headmistress at the time, we jointly came up with the idea of an Honours Board and the annual giving of a medallion to a student in memory of my grandfather William John Symons VC. Since 2006 to this day, the recipients of the medallion have displayed outstanding qualities – the sort of qualities that exhibit true integrity in the face of difficulty. The qualities that my grandfather possessed. A medallion and gift is presented to the student during a ceremony near to ANZAC Day every year.



There is a fitting memorial to William John Symons VC outside the Town Hall at Eaglehawk.



# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN

Once back in England, in the midst of the Depression, he had no job and set himself up as a door-to-door salesman to sustain the family. However, as Britain gradually pulled itself up by the boot-straps, he moved on upwards at a time ripe for developing entrepreneurs. At an exhibition in London he met another Australian called Allnutt – a successful businessman – who immediately wanted him to work with him. At this time Allnutt was developing greyhound stadiums in and around the Leicester area and Symons became a manager/troubleshooter for Allnutt. Symons and his family lived in Dublin for a whilst directing the instigation of pre-fab houses to re-house those who had lost their homes in the War. Pre-fabs were a revolutionary concept whereby a house would be delivered in concrete sections and erected quickly and effectively on blitzed land to get roofs over peoples’ heads.

Symons eventually became a director of this company as well as director of a well-known confectionary company called Callard and Bowser’s. Added to this, he was director of Lea Francis Delahaye, a sports car company in Coventry in the UK. Apart from lovely cars, they made Stirling controls for aircraft which made their factory a prime target in WW2 when Coventry was blitzed in one night and everything was lost.

During WW2 (as mentioned before) he was in charge of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion Leicestershire Home Guard, sitting on panels, interviewing and advising potential new recruits to the British Army. His own Home Guard incorporated a mobile armoured vehicle battalion trained to fight behind the lines as it was keenly felt at that time that Britain was within a whisker of being invaded by Germany.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/william-john-symons-vc/>

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Along with all this, he still never forgot to be an example to others of the “bravest of the brave” and he attended all the gala functions in London in company with the Royal Family between the Wars and after WW2 always with his fellow Australian Gallipoli VC holders; his General – General Birdwood and his close Victorian friend – Albert Jacka VC. He was invited to the opening of the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in France and travelled in the Royal train. They never forgot those days that changed their lives in the trenches of a Turkish peninsular.

As with most lives, Symons experienced happiness and elation mixed in with a large dose of poignancy and a sense of loss that I can feel two generations on.

Later in life he adopted the surname of Pen-Symons in recognition of his Cornish ancestry – his children all carried the name.

He died on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1948 at Paddington, London and was cremated at Golders Green. Unfortunately, there is no marked resting place for his ashes as records are lost and only recently a plaque was unveiled at the crematorium, naming him and thirteen other Victoria Cross holders who were cremated there. I attended the unveiling with Brigadier Bill Sowry, at the time Australian Defence Attache in London.

There is a commemorative paver together with all the other Commonwealth VC recipients at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire.



# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN



Pictures:

Top Left – The VC Plaque at Golders Green Crematorium

Top Right – The commemorative stone for W J Symons at National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas

Bottom Left – Johnson Beharry VC pictured by the Symons VC stone at the unveiling in 2015.

# “Getting to Know My Grandfather”

BY SARAH DEAN

Symons’ Cornish connections go back many generations and therefore so do mine. Our ancestors made the long, frightening and challenging trip across the world by boat. His grandparents, William Manning and Emma Fitcher – my own great, great grandparents - were married very locally at the Wesleyan Parsonage, Long Gully. There are many other Cornish connections.

No wonder Symons was as tough and resourceful as we know him to be – the essential raw material for supreme bravery symbolised in the true granite of his Cornish ancestors.



Editor’s Thanks go to Sarah Dean for this fabulous article and many of the images contained in it.

“The Lone Pine Tree” planted in the grounds of Eaglehawk Primary School

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/william-john-symons-vc/>



# Scottish VC Grave Restorations

<https://www.militarygraverestorer.org.uk/>

Over the course of the past few months, Steve Davies, otherwise known as “Military Grave Restorer” has been casting his net further afield by travelling north of the border, and tending to several military graves including two recipients of the Victoria Cross.

The two graves in question were of William McBean VC in Grange Cemetery in Edinburgh, and of William Gardner VC DCM in Bothwell Park Cemetery, in Bothwell. The stories of the two men and their valour plus the before and after images of their graves are on the next two pages. Below is Steve Davies and one of his previous projects the grave of Charles Wooden VC.





# Scottish VC Grave Restorations

<https://www.militarygraverestorer.org.uk/>

William Gardner (1821-1897) was born in Nemphlar, Lanarkshire on 3rd March 1821. He joined the 42nd Regiment of Foot (later The Black Watch) and took part in the Crimean War, where he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. He was then posted to the Indian Mutiny, where on the 5th May 1858, he would perform the act of gallantry at Bareilly which would earn him the Victoria Cross.

The British had advanced to within 5 miles of the city, when a party of about 360 Ghazis made a furious charge. Sir Colin Campbell gave orders for the 42nd to close ranks and use their bayonets. The Ghazis charge was furious and not easily repelled, dodging the bayonets and cutting the men's legs. At this point, Colonel Cameron was pulled from his horse by a Ghazi, who leaped up and seized him by the collar while he was enraged with another on the other side. His life was then saved by Colour Sergeant Gardner, who seized an enemy's tulwar and rushed to the colonel's assistance, he cut off the Ghazi's head. General Walpole was also pulled off his horse and received two sword cuts, but was rescued by the bayonets of the 42nd.



<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/william-gardner-vc-dcm/>



# Scottish VC Grave Restorations

<https://www.militarygraverestorer.org.uk/>

William McBean was given a commission as Ensign on the 10th August 1854, and was promoted to Lieutenant on the 8th December of the same year. He served in the Crimean campaign from December 1854, including the Siege and Fall of Sebastopol and the assaults of the Redan on 18th June and 8th September 1855. He received the Crimean Medal with clasp, the 5th Class of the Medjidie and the Turkish War Medal. He then went onto serve in the Indian Mutiny Campaign including the Relief of Lucknow by Lord Clyde, the defeat of the Gwalior Contingent at Cawnpore and pursuit to Seraighat, the affair of Kalee Nuddee, siege and capture of Lucknow, affair of Alligunge, battle of Bareilly, and the evacuation of the fort of Mithowli.

On the 11th March 1858, during the breach of the Begum Bagh at Lucknow, McBean was in the thick of the fighting and killed 11 of the enemy in close hand to hand combat. When he was commended for his actions, his response was "It didna take me twenty minutes." He became a Captain on 16th August 1858 and was awarded the Victoria Cross on 24th December 1858. He received his medal from Major General Robert Garrett at a parade at Umbeyla on 6th February 1859.



<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/william-mcbean-vc/>



# Thomas Flynn Unmasked

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/thomas-flynn-vc/>



In the past few months, I was contacted by two gentleman from Athlone, Ireland named Shane McCormack and Gearold O'Brien, who stated their extensive research into local records had changed the story of Thomas Flynn VC.

The two men uncovered that the well publicised story of Thomas Flynn VC including his date of birth, his parents, his service and his later years was incorrect and it was a different man named Thomas Flynn who was the correct man.

They established that he was in fact born on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1839 not in 1842 and that his parents were Patrick and Eleanor Flynn not William Flynn. His marriage was also incorrect as he in fact married Mary Hardiman in 1890. He did indeed die in the Athlone Workhouse in 1892. It now means that Andrew Fitzgibbon VC is sole record holder of being the youngest VC at 15, as the real Flynn was 18 at the time of his action.

# The Loneliest VCs

By Tom Lewis OAM

Of the 101 Australian military personnel who have been awarded the Victoria Cross, our highest honour for bravery, most lie in recognised graves. But five of our fallen – including our newest and only naval VC – have no known final resting place.

To explain further, when the recipients of the Crosses were given their honour, many were awarded posthumously – they had died in the action in which they performed their feats of bravery. But their bodies were recovered, and later buried or cremated.

Many of the other Cross recipients survived warfare. Later they died, and the usual process followed – they were given a funeral. But often they were overseas when that happened, often reflecting the fact that many of these military personnel were born overseas, and had sometimes gone to the country of their birth after their Australian military service. So 37 of our 101 VCs are interred in other countries. Perhaps the most remote of these is the grave of Sergeant Samuel Pearse, who earned his VC in 1919. He is buried in a military cemetery near the Obozerskaya railway station, between Emtsa and Archangel, in North Russia.

Of the VC recipients interred in Australia, most lie in the states or territories where they spent the rest of their lives. They are distributed as follows:

Australian Capital Territory	2	New South Wales	13
Queensland	5	South Australia	5
Tasmania	3	Victoria	18
Western Australia	9		

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The Northern Territory's only VC was Albert Borella from WWI. He was buried in Albury-Wodonga, where he spent his final years. Four VCs are still living with us. And five of our 101 have no known grave.

Sixty-four Victoria Crosses went to the Australian Army in World War I. The Gallipoli campaign saw nine of these in only around six months, testimony to the fierce and close quarter fighting. When Gallipoli was closed down the AIF moved to the Western Front, where they were joined by thousands more Australians for almost three more years of fighting. Four of the five "no known grave" VCs come from WWI, although curiously, one received his VC for a WWI action, but died in WWII. <https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/alexander-stewart-burton-vc/>



Two had fairly conventional ends. Lance-Corporal Alexander Burton died in 1915. Born in Kyneton, Victoria, in 1893, Burton, an ironmonger, joined the Australian Imperial Force and was posted to the 7th Battalion. Although he missed the landing on Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, he saw it from the deck of a hospital ship, where he was being treated for an infection. A week later he was in the trenches, fighting in different areas with his Battalion.

On 9 August at Lone Pine, the Turks launched a counter-attack on a newly captured trench commanded by Lieutenant Frederick Tubb.



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The Turks advanced and knocked over a sandbag barricade but Tubb and Burton rebuilt it, together with a Corporal William Dunstan. The enemy twice more destroyed the barricade but each time was driven off and the barricade rebuilt. Burton was killed by a bomb while he was building up the parapet.

Burton's body was not recovered. Although this is difficult to understand, it reflects the fact that often soft-skinned humans in combat can be literally blown apart. To make matters worse their bodies can lie in a contested area – often known as “No Man's Land” where they might lie for some time. Others may lie in the same area. When one side or the other takes that part of the battlefield hasty burials often result, usually into mass graves. It is an unpleasant aspect of battlefields, but reflects the fact that it is urgent necessity, not nicety, that is needed at the time. Burton has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Lone Pine Memorial.



Private Thomas Cooke died in 1916. He was 35 years old, comparatively old for a private, and married with a family. Born in New Zealand, he had migrated to Australia shortly before the war. In the initial attack on Pozières, in France, Cooke's battalion captured ground, and held on under heavy enemy artillery fire and counter-attacks. Cooke was in a Lewis machinegun team working in a dangerous position.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/thomas-cooke-vc/>

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After the others with him were killed or wounded, he remained fighting at his post. Cooke was later found dead at his gun. His body was lost in later fighting. He has no known grave site. Cooke's name is recorded on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial and on the war memorial in Kaikōura NZ, his town of birth.

Captain Alfred Shout, despite being an Army soldier in WWI, was curiously buried at sea. Shout had served in the Boer War, and following that conflict worked as a carpenter in Sydney, while serving part-time as an officer in the local militia. He joined the AIF when war was declared and took part in the landing on Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. He was awarded the Military Cross and Mentioned in Despatches for actions over the next month.



In August, in fighting at Lone Pine, Shout was involved in an action that saw him attacking an enemy trench, killing eight Turks with grenades. Later that day he was with one of the locally-made grenades when it exploded prematurely, causing horrendous injuries.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/alfred-john-shout-vc-mc/>

Shout died on a hospital ship of his injuries two days later. He was buried at sea, with his Victoria Cross awarded two months later. He is commemorated at the Lone Pine Memorial, Gallipoli, Turkey.

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Corporal Walter Brown served in both WWI and II. A Tasmanian, he enlisted in 1915 in the Light Horse before transferring to the infantry. He gained the Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1917 for bravery before he was involved in an attack on a German trench at Villers-Bretonneux in France. He then attacked an enemy sniper with two Mills bombs, and caused the surrender of several other enemy soldiers. He was awarded the Victoria Cross.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/walter-ernest-brown-vc/>

When WWII broke out, Brown volunteered for the Army, despite being married and of older years. He went missing after the fall of Singapore in February 1942, when he was last sighted declaring, "no surrender for me". He likely died fighting in the confusion surrounding the island's last stand.



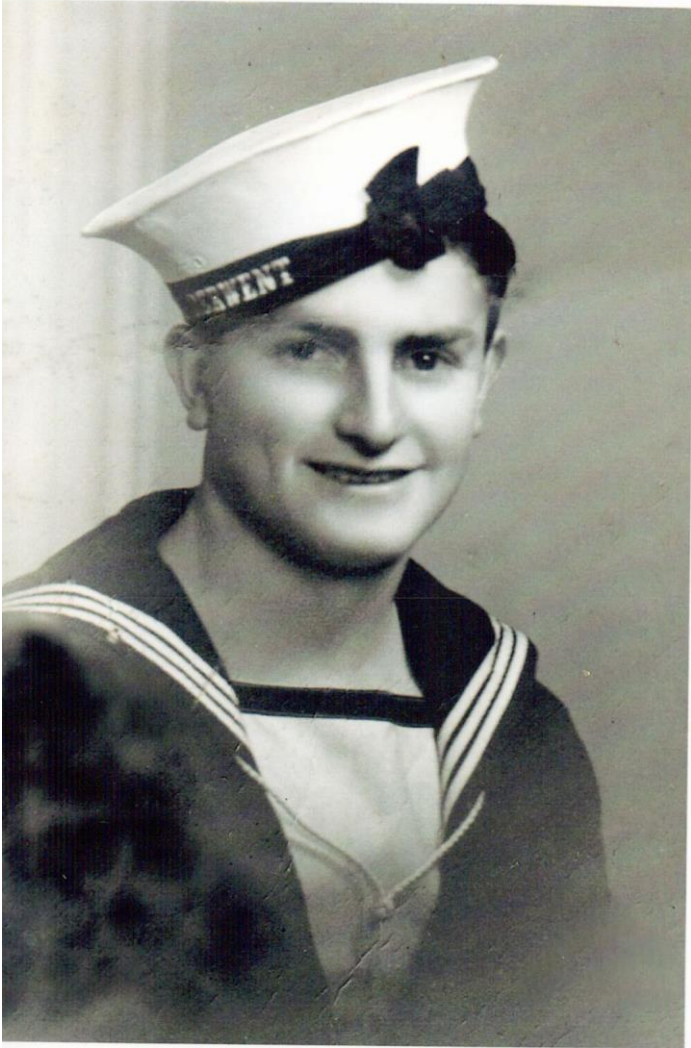
Teddy Sheen is the last of the five with no known grave. HMAS Armidale was attacked relentlessly from the skies by Japanese aircraft on 1 December 1941, and hit by at least one torpedo. Despite "Abandon Ship" being ordered, he returned to his 20mm Oerlikon gun to defend his shipmates from the strafing and circling enemy. Armidale has not been found.

She lies in waters closer to Timor than Australia, and a search for her has begun at least in analysing the records of the action.



# The Loneliest VCs

By Tom Lewis OAM



<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/edward-teddy-shean-vc/>

Dr Tom Lewis OAM, a retired naval officer, is a military historian. His latest books include *Teddy Shean VC; Attack on Sydney Harbour* – about the midget submarine raid of 1942; and *Bombers North*, a study of the Allied air missions out of northern Australia in WWII.

It is a sad aspect for the bravest of our brave that they lie in unmarked graves. But at least we can remember them by recalling their stories.

## Captions:

A studio portrait of Corporal Thomas Cooke VC (Australian Army)

Captain Alfred Shout – a studio portrait (Public domain)

Corporal Alexander Burton VC. This portrait was taken prior to embarkation as a private in August 1914. Following his posthumous award of the Cross, the medal and corporal's stripes were added to the image. (Public domain)

Sergeant Walter Ernest Brown VC DCM, of the 20th Battalion, AIF. (Public domain)

Teddy Shean in uniform, wearing the cap tally of HMAS Derwent, the shore base where he was training in Hobart. (Shean family)



# VC Auction



© Noonans / SWNS

On 26<sup>th</sup> July 2023 at Noonan's in London, the VC and DCM medal group of Arnold Loosemore is being auctioned with an estimate of £220,000.

Sergeant Arnold Loosemore received the highest British gallantry award for his conduct during the second Anglo-French general attack of the Third Battle of Ypres.

The dramatic action took place south of Langemarck in Belgium on August 11, 1917. Sgt Loosemore, of the 8th Battalion, Duke of Wellington's (West Riding Regiment), saw two members of his section had been killed beside him.



© Noonans / SWNS



# VC Auction

When his Lewis gun was blown up by a German bomb, three of the enemy rushed him. But he shot them all with his revolver then took out several enemy snipers.

Sgt Loosemore completed his heroics by carrying a wounded comrade to their original post under heavy fire.

He was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his gallantry with the 1st/4th Battalion at Zillebeke during a raid on June 20, 1918. They captured 11 prisoners and one machine gun, while inflicting numerous casualties being inflicted on the enemy.

Sgt Loosemore, from Sheffield, was severely wounded by machine gun fire at Villers-en-Cauchies on October 11, 1918, resulting in his left leg being amputated.

The Gallipoli campaign veteran never fully recovered from his war wounds, and died because of tuberculosis in 1924.



© Noonans / SWNS



# Australian VC for Sale



On 25<sup>th</sup> July 2023, the Second World War VC group awarded to John Alexander "Jack" French VC will be auctioned at Noble Numismatics Ltd in Sydney, Australia. The estimate is AUS\$650,000.

At Milne Bay on the afternoon of 4th September, 1942, a company of an Australian Infantry Battalion attacked a Japanese position where it encountered terrific rifle and machine gun fire. Advance of the section of which Corporal French was in command was held up by fire from three enemy machine gun posts, whereupon Corporal French, ordering his section to take cover, advanced and silenced one of the posts with grenades. He returned to his section for more grenades and again advanced and silenced the second post.

Armed with a Thompson sub-machine gun he then attacked the third post, firing from the hip as he went forward. He was seen to be badly hit by fire from this post, but he continued to advance. The enemy gun then ceased to fire and his section pushed on to find all the members of the three enemy crews had been killed and that Corporal French had died in front of the third gunpit.

