

Coventry's First VC



Victoria Cross Online
Issue 13 October 2023

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the 13th edition of Victoria Cross Online Magazine. The first article this month sees the return of Dr Tom Lewis OAM, with an informative piece on Australian Naval Heroes and their recognition.



There is also the first of two articles on Frederick Birks VC MM by new contributor Janet Tildesley. The first part of the article focuses on the award of the Military Medal, while part two in next month's issue will feature his Victoria Cross award.

There is also a feature article on Coventry's first recipient of the Victoria Cross, Arthur Hutt, written by yours truly on behalf of Nathan Houghton, who provided many of the images related to his distinguished relative.

Finally, there is another feature by Richard Pursehouse on John Berryman VC.

Contents

3-13 "Australian Naval Heroes" by Tom Lewis OAM.

14-23 Fred Birks VC MM Pt 1 by Janet Tildesley

24-31 Coventry's first VC by Mark Green

32- 37 John Berryman VC by Richard Pursehouse

38 Other News by Mark Green

Australian Naval Heroes

Australia's naval heroes have not received the attention they deserved since the formation of the Royal Australian Navy, over more than a century ago.

Several fought so bravely, they should have received a Victoria Cross, but did not. Some were recognised with minor honours - some with nothing at all. This article proposes a method for giving them more recognition.

Some of our naval heroes have achieved fame which has endured in a permanent and visible way. WWII men John Collins, Emile Dechaineux, Hec Waller, Harold Farncomb, Robert Rankin, and Teddy Sheean have all had submarines named after them. Sheean especially is now a household name, having received a long overdue Victoria Cross in 2020, 78 years after his gallant last stand on the corvette HMAS Armidale.

It is worth noting though, that Australian naval personnel have been somewhat short-changed by the arrangements which were in place for World War II in regard to bravery honours and awards.

In those days to recommend decorations within the RAN was very difficult – more so than in the (parent British) Royal Navy, with more restrictions on Australian ship commanders as to what their members could be recommended for.

There were only two classes of posthumous award in WWII: the Victoria Cross and the Mention In Despatches. Posthumous foreign awards were not permitted and RAN gallantry awards were determined by the British Admiralty.

It should further be noted that this situation was unique to the RAN: the Army and the Royal Australian Air Force had their bravery decorations processed through the Australian system – a much easier and more favourable situation than one being processed by the British Admiralty in a country fighting for its life against Germany. In summary we can conclude that if this unfair situation had not been in place, the RAN may well have received other Victoria Crosses – and the argument that more ships should be named after heroic Australians made all the easier.

Only one other Australian naval veteran has had a vessel named after him. In a departure from tradition and usual practise, the country's last veteran of World War I had his name bestowed on HMAS Choules in 2011. Claude Choules started his naval service in the Royal Navy, in his case in 1916.

Australian Naval Heroes

He came to Australia on loan in 1926 and decided to transfer to the RAN. He was a member of the commissioning crew of HMAS Canberra in 1928 and in 1932 became a Chief Petty Officer (Torpedo) and anti-submarine instructor.

During WWII Choules was a Torpedo Officer in Fremantle and the Chief Demolition Officer on the west coast. He transferred to the Naval Dockyard Police after the war so that he could continue to serve, finally retiring in 1956. Although he gave sterling service, the use of his name seems more to testimony he was one of the final servicemen resident in Australia who saw WWI service.

Only seven naval servicemen have had vessels named after them, the Collins-class being the beginning of that practise. However, there have been shore bases named after people, as opposed to rivers, states, and places, which constitute most of the rest of the many hundreds of vessels which have seen service.

For example, HMAS Creswell is named after the “founding father” of the RAN, William Rooke Creswell, originally of the RN, but a fierce advocate for Australia to have its own force, back in the days when the states were so afraid of foreign attack that they had formed separate colonial navies. HMAS Stirling honours the name of Captain James Stirling RN, the officer who landed on Garden Island in 1827. Two years later he founded the first European settlement in Western Australia. Such large shore bases are commissioned as ships in navies, so we should include these two sterling servicemen with the group.

Why not extend this practise a lot further? The newly evolved Cape-class patrol boats, for example, are all named after prominent capes around the country. Why not change these into ships named after people? Or give a future class of vessels such titles? For some reason, we seem reluctant to do this. The Americans, by contrast, have hundreds of ships named after people, and even the RAN’s parent navy – Britain’s Royal Navy – has had a lot.

Australian Naval Heroes

There are many heroes of our own force to choose from.

Francis Emms was a ship's cook who performed valiantly at his Action Station when the first Japanese air raid struck Darwin. On board the small ship HMAS Kara Kara, he manned his machinegun until he fell, wounded from the strafing of the circling Zeroes. He refused to leave his post to be treated until the enemy had broken off the action. He later died of his wounds.

Ronald "Buck" Taylor was in an action very like that involving Teddy Sheean. In March 1942 HMAS Yarra and her three merchant vessels were attacked by a Japanese surface flotilla. Yarra, a sloop, had fire capacities far below the enemy both in weight of shell fired and in range. Nevertheless, she charged the enemy as her captain, Lieutenant Commander Robert Rankin, ordered the ship to engage. Ron Taylor kept his gun firing, ignoring the order to abandon ship. He died without leaving his post.

Several RAN members have been awarded the George Cross – the second highest honour for bravery, just not "in the face of the enemy" – in WWII. Mine warfare demanded the highest examples of cold-blooded courage and four of the Navy's best took that bravery into everyday operations in mine warfare defusing and disposal: Leon Goldsworthy, George Gosse, John Mould, and Hugh Syme – the latter two also receiving the George Medal.

Jonathan "Buck" Rogers – the nickname comes from a popular science-fiction character – was a hero from HMAS Voyager, tragically rammed by the aircraft carrier Melbourne in 1964 off Jervis Bay. Chief Petty Officer Rogers united those trapped in the forward section of the destroyer, still afloat, before after some time its inexorable flooding with water sent it to the seabed. Rogers is a George Cross recipient; he already held the Distinguished Service Medal for 'coolness and leadership' under enemy fire during an action off Dunkirk, France, on the night of 23/24 May 1944.

Australian Naval Heroes



Francis Emms (top left)

Ronald Taylor (top right)

Claude Choules (left)

Australian Naval Heroes

The George Medal was given to others:

- Petty Officer John Humphries. Awarded the Medal on 17 February 1942, the citation reading “For skill, and undaunted devotion to duty in hazardous diving operations”.
- Lieutenant Geoffrey John Cliff, RANVR. Awarded the Medal in 1942 for work undertaken defusing mines in London.
- Lieutenant James Kessack, RANVR. A mine clearer, he died in the execution of his duty on 28 April 1941.
- Lieutenant Commander Alan McNicoll RAN., Received the Medal for “gallantry and undaunted devotion to duty. In 1940 in the captured Italian submarine Galileo Galilei, McNicoll removed the inertia pistols from eight corroded torpedoes.”
- Lieutenant Howard Dudley Reid RANVR. First awarded for "gallantry and undaunted devotion to duty" in mine disposal between December 1940 to January 1941. Secondly, for mine disposal in Glasgow in August 1941.
- Lieutenant Nelson Smith RANVR. “Awarded for gallantry and undaunted devotion to duty. In March 1941, rendered safe eight bombs in London.”
- Lieutenant Keith Upton RANVR. As a mine clearer, showed 'the highest courage, devotion to duty and remarkable ingenuity, his initiative and gallantry marking him out among the personnel of this special section'.
- Lieutenant Herbert Wadsley RANVR. First awarded the Medal in 1940 for mine disposal in London. A bar was awarded in 1942 for bomb and mine disposal in Portsmouth in 1941.
- Lieutenant Commander Neil Waldman RNR. Commanding minesweepers in North Africa, including the port of Tripoli, where the Medal was awarded for great bravery and undaunted devotion to duty.

There are many others who could join a list of possible Navy people after whom a ship or base could be named.

Australian Naval Heroes

Ordinary Seaman Ian Rhodes, a RAN Volunteer Reserve sailor, was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal for courage in action on 23 May 1941, when HMS Kashmir was sunk during operations to defend Crete. Posted to the RN, Rhodes was part of the crew for the aft port Oerlikon gun. With the water rising around the weapon as the ship sank, and under fire from German aircraft which strafed the ship and survivors already in the sea, Rhodes climbed up to the weapon on the other side of the ship and commenced returning fire, shooting down an aircraft. For his courage in action, he was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, the award for gallantry second only to the Victoria Cross for sailors, and the only Australian sailor to receive the decoration through both world wars.

Harry Howden was one of the Navy's best fighting captains. Howden's command of the cruiser HMAS Hobart in WWII was characterised by the energy and aggressiveness of a captain who resembles the famous General Patton in his willingness to engage with the enemy. Mercurial but meticulous, he was much respected and even worshipped by his ship's company. As a fighting captain he was known for his high-speed handling of Hobart, and commanded her in much action through the war until brought down by sickness.

Warwick Bracegirdle, a gunnery officer, was perhaps the best product of that branch the RAN ever produced. He served through WWII where as a lieutenant he was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for "whole hearted devotion to duty and high personal courage" – particularly during an air raid at Piraeus, Greece, when towing an ammunition lighter away from a burning ship, which exploded nearly killing him and another officer.

Appointed to the heavy cruiser HMAS Shropshire, Bracegirdle developed a burst method for firing heavy guns in Anti-Aircraft work. He was later awarded a bar to his DSC and twice mentioned in dispatches. He served on after the war and then in the Korean conflict where he commanded the destroyer HMAS Bataan.

Australian Naval Heroes



Warwick Bracegirdle

Australian Naval Heroes

For his Korean War service Bracegirdle was awarded a second bar to his DSC – thus the equivalent of being awarded the medal three times – and the United States Legion of Merit.

The career of Stanley Darling, sinking U-Boats, and then quietly retiring from combat to take on the mere matter of a Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race year after year, reads like a Boy's Own adventure tale. Serving in Europe, he was appointed in command of the frigate HMS Loch Killin as part of Captain Frederic 'Johnnie' Walker's 2nd Escort Group of anti-submarine frigates. This group of six frigates became renowned as a deadly and greatly feared submarine killer group in the Atlantic campaign. Darling's frigate was accredited with sinking three U-Boats in the war – an unusually high score in a war where most ships never had an anti-submarine attack confirmed as a kill.

For some reason the Royal Australian Navy has been loath to carry the practise forward of naming ships and bases after men. (Many of the Victoria Cross holders of the country – 96 Army and four RAAF – are remembered in rest stops on the Hume Highway: there has yet been no arrangement made yet for Teddy Sheean's name to be added to them.) But there is no real reason why this is not the practise, and it is not unusual in navies. In what might be termed our two closest allied navies – that of Britain, and that of the United States of America – have in general, shown a different attitude towards granting its armed forces' members' decorations, and recognizing their service, than we have.

For example, the USA has named ships after military personnel with an enthusiasm not often imitated by other countries. This can even border on the unusual: one WWII vessel was named USS The Sullivans, to commemorate the five Sullivan brothers from Iowa who had asked to serve together, and who had all been killed when their cruiser USS Juneau was torpedoed in 1942. A warship of the name was commissioned the following year.

Australian Naval Heroes

The practise of naming ships after people was developed from the early days of the US Republic, and practised prolifically ever since. Presidents of the United States have featured strongly, and recently a new aircraft carrier named after President George HW Bush, a WWII veteran, was commissioned.

In general the US practise sees vessels named after a person who has died, but this is not always the case. Foreigners have also been named: USS Winston S Churchill was commissioned by President Carter, for example, who in an example of the previous point had a Seawolf submarine named after him – he is the only US president to have qualified on submarines. Another US president who served in the Navy was “JFK” – the aircraft carrier USS John F Kennedy is named after him.

In Australia, no prime minister has ever served in the Navy, although several have in the Army and RAAF. One-quarter of Australia’s prime ministers enlisted for military service at some point in their lives. This includes four who saw active service: Stanley Bruce, John Gorton, Earle Page and Gough Whitlam. Two – Bruce and Gorton – were wounded during active service.

US Army forces bases are also prolifically named after serving personnel. The writer was interested to see a firing range in Iraq, on which he practised shooting twice a week in 2006 during the war, was named after a recently deceased soldier who had died in combat, in that very same conflict.

Fort Lee, in Virginia, is named for Robert E Lee, the Civil War Confederate leader. Fort Benning in Georgia is named for Henry Benning, a State Supreme Court associate justice who became one of Lee’s subordinates. Fort Sam Houston, a US Army installation in San Antonio, Texas, is named in honour of Sam Houston, the first (and third) president of the Republic of Texas, whose victory at the Battle of San Jacinto secured the independence of Texas from Mexico.

Australian Naval Heroes

US Air Forces bases follow the tradition. Dyess Air Force Base, for example, is named in honour of Lieutenant Colonel William Dyess, a Bataan Death March survivor.

Australia's parent Navy in Britain has also been prolific in naming warships after people. Perhaps the first vessel named after a person dates from 1418, when Britain's King Henry V paid the Bishop of Bangor five pounds for christening the largest warship of the time, the Henri Grace A Dieu, which translated as Henry By Grace Of God. This certainly reminded the general public that he was appointed by divine right, an important topic around that time.

A brief sample of other ships in the Royal Navy includes many named in the long war between France and Britain which culminated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Towards the end of the war, the RN began to name more ships for people, including contemporary names. The Nelson class of 120 gunships also included vessels named for military people: HMS Howe – after Admiral Richard Howe – and Saint Vincent – named after Lord St Vincent – after Admiral of the Fleet John Jervis, after whom Jervis Bay is named; and one named after royalty, the Prince Regent. There were major warships named for military men: Wellington, Wellesley – both named after the Army general who was the victor of Waterloo – Duncan, Cornwallis, Benbow, Barham, Drake, Hawke, Melville, and Pitt after the prime minister.

In more modern times the RN has named ships for the Antarctic explorer Robert Scott, and of course as most would know their two present large aircraft carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth, and HMS Prince of Wales.

It would be likely that the RAN will continue the names of the seven people who have ships afloat named after them. The usual practise sees the more notable names continued – for example there have been four HMAS Sydney's so far. Some names are seemingly destined to be only used once. For example, HMAS Wyatt Earp will be unlikely to be used again. This vessel, purchased from trade, served in WWII under a different name, but then was used in her original

Australian Naval Heroes

duty of Antarctic supply under her earlier title. As the name commemorates a well-known American West lawman it would be unlikely. However, like many others, HMAS Tasmania has only been used once. It is worth noting there is considerable enthusiasm for Navy to continue using old names, with many “ship associations” advocating for their cause.

In conclusion, there are a host of alternative names – those of its heroes – which the RAN could use to name ships. By doing so it would not only commemorate the past, but also celebrate the actions which its personnel are sometimes called upon in battle – and therefore show that their actions are laudable and to be emulated.

This action, of changing the practise of naming ship after people, should be argued for until it becomes reality. In the words of the motto of the submarine Sheean – Fight On.

Dr Tom Lewis OAM is the author of 20 books. A veteran of the Royal Australian Navy, he was decorated with the Order of Australia Medal for services to military history. He served in Iraq as an intelligence analyst and the commander of a US Forces unit. His books mostly deal with World War II, but also cover the actuality of battlefield behaviour in *Lethality in Combat*, and middle ages warfare in *Medieval Military Combat*. His most recent work is *Attack on Sydney*, a study of the failures in command combating the midget submarine attack of 1942.

Editor's Note – Many thanks to Dr Tom Lewis for another fascinating and informative article for this issue of Victoria Cross Online

Frederick Birks VC MM

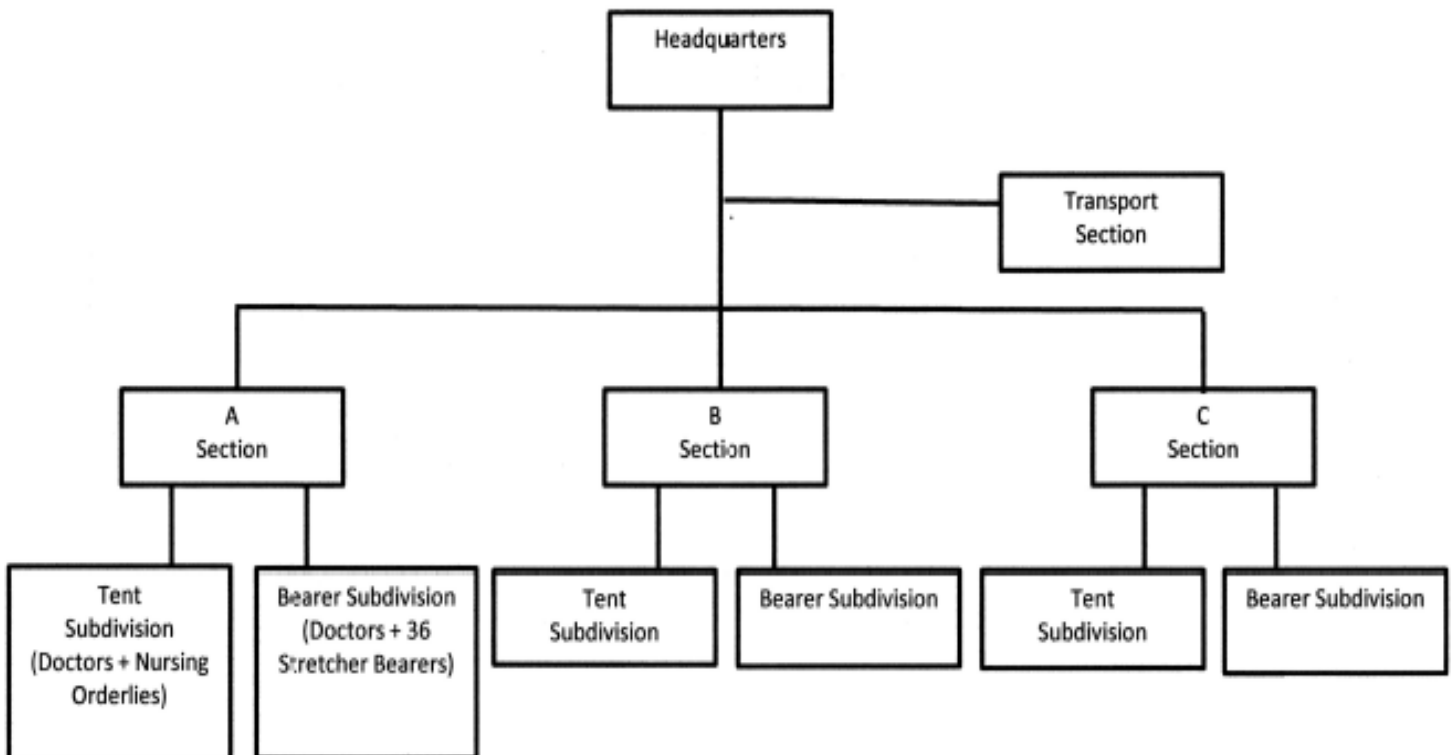
<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/frederick-birks-vc-mm/>

In writing about my great uncle, I have wanted to better understand his experience in the 2nd Field Ambulance (Australian Army Medical Corps) where he served from enlistment (18th August 1914, 2 days after his 20th birthday) until his transfer to the 6th Infantry Battalion (12th May 1917). The awards, to Fred, of the Military Medal and the Victoria Cross were made for acts of bravery and leadership in very different roles, one as a combatant, the other as a non- combatant. In this article I will focus on the non-combatant role as this, in general, receives less attention.

The concept of a Field Ambulance Unit appears to have come from the South African War and was adopted by the Australian Army in 1906. Previously Dressing Stations and Bearer Companies had operated independently and frequently became separated. The new Field Ambulance Unit would collect, treat and feed its patients and remain in close contact with the brigades which it was tasked to support.

The 2nd. Field Ambulance was raised in Melbourne in August 1914 and consisted of circa 230 officers and men.

Organizational Chart for 2nd Field Ambulance



Frederick Birks VC MM

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/frederick-birks-vc-mm/>

The 108 Stretcher Bearers were to carry the wounded from the battlefield, after the battalion bearers had brought the wounded back to the Regimental Aid Post, where they were classified by the Regimental Medical Officer before being retrieved by the Field Ambulance bearers.

Fred volunteered, at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne and was assigned to the 2nd Field Ambulance ('A' Section) as a Stretcher Bearer. It is not clear whether Fred applied specifically for the 2nd Field Ambulance or whether he was assigned upon enlistment. Only 17% of those recruited to the 2nd FA had any previous military experience and the vast majority of recruits were of Anglo-Celtic background. Previous experience must have been an important consideration in the decision to assign a man to the FA or to an Infantry Battalion but no link has yet been established between Fred's experiences or preferences and the decision. I have read a suggestion that doctors in the AAMC, conducting enlistment medicals, personally selected those they wanted in their units but I have no evidence for this.

On August 19th 1914, some 2000 of the newly recruited Australian Imperial Force (AIF) assembled at Victoria Barracks and marched the 12 miles to the training camp at Broadmeadows. The troops, which included Fred and the 2nd FA, were accompanied by 2 bands and a solitary drummer boy. The Melbourne Argus reported *"The city streets were thronged with a dense crowd. As the men came into view the spectators broke into a spontaneous burst of cheering."*

Over the next few weeks equipment was issued and basic training undertaken, including First Aid training for bearers. Physical training was given great emphasis with frequent route marches. There was, however, said to be something of a vacation air as generous leave was granted and visitors allowed to the camp every afternoon.

Frederick Birks VC MM

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/frederick-birks-vc-mm/>

On the 18th October the 2nd FA boarded the SS Wiltshire at Port Melbourne and the following morning sailed for Western Australia where it anchored till the whole fleet assembled. These were hopeful and exciting times for these young men who wanted to be involved in a great adventure. The expectations of the men were that they were going to the Western Front. On the 9th November there was much celebration when a German Light Cruiser, SMS Emden, was sunk by the fleet off the Cocos Islands.

After some 6 weeks at sea the 2nd FA disembarked in Egypt on 12th December 1914 and travelled, via Cairo, to their camp at Mena. With the backdrop of the Sphinx and the Pyramids this must have been another exciting time. Based at Mena for several months, training continued. Ralph Goode notes in his diaries *"We frequently had Field Days, marching out of camp with wagons and equipment complete. A spot 3 or 4 miles out would be chosen; tent subdivisions would pitch tents and prepare them to receive wounded brought in by ambulance bearers and wagons. The bearers practised 'advancing under fire' to collect wounded and received much instruction in improvising tourniquets and splints."* Mena Camp became like a small city with the troops comfortable and entertained. Leave into Cairo was granted, usually on the basis of 10% of a Unit at any one time. However many overstayed their leave or went into Cairo regardless of permission. This, alongside disturbances involving service personnel and the high incidence of venereal disease, caused much concern to the Army hierarchy.

On 4th April 1915 the 2nd FA left Mena Camp and boarded the SS Mashobra for the trip to the Greek island of Lemnos. Route marches were taken through small Greek villages which were noted as if *"..... the whole lot looked as though it had fallen out of the bible."*

Frederick Birks VC MM

An organisational change was made to reduce the size of stretcher bearer squads from 6 to 4 men: this meant 9 stretcher squads in each Bearer Sub-Division and thus an increased carrying capacity.

The Invasion Force made its preparations on April 24th. Troops had been issued with a British style service cap, slouch hats, blankets & kit bags having been stowed away. Each stretcher bearer carried a full water bottle, iron rations for 48 hours (1 can of bully beef, biscuits, tea, sugar and a soup tablet), ground sheet, greatcoat, haversack and field dressing kit. The No 4 of each Bearer Squad carried a surgical haversack and a medical water bottle. Stretcher bearers each would also be carrying a stretcher.

At 6 a.m. on 25th April the Bearer Sub-Divisions assembled on deck and climbed down the ships nets on to TBD Foxhound. About 500 yards from shore they transferred into waiting boats and were towed for 400 yards by a pinnace & then rowed ashore by seamen from the pinnace. The troops were landed further north than had been planned, this being due to poor visibility and sea currents, and this resulted in very difficult conditions. Anzac Cove and the surrounding topography was an extremely hostile environment with very narrow beaches backed by steep and rocky cliffs. Fred, in 'A' Section came ashore at Ari Burnu (the northern tip of Anzac Cove). The FA History notes that enemy gunfire had been silenced by the guns of HMS Triumph but Ralph Goode noted that they had landed "*under fire with many casualties.*" The 3 Sections moved together to Anzac Cove where hundreds of troops had assembled. From there they scaled the steep cliffs into Monash Valley and on to Second Ridge to begin evacuating casualties down to a dressing station at Anzac Cove. The steep, rugged, scrubby hillside was challenging for the bearers who had to slide stretchers down steep inclines and use slings. By early afternoon dressings were running low and there were no stretchers as the wounded were being moved, on their stretchers, to the ships.

Frederick Birks VC MM

Improvised stretchers, bandages and splints were devised using, for example, puttees, entrenching tool handles and bayonets. It is hard to imagine an area less suited for combat; steep cliffs, small gulleys and constant enemy sniper fire. This would be their experience throughout the many months on Gallipoli.

None of Fred's letters survive but accounts from others in the 2nd Field Ambulance record:

"Our work has none of the excitement that is attached to a man with a rifle. We try to relieve suffering and a man placed on a stretcher is no light weight to carry, and running from cover to cover is not practicable with a seriously wounded man on a stretcher. Our feelings when crossing a clearing, swept by machine gun fire can be imagined-it is like cold water running down the spine."

"At this time snipers were doing a lot of damage to our men, picking off the stretcher bearers as they wended their way down to the beach. The hills being thickly timbered, snipers had a chance to be hidden for days among the thick bracken and pick off men as they passed to and fro..."

"The practice followed by the squads was to move up the various gullies until the cry 'stretcher bearers' was heard."

With the lack of stretchers, improvised ones were being made using rifles poked through the sleeves of greatcoats. *"This proved a failure being torture for the patient and extremely difficult work for the bearers, some of whom discarded their makeshift stretchers, preferring to carry their patient on their backs. By this time the beach was in a very congested state, hundreds of wounded lying in the open awaiting boats to take them off. Some were, unfortunately, re-wounded by shrapnel and all were suffering from thirst.*

By early May the trench lines had become more stabilised and access to fresh water was established.

Frederick Birks VC MM

On 3rd May Rupert Laidlaw notes: *“There were plenty of casualties, we were working right through the night, the most cases I noticed were body injuries though there were a good many fractures. We had a very anxious time with regard to snipers, they fired point blank at our squad which were bringing back wounded men, happily they didn’t hit any.... we don’t wear our Red Crosses now as they only make a target for the enemy.”*

On 5th May the Bearer Sub Divisions sailed for Cape Helles to support the offensive there and at the Second Battle of Krithia. Ralph Goode notes *“As the wounded came in, squads were detailed to carry them to a Casualty Clearing Station on V Beach, a distance of 2.5 miles. It was now dark and owing to the density of the scrub and the broken ground, the majority of the squads went astray and spent valuable time trying to find their way. Meanwhile the wounded were pouring in faster than they could be cleared and lay in such numbers that the embankment was insufficient protection for them so that several were wounded again.”*

It was in this environment that Fred Birks was recommended for a Military Medal which was, on this occasion, not awarded. The recommendation read: *“Carrying wounded single handed under shell and rifle fire from the firing line from positions where it was impossible to take stretchers at ANZAC on 25th April 1915. Devotion to duty and good work, carrying wounded from the firing line under heavy fire and shell fire at Cape Helles on May 8th 1915.”*

Captain Gutteridge noted his admiration for the bearers of the 2nd Field Ambulance *“A continuous carrying of cases over rough country for distances of up to 3000 yards with only two men to a stretcher for 20 hours without a spell was their record.”*

Frederick Birks VC MM

The Gallipoli campaign continued and by July the overall health of troops was suffering because of poor diet and hygiene. August saw Fred involved in work in the Lone Pine offensive. Rupert Laidlaw notes *“We commenced collecting the wounded at once and it was awful, we were under withering shell fire all the time and one of our squads got the full force of a shell, with the result one man was killed and the other three wounded.... We had to advance right into the trenches to get our men and some of the wounds were awful.... we worked through the night continued our work through the day until 4 p.m.”*

The 2nd Field Ambulance left Gallipoli on 9th September 1915. Their condition was poor; lack of exercise, sickness and poor diet having taken their toll. Based again on Lemnos they remained there until the full evacuation. An event of note at this time was a visit from Lord Kitchener who inspected the troops on Lemnos on 11th November.

On 31st December the troops left Lemnos for Egypt where they were based until they sailed for France in March 1916. HMS Briton arrived in Marseilles on 31st March and the 2nd FA boarded a train for northern France and Belgium. In billets near Armentieres Rupert Laidlaw notes *“This evening star shells were plentiful and the machine guns are going at a great rate, while the guns are making an awful row.”* What a contrast to the terrain, climate and style of combat they had been experiencing since leaving Australia some 18 months previously. Troops also had to adjust to security measures unknown at Gallipoli. Many soldiers had cameras but these were forbidden in France. On a more positive note the troops could spend time in local villages when on rest.

Frederick Birks VC MM

A further note from Laidlaw in May notes "An order was received that a gas attack was imminent, besides a bombardment. I was sent up to our post in the trenches with my squad ... By the time we got to our post the wounded started to come in. They enemy were still bombarding, they having confined their attack to our front line trenches and it was here that we had most of the casualties. We worked from 7.30p.m. till 5.30 a.m. the following morning."

The Unit remained in the area, including time at the Saily Laundry Dressing Station, through June 1916 with bearers being sent out in readiness for an imminent and subsequently successful raid by the 6th Infantry Battalion on the German trenches. Then in early July they were moved to just outside Amiens, in preparation for the offensive at Pozieres, a small village on high ground.

For the first few days of this battle, which commenced on 22nd July, all evacuations from the battlefield were undertaken by two-men hand carrying a stretcher for distances of at least 1.5 miles to the nearest horse wagons. Apart from dodging frequent enemy shell fire, both high explosive and shrapnel, the bearers also had to contend with phosgene gas shells, which required them to don their gas helmets.

Descriptions of the action at Pozieres paint a dramatic picture:

Corporal Thomas notes "We have to cross open country simply alive with shells. I turned my head sharply and saw a decapitated man-one of ours. It is bloody gruesome-oh will it soon end-this awful game."

Lieutenant Rogers: "My men are being unmercifully shelled. They cannot hold on if an attack is launched. The firing line and my Headquarters are being plastered with heavy guns"

Frederick Birks VC MM

Ralph Ball: *“Only 5 out of 32 in my platoon came out of Pozieres. The gun fire was such that you could read a paper by the flashes of the guns.”*

Through these days the bearers continued working. Captain Willcocks noting: *“During the five days the bearers were magnificent carrying all the time under shell fire, on the road the first two days and in Pozieres wood the last three days. Throughout operations the 2nd Field Ambulance bearers carried from the Regimental Aid Posts and the front line to Bailliff Wood corner; consequently, they endured much more shell fire than other units.”*

It was for his actions here on 26th July that Fred was recommended and subsequently awarded the Military Medal. *“At Pozieres, France on the 26th July 1916 L/Cpl Birks continually led his squad of stretcher bearers through Pozieres Wood and Village, from the front line, many of the Regimental stretcher bearers being out of action. He was exposed to heavy shell fire the whole time.”*

The Citation notes the additional work undertaken in the absence of the Regimental bearers, the 2nd FA bearers having to collect wounded from where they had fallen as well as from Regimental Aid Posts.

On 5th August Fred was promoted from Lance Corporal to Temporary Corporal (Wagon Orderly), this promotion becoming substantive on 10th August. The 2nd FA returned to the Ypres area after Pozieres where they operated across a wide area throughout the autumn and winter. General Sir William Birdwood presented Fred with his Military Medal at a Divisional Parade around the 27th of September.

The winter of 1916/17 was one of the coldest on record. During the December Fred visited Buckley whilst on leave and in early February he had a spell in the Field Hospital, suffering from pyrexia.

Frederick Birks VC MM

On 28th February 1917 Fred transferred to the Divisional School for Officer Training, having been selected for a commission. On 12th May he was transferred from the 2nd Field Ambulance to the 6th Australian Infantry Battalion as a Second Lieutenant. The family recollection is that Fred had requested the 6th Battalion as his brigade of stretcher bearers had worked alongside this battalion.

Having explored in more detail the experience of a stretcher bearer, the enormous stamina and physical endurance is highlighted. The appalling injuries and carnage that they witnessed as they went about their work was relentless. Despite their role they were, in Gallipoli, often targets for the enemy and they carried no weapons themselves. The role they played was of critical importance to the support and delivery of the offensives, as indeed were the roles of many other non-combatants.



Coventry's First VC



The idea for an article on the first Coventry born recipient of the Victoria Cross was inspired by two separate thoughts. On working on the daily posts I complete on the Victoria Cross Online Facebook group I noticed that the 4th October was the 106th anniversary of Arthur Hutt's heroic action, and secondly it reminded to contact Nath Houghton, a relative of Arthur's who has kindly helped with a number of images on his page, and Nath asked if I would write a piece on his and his family's behalf on Arthur.

Arthur was born at 1 Court, 4 New Buildings, in Earlsdon, near Coventry on 12th February 1889. His father, Samuel, a timber labourer, married Jane Knibb, a silk winder, on 8th July 1876 at St Michael's, the Old Cathedral, Coventry. They had ten children in all including Arthur. Arthur was educated at Holy Trinity School, Coventry. He was employed by Courtaulds artificial silk works, Foleshill, Coventry from 1910-1915. When the factory he worked for formed a company (called a "Pals" unit) in the Warwickshire Territorials (a militia unit), Arthur was keen to join up. Arthur married Alice Lenton in 1913 in Coventry. They had a daughter, Victoria Constance in 1920.

Arthur was at annual camp at Rhyl, North Wales when war broke out and the Battalion was embodied on 4th August. He sailed from Southampton to Le Havre on 22nd March 1915.

Coventry's First VC

See TEM Card

Name	Corps	Rank	Serial No.
HUTT (VC) * - -	R. War. 1st	Cpl	1056 267110
Arthur			

Symbol	Roll	Page	Remarks
VICTIMS *	L/104 B18	3791	Blair
HURT	- - -	- - -	
15 STAR	L/115	272	

Threat of War first served in	(1) France
Date of entry therein	22-3-17

25972/AM

Correspondence.

Address.

Coventry's First VC

No. 267110 Pte. Arthur Hutt, R. War. R.
(Earlsdon, Coventry).

For most conspicuous bravery and initiative in attack, when all the officers and non-commissioned officers of No. 2 platoon having become casualties, Pte. Hutt took command of and led forward the platoon. He was held up by a strong post on his right, but immediately ran forward alone in front of the platoon and shot the officer and three men in the post, causing between forty and fifty others to surrender.

Later, realising that he had pushed too far, he withdrew his party. He personally covered the withdrawal by sniping the enemy, killing a number and then carried back a badly wounded man and put him under shelter.

Pte. Hutt then organised and consolidated his position, and learning that some wounded men were lying out and likely to become prisoners if left there, no stretcher bearers being available, he went out and carried in four wounded men under heavy fire.

Coventry's First VC

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/arthur-hutt-vc/>

In the spring of 1916 he returned to Britain to his old job. His service record no longer exists, so it is unknown the reasons for his discharge. He may have been recalled due to the shortage of skilled labour in Britain or may have reached the end of his term of service in the Territorial Force. Arthur was recalled in September 1916.

On 4th October, 1917, during the attack by the 48th Division before St. Julien, the 7th Battalion had as their objective Tweed House. "A" Company captured their first objective but when they continued their advance, all the officers and non-commissioned officers in private Hutt's platoon were hit. Private Hutt thereupon took command and led forward the platoon. He was held up by a strong point on his right, but immediately ran forward alone, shot the officer and three men in the post, and caused forty or fifty others to surrender. Presently realising that he had pushed too far ahead, Hutt withdrew his party. He personally covered the withdrawal, sniping the enemy and killing a number of them. Then he carried back a comrade, who had been badly wounded, and put him under shelter. After he had organised and consolidated his position, he learnt that some wounded men still lay out in the open, where they were likely to be taken prisoners. As no stretcher bearers were available, Hutt went out himself and carried in four men under heavy fire. He held his post until relieved on 7th/8th October.

His Division served in Italy from November 1917. He had been promoted Corporal by 12th January 1918 when he returned to Coventry. He was met at the station by the Mayor and driven through the streets to the Council House for a civic reception, during which he received an illuminated address and learned a fund set up for him had raised £500. The VC was presented to him by King George V at Buckingham Palace on 16th January 1918. He was discharged in early 1919 and was given the Freedom of Coventry.

Coventry's First VC



Pte. ARTHUR HUTT, V.C.,
Royal Warwickshire Regt.



Coventry's First VC

Arthur returned to work for Courtaulds. Between the wars he had a number of jobs and suffered unemployment just before the Second World War. He attended the VC Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in 1920 and the VC Dinner at the House of Lords in 1929. In November 1938, he volunteered for the Auxiliary Fire Service and was serving with it when the war broke out, but later joined the Home Guard. In 1941 he was a Lieutenant in 13th Warwickshire (Coventry) Battalion. His last job before retirement was in the packing department of the Standard Motor Company.

After the Second World War Arthur drifted away from his immediate family, but did not divorce Alice. He lived at 35 Weston Street, Coventry, and may have had more children; a daughter, Jeanie, attended his funeral. He attended the Victory Day Celebration Dinner in 1946. He was a keen supporter of ex-service organisations and was a member of the 7th Royal Warwickshire Old Comrades' Association. He was one of ten Vice-Presidents of the Royal Warwickshire Association appointed in 1935. Arthur died at his nephew's home at 277 Sewall Highway, Coventry on 14th April 1954. More than 350 people attended the funeral including VCs, William Beesley, Arthur Procter and Henry Tandey. He was cremated at Canley Crematorium.

In addition to the VC he was awarded the 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-20, Victory Medal 1914-19, Defence Medal 1939-45, George VI Coronation Medal 1937, Elizabeth II Coronation Medal 1953 and Territorial Efficiency Medal. The medals are held privately. The medals are currently on display at the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry, Warwickshire.

Coventry's First VC



Coventry's First VC



John Berryman VC

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

On 19 July 1825, John Berryman was born in Dudley, Staffordshire. In 1832, he survived an outbreak of cholera in the town, which claimed the lives of three of his siblings.

Shortly after his 18th birthday, he enlisted at Birmingham in the 17th Lancers. His military career started well and he was promoted to corporal in October 1848, although he was court-martialled in January 1849, and reduced to the ranks. In October 1851, however, he regained his corporal stripes.

In 1854, the Crimean War broke out and the 17th Lancers, as part of the Light Brigade sailed off to Bulgaria. He spent the first three months of the war there, and in April 1854 he was promoted to troop sergeant major. The Light Brigade moved to the Crimea and was soon in action after landing at Sebastopol.



John Berryman VC

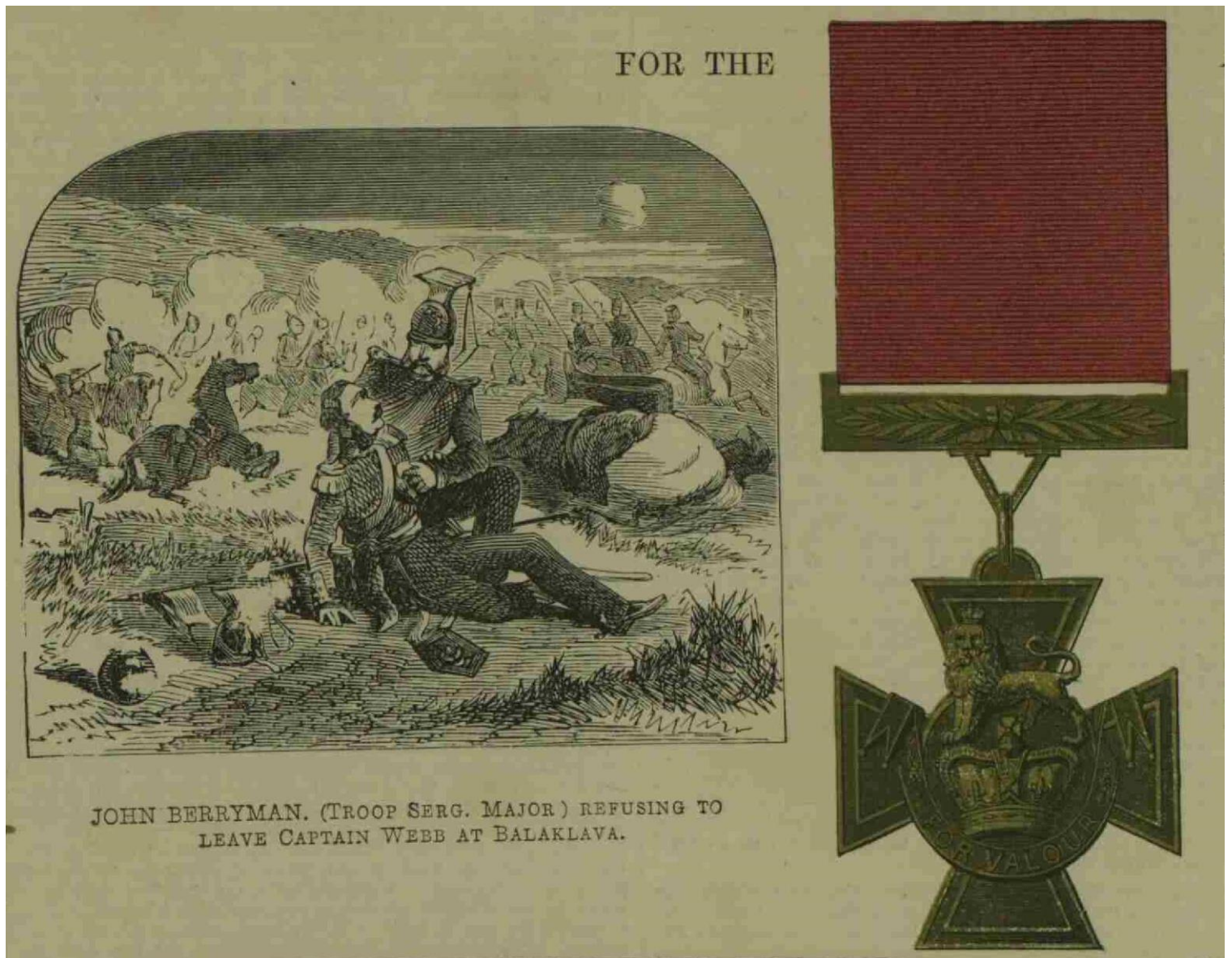
On the 25 October 1854, on the plains at Balaclava, Berryman performed the actions which led to the award of his Victoria Cross. Berryman was in one of the front two lines of the charge, and watched as Captain Nolan (played by Errol Flynn in the film *Charge of the Light Brigade*), who led the charge, was killed by a Russian shell. Berryman made it to the Russian guns, where his horse, wounded and with a broken leg could go no further. He himself was also wounded, as was his own troop officer, Captain Webb, whose leg was shattered and who was unable to ride. Unable to advance, they were joined by another 17th Lancer, John Farrell, and disobeying Webb's orders to save themselves, they carried him under heavy fire towards their own lines. With the help of a third man, Corporal Joseph Malone, from the 13th Light Dragoons, they got Webb to safety. Having had his leg amputated, Webb died in hospital on 6 November. He was awarded the VC (London Gazette, 24th February 1857) for his actions at Balaclava.

Berryman was fourth in line to receive the Victoria Cross number 16 from Queen Victoria at Hyde Park on 26 June 1857. Later that year, he sailed on the SS Great Britain bound for India, to help quell the Mutiny. The men of the 17th Lancers captured so much spoil that they were the envy of other regiments. All their trophies they gave, however, to be sold, for the purpose of founding a home India for the children of British soldiers.

He married Eliza ('Betsy') Enright at Masulaptan in India on 14 January 1861 and they had a daughter Florence born in March 1863. Sadly, cholera would affect Berryman's life again, as his wife died in Bombay from the disease in January 1865. He was promoted again to Quartermaster and he served in the Army back in England for a number of years.

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

John Berryman VC



In 1879, he was posted to South Africa to take part in the Zulu War. The Northern Whig dated 20 February 1879 reported:

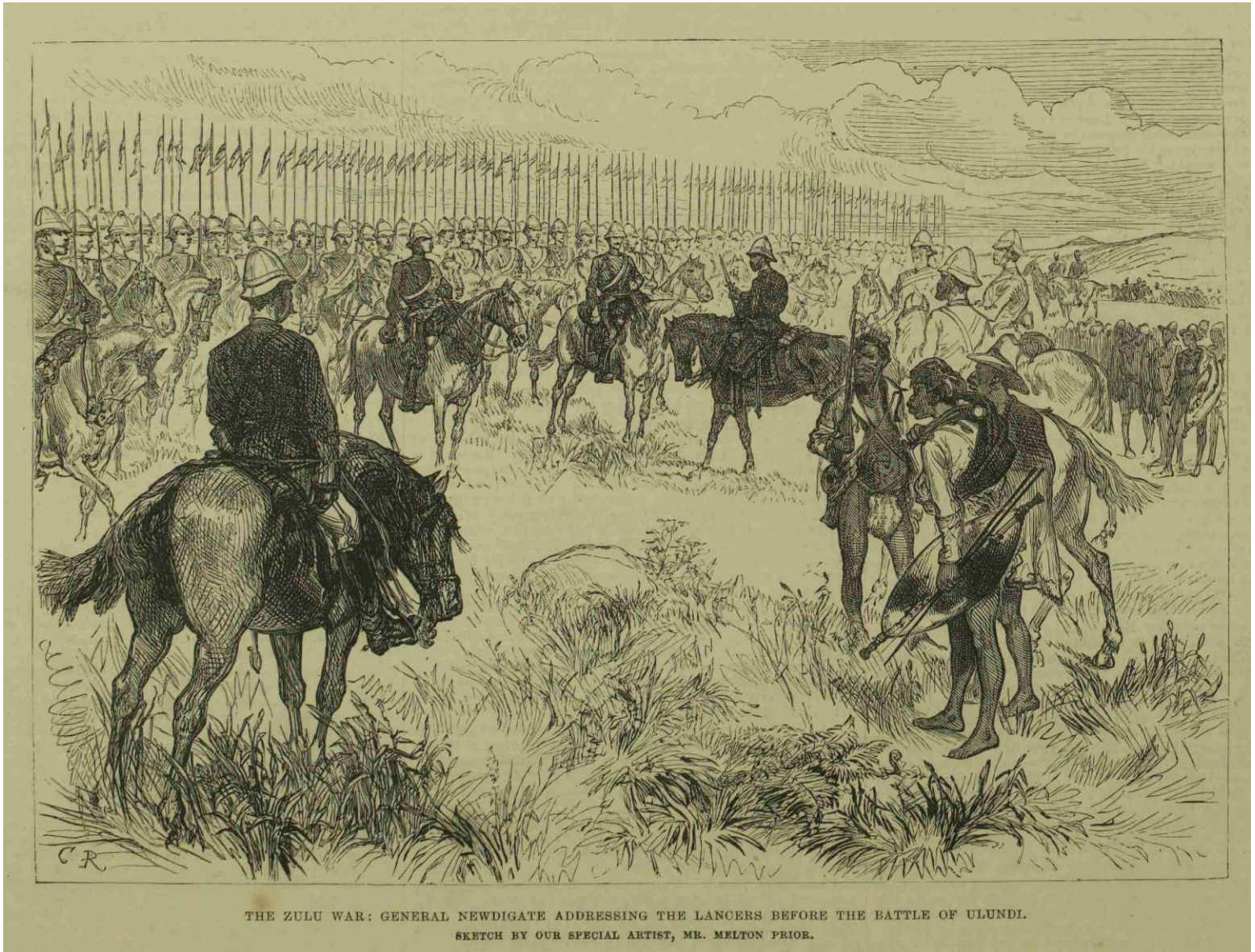
THE WAR IN ZULULAND.

THE 17th LANCERS.

It is abundantly evident, that the "Death or Glory Boys", as the 17th Lancers - who wear the grim insignia of a skull and crossed bones on their sleeve - are called, have their whole heart in this expedition.

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

John Berryman VC



Few Englishmen need to be reminded that this regiment contributed most numerous to the Light Brigade, whose charge at Balacava the 17th Lancers found themselves heavily involved. Among their officers at the present time are to be found the only two who rode in the famous Crimean charge; and these survivors, who were both sergeants when they galloped twice 'through the Valley of Death', are Captain and Paymaster Brown and Quartermaster Berryman, V.C., who distinguished himself at the time by bringing a wounded officer out of the charge in a very gallant manner.

John Berryman VC

The men wore the new white helmet, a welcome change in their head-dress under the African sun. The 17th Lancers' last full-blown charge was on the 4 July 1879 at the Battle of Ulundi, where the regiment's two Adjutants, John Brown and Berryman became the only men to take part in charges in the Crimea, India and the Zulu Campaigns. In 1880, he transferred to the 5th Lancers and became an Honorary Major, before retiring from the Army in 1883.

Berryman's VC was sold by Spink in 1886 at auction for £10 due to 'heavy contact marks from years of faithful cavalry service.' In July 1890 he was invited along with nearly forty survivors of the Balaclava Charge, together with a number of other Crimean Veterans to an event organised for the benefit of the Light Brigade Relief Fund, held at Olympia, Kensington. The attractions included a recitation by Sir. W. H. Pennington, who himself took part in the Balaclava Charge, of Lord Tennyson's well-known poem about the charge. 'When can their glory fade?' asked Tennyson. The question received a melancholy answer to the fact that it is necessary to organise a benefit in order to rescue some of these heroes from the workhouse. It should be added that Lady Cardigan - widow of the gallant officer - was present also. Of the survivors of the famous charge there were six representatives of the 4th Light Dragoons, fourteen of the 17th Lancers, one of the 8th Hussars, six of the 13th Light Dragoons, and eleven of the 11th Hussars.

John Berryman died on 27 June 1896, a few weeks short of his 71st birthday, and was buried in St Agatha's Churchyard, Woldingham, Surrey. His medals are not publicly held.

John Berryman VC



MAJOR JOHN BERRYMAN, V.C.

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

Other News

On 18th September 2023, during an episode of “Antiques Roadshow” filmed at Pollok Park in Glasgow, the son of Gian Singh VC appeared with his father’s medal group. The group which consists of the Victoria Cross, Sainya Seva Medal, Indian Independence Medal, 1939-45 Star, Burma Star, War Medal 1939-45, India Service Medal 1939-45, Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal (1953), and Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal (1977) was being kept in a bank vault.

At the show’s recording, the Roadshow’s resident medals expert, Mark Smith (former Curator of the Royal Artillery Museum), valued the medal group at £250,000. Gian Singh’s son stated that the family would never sell the medals, and it has been recently announced that the medal group will be on a 2 year loan to the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow from October 2023.



Read more about the gallant actions and life of Gian Singh VC at

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/gian-singh-vc/>