

Victoria Cross Online



Issue 44 June 2026

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the ^{44th} edition of Victoria Cross Online Magazine.

This month's edition will continue with the next two in the Royal Air Force Victoria Cross recipients' series. It will tell the stories of Roderick Learoyd VC and the only VC of the Battle of Britain - Eric Nicolson VC.

I will also of course cover the only VC from D-Day as this month sees the 82nd anniversary of Operation Overlord, and the exploits of Stan Hollis VC that day.

There is also the unveiling of the blue plaque in Dover, Kent to Thomas Gould VC courtesy of the Submariners Association. The event was attended by Steve Lee, a great friend of Victoria Cross Online, with his work with www.memorialstovalour.co.uk

There is also news of my recent appearance on the History Syndicate Podcast hosted by Mark Martin. I have previously appeared talking about the Arnhem VCs, but I was kindly invited back to talk all things Stan Hollis VC.

There is also news of the latest VC grave restoration by the Victoria Cross Trust in Leeds during the past month.



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The RAF VCs

Roderick Learoyd VC



Roderick Learoyd VC



Roderick Alastair Brook Learoyd (1913-1996), the son of Major R. B. Learoyd from Littlestone, Kent, was born on 5th February 1913 in Folkestone, Kent. Educated at Hydrey House Prep School, Baldstow, Sussex, and Wellington College, Berkshire, Learoyd then attended the Chelsea College of Aeronautical and Automobile Engineering.

Following his schooling, he spent two years in Argentina as a fruit farmer, before a short period as a motor engineer, before he decided to join the RAF to learn to fly. Accepted in March 1936 for a short service commission, he received his elementary training at Hamble AST, and his Service training at Wittering; graduating in December 1936 and being posted to 49 Squadron, equipped with Hawker Hinds at Worthy Down aerodrome.



Acting Flight-Lieut. Roderick Learoyd, R.A.F., who has been awarded the V.C. for his daring exploit in raiding the Dortmund-Ems Canal. His own story of the raid is told on page 1153.

...that to date the sum of £3,052,841 had been received from the public for the purchase of aircraft.

It was announced from New York that President Roosevelt and Mr. Mackenzie King, Canadian Prime Minister, had agreed that "a Permanent Joint Board on

nine German raiders were brought down without loss to the R.A.F.

In the House of Commons Sir Archibald Sinclair stated that since August 8—when the Germans started their intensive air war on Britain—we had brought down 701 German machines. Our loss in the



Lieut. R. B. Stannard, R.N.R., of H.M.S. Trawler "Arab," awarded the V.C. for "outstanding valour and signal devotion to duty at Namsos" (see page 1166). On the right is Mrs. Stannard with her two children reading telegrams of congratulation at their home at Bexley Heath.



Roderick Learoyd VC

In March 1938, 49 Squadron moved base to Scampton where it became the first RAF Squadron to re-equip with the new monoplane Handley Page Hampden bombers. Sharing the airfield was 83 Squadron, which began conversion from its Hawker Hinds to Hampdens in October 1938, and was completely re-equipped with the type by early January 1939. The change from biplanes to all-metal monoplane bombers gave both units many months of necessary practice flying though, strangely, virtually no night-flying was undertaken – indeed, it was only on the outbreak of war that the Hampden crews had their first experience in flying Hampdens with full bomb loads.

After the declaration of war on 1st September 1939, the Scampton Hampdens were ordered to bomb up a flight of aircraft each, and at midnight general mobilisation orders were issued throughout the RAF in Britain. By dawn of the 3rd September, the war-loaded Hampdens were still at standby and, at 6.15pm, six Hampdens from 83 Squadron and three from 49 Squadron left Scampton on an “armed reconnaissance” over the North Sea, seeking German naval ships to bomb.

During the next ten months Learoyd participated in 23 more bombing sorties, apart from various other types of operations, proving himself to be a cool-headed pilot, seemingly imperturbable in the most dangerous situations. One target he attacked was a vital waterway, the Dortmund-Ems canal – a heavily defended objective which received considerable attention from RAF bombers in mid-1940. And it was this canal that was to be Learoyd's target on the night of 12th August 1940.



Roderick Learoyd VC

*Air Ministry,
20th August, 1940.*

ROYAL AIR FORCE.

The KING has been graciously pleased to confer the Victoria Cross on the undermentioned officer, in recognition of most conspicuous bravery:—

Acting Flight Lieutenant Roderick Alastair Brook LEAROYD (37860).

This officer, as first pilot of a Hampden aircraft, has repeatedly shown the highest conception of his duty and complete indifference to personal danger in making attacks at the lowest altitudes regardless of opposition. On the night of 12th August, 1940, he was detailed to attack a special objective on the Dortmund-Ems Canal. He had attacked this objective on a previous occasion and was well aware of the risks entailed. To achieve success it was necessary to approach from a direction well known to the enemy, through a lane of especially disposed anti-aircraft defences, and in the face of the most intense point blank fire from guns of all calibres. The reception of the preceding aircraft might well have deterred the stoutest heart, all being hit and two lost. Flight Lieutenant Learoyd nevertheless made his attack at 150 feet, his aircraft being repeatedly hit and large pieces of the main planes torn away. He was almost blinded by the glare of many searchlights at close range but pressed home this attack with the greatest resolution and skill. He subsequently brought his wrecked aircraft home and, as the landing flaps were inoperative and the undercarriage indicators out of action, waited for dawn in the vicinity of his aerodrome before landing, which he accomplished without causing injury to his crew or further damage to the aircraft. The high courage, skill and determination, which this officer has invariably displayed on many occasions in the face of the enemy, sets an example which is unsurpassed.

On 12th August 1940 eleven Hampdens – six from 49 Squadron, five from 83 Squadron – were detailed to destroy the old aqueduct carrying the canal over the river Ems, north of Münster. Flight Lieutenant Learoyd was one of the pilots briefed to bomb. Learoyd was detailed as pilot of Hampden P4403, “EA-M”, and his crew comprised Pilot Officer J Lewis (Observer), Sergeant J Ellis (wireless operator-gunner) and LAG Rich (ventral gunner).

Of the other Hampdens which made the attack that night, two were destroyed and two more were badly hit. Flight Lieutenant Learoyd took his plane into the target at only 150 feet, in the full glare of the searchlights and flak barrage all round him. After commencing its bombing run Learoyd’s aircraft was badly damaged, including a ruptured hydraulic system, resulting in inoperable wing flaps and a useless undercarriage. Wing damage, though serious, had fortunately missed the wing petrol tanks. Despite this damage the bombs were duly dropped and Learoyd managed to get his crippled plane back to England where he decided that a night landing would be too dangerous for his crippled aircraft and so circled base until first light, finally safely landing without causing injury to his crew or further damage to his aircraft.

Post-raid intelligence showed that the raid was successful, and Learoyd was awarded a Victoria Cross, gazetted on 20th August 1940. The award was a popular one to the men of Scampton who held “Babe” Learoyd in high regard for his “unflappability.” The VC was presented on 9th September 1940 at Buckingham Palace, and he was then taken off operations, and was promoted to Squadron Leader, and was acting as personal assistant to Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham. In November 1940 he was further honoured by receiving the Freedom of the Borough of New Romney, Kent.

On 28th February 1941 he rejoined the operational scene when he was appointed Officer Commanding 83 Squadron at Scampton, but in June he left 83 to take up a new post as Wing Commander Flying at 14 OTU, Cottesmore. In December, after six months on instructing, he succeeded to command of 44 Squadron at Waddington; the first operational Avro Lancaster unit. He was still commander of 44 when one of his flight commanders, John Nettleton, led the epic Lancaster daylight raid on Augsburg in April 1942, which brought Nettleton his VC; but in the following month Learoyd was posted to 25 OTU, Finnerley on further instructional duties.

Roderick Learoyd VC

From 1943 until the end of hostilities in Europe, he remained non-operational, with postings to Air Ministry in January 1943 – an attachment to the PRO Branch, giving various talks and lectures about the RAF in what was termed the “Line-Shoot Squadron”; and further postings to 109 OUT in December 1944, and 107 OUT at the end of March 1945. In May 1945 he returned to flying when he joined 48 (Dakota) Squadron, and a month later moved overseas to West Africa to fly with No 1314 Flight’s Dakotas at Accra. He was demobilised on 14th October 1946 and was transferred to the RAF Reserve as a Wing Commander.

For his first three years as a civilian he joined the Malayan Civil Aviation Department, becoming personal pilot to succeeding governors of Malaya; and on expiry of his contract in 1950 he returned to the UK and accepted a position in a tractor and road construction company. In January 1953, he became an export sales manager to the Austin Motor Company, and stayed in the profession until his retirement.

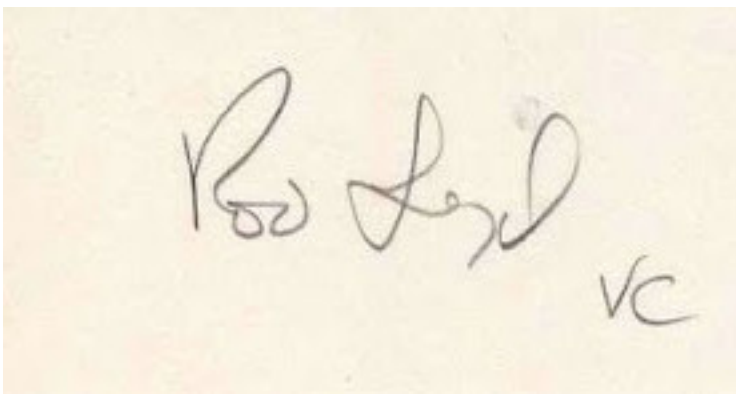
Learoyd died on 24th January 1996 in Rustington, West Sussex, aged 82, and was cremated at Worthing Crematorium and his ashes interred in Plot 34-35. His medal group was purchased privately in 1989 by Michael Ashcroft.



Courtesy of Kevin Brazier



Medal Group in the now closed Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum courtesy of Richard Thompson



The RAF VCs

Eric James Brindley Nicolson VC



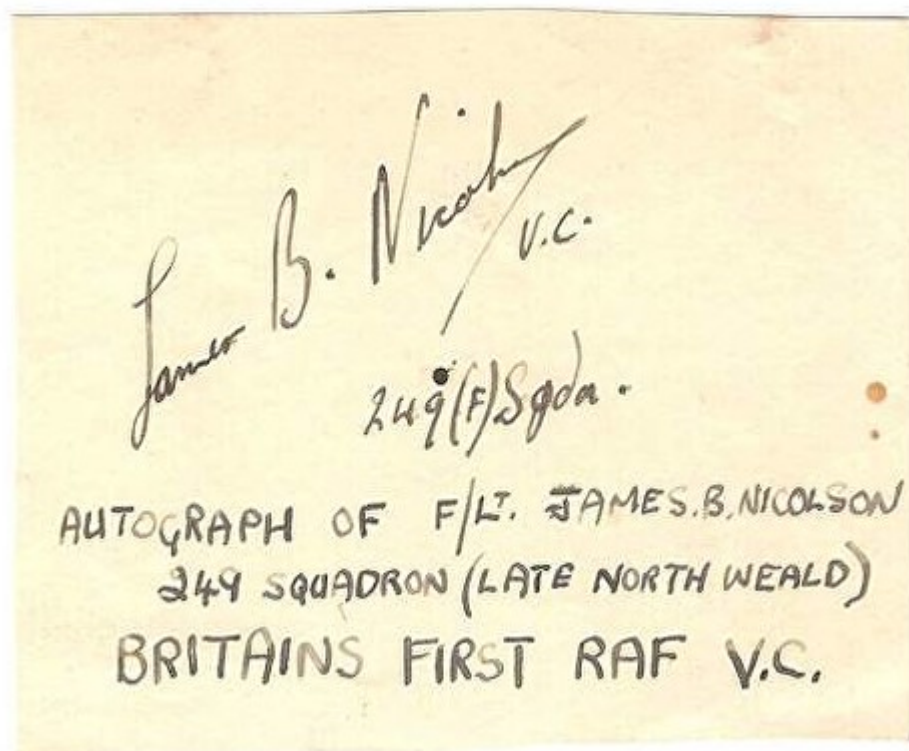
Eric James Brindley Nicolson VC



Eric James Brindley Nicolson (1917-1945) was born in Hampstead, London on 29th April 1917, and educated at Tonbridge, Kent. In 1935, at the age of 18, he began in business as an experimental engineer in Shoreham. In the following year, however, he decided to make a career in the RAF, and began training as a pilot at the White Waltham civil flying school on 12th October 1936. Enlisted officially in the RAF on 21st December, he then completed his Service training at the Ternhill FTS, and on 7th August 1937 joined his first Service squadron, No 72, based at Church Fenton, flying Gloster Gladiator fighters.

“Nick” Nicolson quickly proved himself to be a “natural” pilot, handling the Gladiator with ease and expertise and revelling in the contemporary mode of set aerobatics. As a pilot he was above average and a first class shot in air-to-air flying; displaying at all times the characteristics which epitomised the RAF’s “press-on” type of pilot.

When, in April 1939, 72 Squadron began receiving Spitfires to replace their biplane Gladiators, Nicolson soon adapted himself to the sleek monoplanes, and remained with the squadron until the outbreak of war. In October 1939, the squadron moved base to Leconfield, from where it flew its first operational sorties, though saw no combat action.



Eric James Brindley Nicolson VC

*Air Ministry.
15th November, 1940.*

ROYAL AIR FORCE.

The KING has been graciously pleased to confer the Victoria Cross on the undermentioned officer in recognition of most conspicuous bravery:—

Flight Lieutenant James Brindley NICOLSON (39329)—No. 249 Squadron.

During an engagement with the enemy near Southampton on 16th August, 1940, Flight Lieutenant Nicolson's aircraft was hit by four cannon shells, two of which wounded him whilst another set fire to the gravity tank. When about to abandon his aircraft owing to flames in the cockpit he sighted an enemy fighter. This he attacked and shot down, although as a result of staying in his burning aircraft he sustained serious burns to his hands, face, neck and legs.

Flight Lieutenant Nicolson has always displayed great enthusiasm for air fighting and this incident shows that he possesses courage and determination of a high order. By continuing to engage the enemy after he had been wounded and his aircraft set on fire, he displayed exceptional gallantry and disregard for the safety of his own life.

Several moves took place between October 1939 and March 1940; but Nicolson had still not seen combat action when, on 15th May 1940, he was posted to a newly-formed fighter squadron, 249, as an acting Flight commander. Moving to Leconfield five days later, 249 Squadron exchanged its Spitfires for Hawker Hurricanes in mid-June, and was at Church Fenton, working up on their aircraft prior to being declared fully operational from 3rd July. On 14th August 1940 the squadron was sent south to Boscombe Down, Wiltshire to join in the desperate defence of the southern counties against the onslaught of the Luftwaffe's daily armadas.

On 16th August 1940 near Southampton, Nicolson's Hawker Hurricane was fired on by a Messerschmitt Bf 110, injuring the pilot in one eye and one foot. His engine was also damaged and the petrol tank set alight. As he struggled to leave the blazing machine he saw another Messerschmitt, and managing to get back into the bucket seat, pressed the firing button and continued firing until the enemy plane dived away to destruction. Not until then did he bail out, and he was able to open his parachute in time to land safely in a field. On his descent, he was fired on by members of the Home Guard, who ignored his cry of being a RAF pilot.

On landing, he was crippled by his badly burned hands, blind in his left eye from a severely severed eyelid, and other wounds to his face. Immediately rushed to Southampton Hospital, his life hung in the balance for several days. Far away in Yorkshire, his wife Muriel, heavily pregnant with their first child, was unable to travel to be with him. Three weeks later, he had recovered enough to be moved to RAF Halton which specialised in burns treatment, and by November he was a convalescent patient in the Palace Hotel "hospital" at Torquay. His foot wound had healed, as had much of his facial burns and injuries; but his left hand was still virtually unusable, while his right hand had only just started to show signs of improvement.

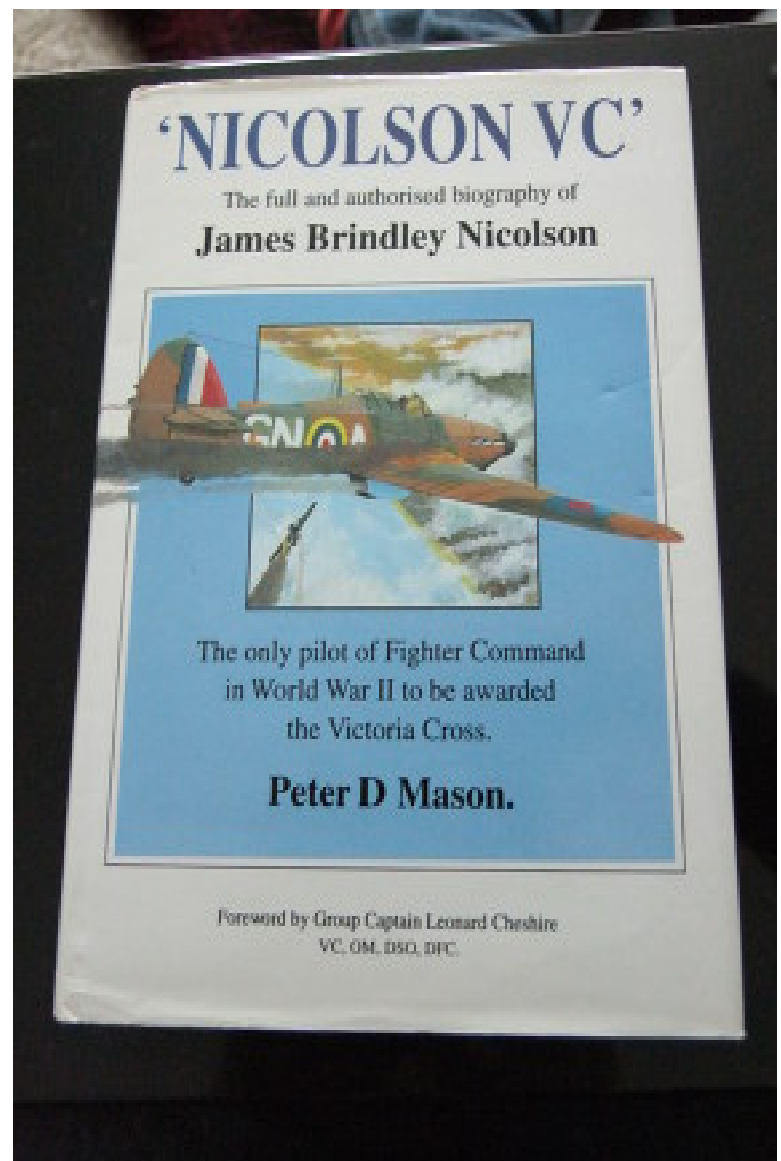
On 15th November 1940, the award of his VC was announced, and Nicolson's reaction was that of disbelief. Ten days after the announcement, he received the VC from King George VI at Buckingham Palace. Though still not medically fit for flying duties, he soon began agitating for a return, and on 24th February 1941 he joined the instructional staff at 54 OUT. His burnt hands were slow to heal, and finally became operational again when appointed to command No 1459 Flight, Hibaldstow.



Eric James Brindley Nicolson VC

After six months he was posted to become Staff Officer at HQ 293 Wing, Alipore, India; moving to another desk job at Air HQ, Bengal in mid-December. He finally got his wish to return to operational flying on 4th August 1943 when he took command of 27 Squadron at Agarthala, Burma. For exactly a year, Nicolson led the "Flying Elephants" as they were known, to war. He left the unit on 11th August 1944 to take up a Wing Commander Training post in Comilla, Bengal. He was recommended for a decoration and was duly awarded the DFC. By April 1945, he was appointed to RAF Burma HQ, and on 2nd May 1945 persuaded higher authority to allow him to accompany a bomber crew on a bombing sortie as an "observer".

Tragically, when the Liberator had reached a point 130 miles south of Calcutta, one of the engines erupted in flames and the bomber crashed into the sea. Sixteen hours later rescue Catalina flying boats located the scene but found only two NCO survivors. The rest of the crew including Wing Commander Nicolson VC DFC had perished with the aircraft. His body was never found, so he was commemorated on the Kranji War Memorial, Singapore. He left a widow and a son, James. His medals are held by the RAF Museum, Hendon.



Eric James Brindley Nicolson VC



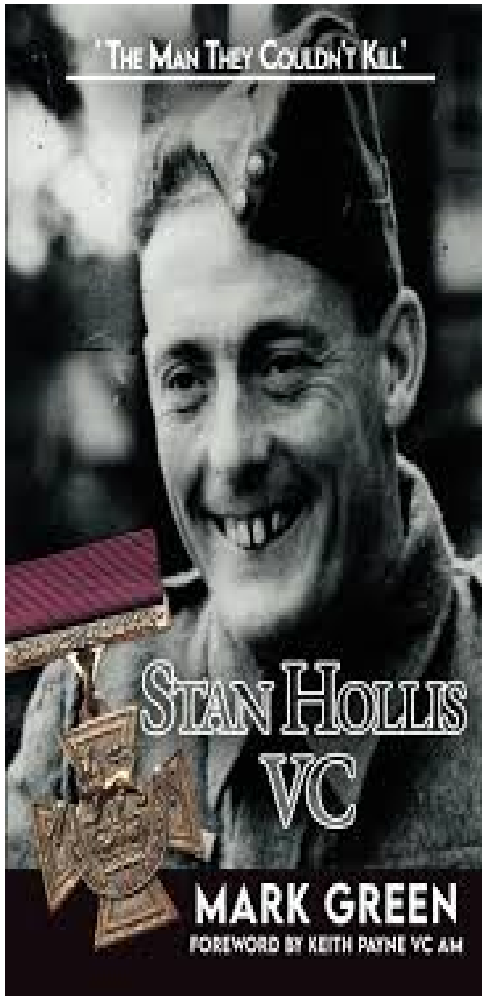
NICOLSON VC

As a pilot during the Battle of Britain, Eric James Brindley Nicolson was awarded RAF Fighter Command's only Victoria Cross. On 16 August his Hawker Hurricane was hit by an enemy aircraft. Despite sustaining serious injuries, and with his Hurricane ablaze, he continued to pursue and shoot down a Messerschmitt Bf 110.

James had previously served with No. 72 Squadron and undertook several operational patrols in Spitfire Mk I K9942 displayed alongside this case.



Stan Hollis VC



During the editing on this month's edition of Victoria Cross Online magazine, saw the passing of the 82nd anniversary of "Operation Overlord", the Allied amphibious invasion of the Normandy beaches on 6th June 1944.

As all of you will be aware as Victoria Cross experts, the only Victoria Cross awarded for actions that morning, was earned by Colour Sergeant Stanley Elton Hollis of the Green Howards Regiment. The actions actually earned him two Victoria Cross recommendations (though they were combined into one award and are both part of his citation). But, did you know, he was also recommended for both the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions at the Battle of Primasole Bridge in Sicily in 1943, and the Military Medal for his actions on the retreat to Dunkirk in 1940?

Stan was a very complex character, who as he stated himself "led a charmed life" in the Second World War, being wounded six times, the last of which saw him evacuated back to the North East in the late summer of 1944, earning him the nickname "The Man They Couldn't Kill".

If you want to read this man's incredible story - you can read my book which is available from Barnthorn Publishing, Amazon or from yours truly if you want a signed copy - all links are found at www.victoriacrossonline.co.uk/stan-hollis-vc-the-man-they-couldnt-kill/



On the 10th June 2026 saw the release of the History Syndicate Podcast, where I discussed all things Stan Hollis VC with the excellent host, Mark Martin. I had the pleasure of recording a previous podcast with Mark back in 2025 soon after the release of my Arnhem VCs book, and Mark kindly invited back on to talk about Stan.

Please click the following link to listen to the podcast:

<https://shows.acast.com/the-history-syndicate-podcast/episodes>

Thomas Gould VC Blue Plaque



In June 2026, at the Maison Dieu, a historic building in Dover, Kent, a blue plaque commissioned by the Submariner's Association was unveiled in honour of Thomas William Gould VC. Tommy, as he was known was born in the town, and was educated at St James School.

Tragedy struck Tommy in his early childhood, when his father, Reuben, was killed at the Battle of the Somme on 22nd July 1916. Tommy was just two years old. Tommy joined the Royal Navy at the age of 19 in 1933, and became a submariner three years later.

In World War II, he served under the command of Lieutenant HS McKenzie, aboard HMS Thrasher. His life changed off the coast of Crete on 16th February 1942. Thrasher came under attack from enemy aircraft and anti-submarine vessels, and it was left with two 100lb bombs lying on its casing. Gould, as Coxswain, and Lieutenant Peter Roberts volunteered to tackle them. The first bomb was reached relatively easily and having wrapped it carefully in a potato sack tied with rope, lowered it off the side and Thrasher pulled clear.

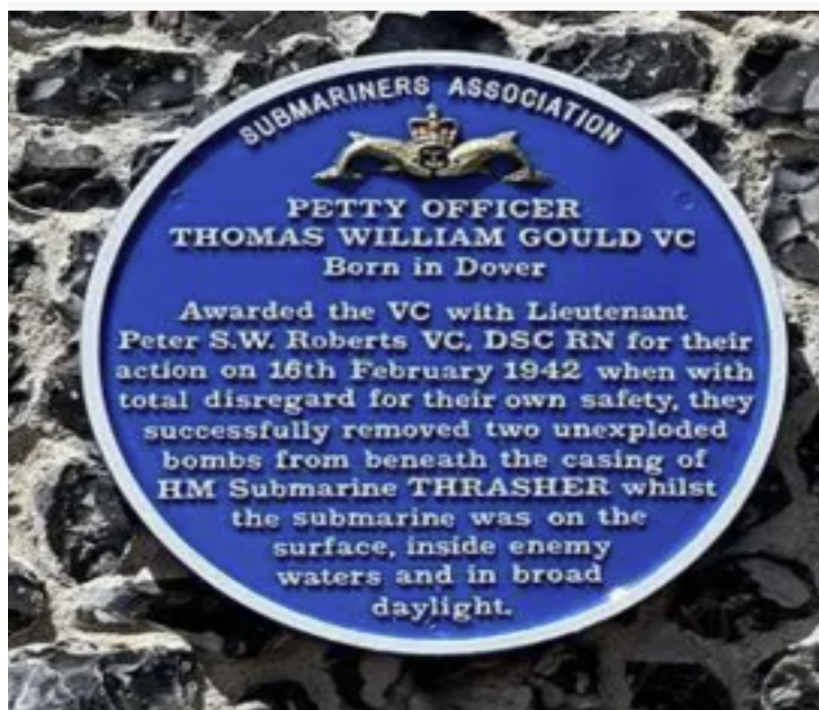
The second bomb was far trickier. They found the bomb had made a jagged hole in the casing and was resting on the pressure hull. The only way to get at it was through a hinged metal trap door. Gould then explains what happened next....

“To get to the bomb we had to wiggle forward through the outer casing. In that confined space there were angle irons to hold the superstructure up, battery ventilators and drop bollards as well. When we got through, I saw that it was another heavy bomb, about 100lb. Then began a nightmarish journey back through the casing, which at points gave only two feet clearance from the hull: I picked up the bomb and passed it through to Roberts. I then laid on my back with the bomb on my stomach, and held on to it while he laid on his stomach with his head to my head pulling me by my shoulders. It was pitch dark and the bomb was making this ticking noise while the submarine was being buffeted by the waves.

Also at the back of their minds was the thought that if the submarine was attacked, the captain would have no option but to dive, the unpressurised casing would fill up with water and the two men would drown. After a gruelling 40 minutes they got to the grating. The bomb was then passed up to a sub- lieutenant who was waiting on the forecasing. The bomb was wrapped in sacking and gingerly lowered over the side by ropes. When we knew it was on the surface of the water we let it go, heaving lines as well. Then we ducked and waited for the explosion, but nothing happened – it obviously could not have been primed.”

On 29th June 1943 Gould received his Victoria Cross from King George VI who commented, “I bet it was cold.” Gould loved the camaraderie of submarine life and, after being invalided out of the Navy in 1945, maintained an interest in the Navy and with the Jewish community. In 1946 he was in the front row of the Jewish ex-servicemen's march through London to protest against the government's policy towards the Jews in Palestine.

The Jewish Military Museum has now closed and the museum's artifacts, including the Thomas Gould Victoria Cross group, have been installed in the Jewish Museum's 'History Gallery' which is based in Raymond Burton House, Albert Street, North London. Tommy passed away in Peterborough on 6th December 2001, aged 85, and was cremated at Peterborough Crematorium.



Edwards VC Grave



In June 2026, the Victoria Cross Trust undertook the task of completing a clean of the grave of Wilfrid Edwards VC, who lies at rest in Upper Wortley Cemetery, in Leeds, Yorkshire. Wilfrid was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions on 16th August 1917 at Langemarck, Belgium. On that day, Private Edwards, without hesitation and under heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from a strong concrete fort, dashed forward at great personal risk, bombed through the loopholes, surmounted the fort and waved to his company to advance. Three officers and 30 other ranks were taken prisoner by him in the fort. Later he did most valuable work as a runner and eventually guided most of the battalion out through very difficult ground.

The VC was presented to him by King George V in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace on 26th September 1917. He was nervous about meeting the King, and forgot to salute, which caused the King some amusement. Wilfrid died at St James' Hospital, Leeds on 2nd January 1972, the last surviving KOYLI VC. In his will he left the VC to York Castle Museum, but the other medals are on loan to the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry Museum, Doncaster.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/wilfrid-claude-edwards-vc/>