

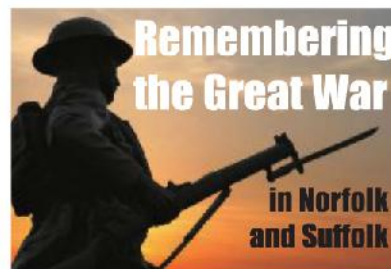


Bravery beyond the call of duty

John Kerrison on the Norfolk and Suffolk men honoured with the Victoria Cross

For Valour reads the inscription on the medal in the shape of a Maltese Cross. Made of bronze and far less showy than lesser awards, the Victoria Cross was introduced in 1856 by Queen Victoria to recognize “valour in the face of the enemy” during the Crimean War. It is an award that is classless, being given to any rank in any of the three services, as well as to civilians who are under the command of the military. 1357 of the medals have been awarded in total, but since the end of World War II only 14, perhaps reflecting the changing nature of how wars are fought since that time, with set piece battles and wholesale slaughter a thing of the past.

As the year marking the centenary of the start of the Great War begins, now is a good time to reflect on the eight, (as far as I have been able to ascertain) Norfolk and Suffolk born men who,



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fighting in that conflict, were awarded the Victoria Cross. The Victoria Cross is awarded for “most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the

presence of the enemy” and this article relates the stories behind the awards. Without doubt, there were countless acts of valour during the First World War, but the tales of these local men across the century that has passed since the outbreak of the conflict help us remember the sacrifice of the millions who were killed and wounded.

The definition of “valour” is “exceptional or heroic courage when facing danger, particularly in battle”, but in the case of the recipients of the Victoria Cross the word “selfless” should also be added.

Without exception, these men risked and sometimes lost their lives to protect those around them.

Picture credits

Arthur Saunders – Courtesy of Taff Gillingham Collection

William Hewitt – Courtesy of Ditsong National Museum of Military History



Arthur Saunders from Ipswich originally served in the Royal Navy before returning to civilian life and working at the engineering firm of Ransome, Sims and Jefferies in his hometown. Already a member of the Territorial Army, he became a regular soldier at the outbreak of war. In September 1915 he won his VC at the Battle of Loos. By then he was a sergeant and when his officer was wounded in an attack he took command of two machine guns and some men giving close support to another battalion, although he had a severe wound to his thigh. When the battalion had to retire he stayed with his gun and gave them covering fire. Initially it was thought he would lose his leg but it was saved, although three inches shorter and necessitating a medical boot.



Tom Crisp was a Lowestoft man, who was captain of a converted smack, protecting fishing vessels on the Jim Howe Bank off the Norfolk coast in 1917. His son was among the crew. A submarine surfaced and began firing on his ship, the *Nelson*. The poorly armed smack took several hits before it was able to get close enough to return fire. Crisp's legs were blown off during the engagement but he was still able to give orders, which included sending a signal by carrier pigeon, there being no radio on board. The signal read: "*Nelson* attacked by submarine. Skipper killed. Jim Howe Bank. Send assistance at once." Tom Crisp ordered his men to throw him overboard so he didn't slow them down. They refused and he died in his son's arms, after which, the crew abandoned ship.



All of the stories of these Victoria Cross winners are tales of great bravery but the story of Gordon Flowerdew from Billingford is unique. He not only won the VC for outstanding bravery but took part in what became known as "The Last Great Cavalry Charge", the last cavalry charge in military history, in fact. Enlisting as a private in Lord Strathcona's Horse, he was commissioned by 1916 and by January 1918 he was in command of C Squadron. After years of largely static trench warfare, the Germans made a rapid advance in the spring of that year and cavalry was seen as an important factor in countering it. In March, the Germans were threatening Amiens and as they entered a wood close to the strategic town of Moreuil, Flowerdew ordered his men to charge the five infantry companies and an artillery battery. Up to seventy percent of the cavalry squadron were killed or wounded by the intense fire but undaunted the survivors killed many Germans with their swords and the enemy retreated, unnerved by the charge. Flowerdew was badly wounded and died the next day. The incident was commemorated in a painting by Sir Alfred Munnings.



Harry Cator of Drayton, near Norwich, was a sergeant during the Battle of Arras in 1917. After his platoon had taken a large number of casualties from an enemy machine gun, he crossed 'no man's land' with another soldier to attack this gun position. His comrade was killed but Cator continued his advance with a Lewis gun and ammunition he found en route. He reached the German trench and killed the machine gun team and its officer. He then held the trench so reinforcements could capture another five machine guns and take 100 prisoners. Cator was injured by a shell a few days later, but survived and was awarded the Croix de Guerre as well as the VC.



Another Suffolk born VC winner was William Hewitt of Copdock. By the time of the Great War the ex-Framlingham College pupil was living in South Africa where he served as a policeman, before joining the army. In September 1917 he won his VC near Ypres, attacking a pillbox with his unit. He was severely wounded but continued with the attack, managing to put a grenade into the loophole of the pill box, and being wounded again in the arm while doing so.



Claud Castleton had been born in Kirkley but emigrated to Australia, where he enlisted in 1915 and found himself initially at Gallipoli and then on the Western Front in 1916. In July, at Pozieres, he took part in a night infantry attack, which was forced to pull back by intense enemy machine gun fire, with many wounded being left in 'no man's land'. Sergeant Castleton went out twice in the face of heavy fire carrying a wounded man back each time. A third attempt ended when he was hit in the back and killed. His VC was awarded posthumously.

Stowmarket born, Drummer Spencer Bent, of the East Lancashire Regiment, was awarded his VC for his actions in the autumn of 1914 in Belgium. He had previously shown great courage in October by bringing ammunition to the Front Line under heavy shell and rifle fire. On the night of 1st/2nd November Bent took command of his platoon after his officer, sergeant and several men had been hit, holding their position until relieved. On the 3rd he further distinguished himself by bringing wounded men, who were lying in the open under enemy fire, to cover, with no regard for his own safety. Despite being wounded later and suffering from rheumatic fever, this remarkable man returned to the front repeatedly, rising to the rank of Company Sergeant Major and seeing action on Messines Ridge and at Passchaendale, before winning a Military Medal in October 1918 for outstanding bravery leading patrols against the Germans.



The story of Charles Doughty-Wylie of Theberton is another fascinating VC tale. He had been the British Consul in 1909 in Mersina, a city in the Ottoman Empire, and was largely responsible for stopping the massacre of Armenians by the Turks at that time, for which he received a prestigious military honour from the Ottoman Government. In 1915 he found himself facing his erstwhile comrades at Gallipoli, attached to the headquarters staff of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, owing to his knowledge of Turkey and Turkish affairs. After the landing by Allied forces, which sustained heavy losses, Lieutenant Colonel Doughty-Wylie and another officer led a successful attack, with great bravery, on a hill-top fort, encountering ferocious opposition. Both officers were killed in the final, victorious assault, Doughty-Wylie being hit by a sniper. In an interesting postscript to this story, he alone - no doubt because of his earlier service with the Ottoman Empire - remained buried on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The Turkish authorities moved all other foreign soldiers' graves.