

A History of the Victoria Cross and its Significance

The decoration was introduced in 1856. Its introduction was heavily influenced by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. It was available to all ranks of the armed forces and covers all action from the Crimean War to the present day. It is not a posthumous award and about 18 – 20 holders are alive today.

The medal was authorised by Royal warrant which in Clause V says “it is ordained that the Victoria Cross shall only be awarded to those officers and men who have served (their Sovereign) in the presence of the enemy and have performed some signal act of valour or devotion to their country”. The warrant has been amended from time to time but its conditions remain the same. The decoration is first in all decorations and takes precedence over all others.

The medal is made from Russian cannon captured during the siege of Sevastopol. They actually turned out to be Chinese (nothing changes). They are manufactured from the CASCABEL, which is the large knob at the end of the cannon. It is a simple medal – illustrated on the front of the Order of Service – suspended by a maroon ribbon.

There have been 1356 awards of the VC since the introduction in 1856. Considering the various and numerous wars which have occurred and the very large numbers of military personnel from this country, the Commonwealth countries and the Empire as was, it is obvious that the award has been made most sparingly and is highly prized as a result.

Awards made.

The first VC was awarded to Gunner's Mate Charles Lucas, RN in January 1854. Whilst serving on HMS Hecla in the Crimea, he threw a smoking shell which had landed on the deck of his ship over the side. The shell exploded before it hit the water and Lucas's prompt action saved the lives of many of his shipmates, if not the ship.

The youngest VC was awarded to John Travers Cornwell – Boy First Class, RN. He was serving on HMS Chester during the Battle of Jutland when he was mortally wounded and remained standing alone in a most exposed position, quietly awaiting orders with his gun's crew dead or injured around him – he was just 15½ years old.

The oldest, aged 41, was Private Samuel (George) Parkes, who, at the Charge of the Light Brigade, was de-horsed and then defended his Trumpeter Major in a desperate retreat from the Valley of Death. He was eventually taken prisoner when his sword arm was severely wounded.

The latest VC was awarded on 2nd July to Corporal Apiata of the NZ SAS, who saved a comrade from dying through loss of blood by carrying him some 100 yards through open country despite very heavy and sustained Taliban fire, in Afghanistan. Both men survived.

The last British VC was to Corporal Brian James Budd, of 3 Para, on 14th December 2006, when he attacked, single-handed, an enemy position in Afghanistan in order to save his men from further casualties. Corporal Budd was killed and received a posthumous award.

Every award has a wonderful and admirable story to tell and it is a pity we can't hear them all. Christopher Cox is no exception and we shall be hearing his story later. Sufficient to say that his story matches all the others.

I can only conclude by quoting the words of the Gospel according to St. John "Greater love hath no man that this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".

Christopher Cox lived – he offered his life and would have laid it down had it been required.

Thank you for listening.

Donald Abbott, 9th September 2007.