

Why was the Victoria Cross formed in 1857, and how has it evolved in the subsequent 150 years?**Zeb Micic**

It is ordained that the distinction shall be styled and designated 'THE VICTORIA CROSS' and shall consist of a Maltese Cross of bronze with Our Royal Crest in the centre and underneath which, an enscroll bearing the inscription, 'For Valour'.¹

Introduction

The Victoria Cross (VC) will always be an endless source of interest and fascination for swathes of the public: this article charts the formation of this unique award, its evolution, and its fascination for not only historians and medal collectors, but also the general public at large. While only dealing with the medal itself, the article, also, looks at the military and society itself – since the VC is, perhaps, a microcosm of British society at large.

This essay will look at the systems in place to recognise gallantry prior to the formation of the VC showing the need for a decoration and how it came to be formed. It will then look at the 'prestige' of the VC. It is not my intention to discuss individual holders of this most important of decorations, not withstanding my great admiration for their courage and devotion to duty, they truly are, as the long serving secretary of the VC and GC Association said, 'just incredible people'.²

The Victoria Cross is known by all of us: Mark Smith, former curator of the Royal Artillery Museum, said 'I take eight year old children in classes... and they have heard [of the VC].'³

Recognising gallantry prior to the VC

Until the Crimean War, it took a civil war, and the subsequent deposition of the monarchy, for the British to honour gallantry with a medal of sorts. After Cromwell's Republic, there existed a haphazard way of honouring military gallantry with titles and promotion – and even then, it depended on rank. For the ordinary foot soldier there was little reward. A limited number of direct commissions were available to other ranks: these, in practice, were limited to warrant officers.

Soldiery was not considered the noble profession it is now: it was whereone was sent if one did not want to go to prison. Indeed, Field Marshal The Duke of Wellington said British soldiers were 'the mere scum of the Earth'.⁴ The British public were, understandably, unconcerned that the very 'scum' were not recognised for gallantry. It was not until the Crimean War, when they had access to

¹ Clause 1 of the original VC Warrant (1857), The National Archives (TNA), WO 98/1

² 'The Victoria Cross: For Valour', (2003). [TV programme] BBC, 14 Nov

³ M. Smith (2010) *For Valour* (Lecture to the Western Front Association)

⁴ Earl Stanhope (1886) *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington* (private circulation)

‘instant’ news reporting’ in the form of William Howard Russell’s⁵ reports and Roger Fenton’s photographs that the misconception about the ordinary soldier was addressed.

At the outbreak of War in 1856, there were three existing means of reward: appointment to the Order of the Bath, promotion by brevet or a field commission, and the mentioning of an individual in the Commander in Chief’s dispatch. The Order of the Bath was only available to officers of field rank: as Secretary of State, the Duke of Newcastle said that he ‘cannot help feeling that... Lord Raglan... recommends nearly every officer of a certain rank and class’ – His Grace went on to say that ‘he fears that if decorations are to be given to all... some who have done little to deserve such reward... whilst many who have borne the burden and heat of the day will feel slighted’.⁶ The Duke’s comments seem common sense to us over 150 years later, but it was the first case of someone in power recommending that ordinary soldiers should receive recognition. Unsurprisingly, however, Lord Hardinge (the Commander in Chief and recipient of the Napoleonic Army Gold Cross) refuted Newcastle’s comments.

Perhaps there was an element of keeping up with the French (Britain’s allies in the Crimean War): the French had a decoration – the *Legion de Honneur* – that was available to all. Indeed, its three founding principles, as defined by Napoleon in 1802, were ‘reward[ing] individual merit’; ‘universal recognition’; and rewarding someone’s ‘contribution to the public good’.⁷ The (British) Indian Army had the Indian Army Order of Merit – established for sepoys in 1837.⁸

The Establishment of the Decoration

The distinction of being the first person to publically ‘campaign’ for such an award falls to Captain George Scobell, MP, who, in the House of Commons on 19 December 1854, moved:

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty praying that she would be graciously pleased to institute an 'Order of Merit,' to be bestowed upon persons serving in the Army or Navy for distinguished and prominent personal gallantry during the present war, and to which every grade and individual, from the highest to the lowest, in the United Services, may be admissible.⁹

⁵ Special Correspondent of the *Times*

⁶ Duke of Norfolk to The Queen, 5 December 1854: Nottingham University, Newcastle Collection (NeC), NeC 9786 (quoted in Crook (1974) *The Evolution of the VC*)

⁷ Chancellery of the Legion of Honour (2019). Founding principles and history | La grande chancellerie. [online] Legiondhonneur.fr. Available at: <https://www.legiondhonneur.fr/en/page/founding-principles-and-history/403> [Accessed 27 Jan. 2019].

⁸ P.E. Abbot & J.M.A. Tamplin (1981) *British Gallantry Awards* (London: Nimrod Dix), p159

⁹ Houses of Parliament (2019). Medal For The Army In The Crimea. (Hansard, 19 December 1854). [online] Available at: https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1854/dec/19/medal-for-the-army-in-the-crimea#S3V0136P0_18541219_HOC_22 [Accessed 27 Jan. 2019].

Members who spoke after the honourable and gallant member were in general support of his motion, but Lord John Russell considered that 'a proposition of this kind ought properly to come from the Crown.' Russell, then Lord President of the Council, gave his assurances that 'the whole question was under consideration.'¹⁰

Scobell's reasoning behind his suggested 'order of merit' were simple by today's standards, but were alien to the ruling classes of 1854. He suggested that the awards would not only act as a suitable mark of approbation from a grateful government, but would also act be a, much needed, boost to morale. He also brought to the House's attention that the French 'possessed an Order which extended down to the meanest drummer-boy in the ranks.'¹¹

Although withdrawing the motion, Captain Scobell set the wheels in motion, to the extent that the Duke of Newcastle wrote to the Prince Consort, regarding the medal, on 20 January 1855. The most important undertone to His Grace's letter were that the award be universal – he said that the 'cross... [should] be within reach of every Private Soldier and yet ... coveted by any General' and that it should be awarded entirely on merit (he wrote 'there are some Orders which even Crowned Heads cannot wear.')12

Prince Albert sent the Secretary of State a memorandum on 22 January, in which he examined the various problems with existing methods of recognition (namely the Order of the Bath; mention in despatches and campaign medals), and suggested a 'small cross of Merit for personal deeds of valour', that was to be 'open to all ranks', 'unlimited in number', with an 'annuity', and can be 'claimable' (i.e. a recipient could be recommended by his officers).¹³

His Royal Highness concluded his memorandum with a snarl at the French, in true post-Napoleonic British style. It is worth quoting in full:

I would advise no reference to the Legion of Honour, the distribution of which is entirely arbitrary and guided by the principles, which is given indiscriminately to Soldiers and Civilians, and has long been a tool for corruption in the hands of the French Govt the Number of whose members extends to 40,000 and which has almost become a necessary appendage to the French dress.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² NeC 9786, p33, quoted in Crook (1975) *The Evolution of the VC*, p13

¹³ NeC 9701b, quoted in Crook (1975) *The Evolution of the VC*, pp275-277

¹⁴ Ibid

The Prince Consort's views now known, Newcastle considered matters had reached an advanced state of development for a public announcement to be made. This he did in the House of Lords on 29 January 1855.

The notion that the medal itself is not significant is crucial to its understanding, and this idea was, in a way, confirmed by Edward VII and George V. The first happened to be a medal collector, and, with an interest far greater than his late mother, established several new decorations during his short reign.¹⁵ They made two major reforms to the VC: the first was to reverse the ruling that the late Queen so fastidiously defended that the decoration could not be awarded posthumously. The second is far more interesting. The original warrant of 1856 included a clause to 'preserve pure this most honourable distinction' any recipient found guilty of 'treason, cowardice, felony or of any infamous crime would find 'his name ... erased' from the VC register.¹⁶ As such, eight VCs were forfeited between 1861 and 1908.¹⁷ The King felt

...so strongly that, no matter the crime committed by anyone on whom the VC has been conferred, the decoration should not be forfeited. Even were a VC to be sentenced to be hanged for murder, he should be allowed to wear his VC on the scaffold.¹⁸

While no VC has been forfeited since 1908, a revised clause remains in the latest Warrant (1961).¹⁹

The Metal

One could be forgiven for thinking that the metallurgical content of the VC is not important to its understanding – that is anything but the case. The metal itself was not an issue until 1914, when the original source ran out. Glanfield has been able to trace 'four separate and distinct sources of metal' with differing metallurgical compositions.²⁰ The first was in use from 1856 until 1914 and was 'presumably a captured Russian gun'. From 1914 until 1942 and from around 1943 to the present day the cascabel of two captured Chinese guns were used - totally different in design, metallurgical content and design.²¹ It is not known how these guns came to be in the store of the Royal Arsenal at

¹⁵ Including the Imperial Service Order and Medal – for retiring civil servants – and the Conspicuous, renamed Distinguished, Service Cross to recognise gallantry in the Royal Navy.

¹⁶ TNA, WO 98/1 (1857 Warrant)

¹⁷ Abbott & Tamplin (1981) *British Gallantry Awards*, p286

¹⁸ Letter from Lord Stamfordham (the King's Private Secretary), 26 July 1920: cited National Army Museum (2007). National Army Museum : Exhibitions : The Victoria Cross. [online] Web.archive.org. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070716121642/http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/exhibitions/vc/page3.shtml> [Accessed 29 Jan. 2019].

¹⁹ War Office (1961) 'Special Army Order 65 of 1961', quoted in Crook (1975) *The Evolution of the VC*, pp304-308

²⁰ J. Glanfield (2005) *Bravest of the Brave* (London: The History Press)

²¹ Maj C Robins (2008) '[Note 1853] Victoria Cross', *JSAHR*, Vol 86, No 345, p94 and '[Note 1861] Victoria Cross', *JSAHR*, Vol 86, No 346, p179

Woolwich: Brigadier Timbers says that they could have reached the Arsenal as early as the 1840s as captured weaponry from the first Opium War. He considers it unlikely, but possible, that they were captured by the Russians who used them in the Crimea – noting that neither are the ‘quality of Russian ordnance of the period.’²²

There is something about the fact that the highest award for gallantry in the face of the enemy, is cast from the very guns they (or, now, their forefathers) fought against. It is unique in that it is the only decoration in the world to be made from such a source. It shows that it is an award for everyone. Whether a general is awarded the medal, or the humblest private, they receive the same award, from the same ‘valueless metal’, that they both fought to destroy.

The ‘Prestige’ of the Victoria Cross

The ‘prestige’ and standing of the nation’s greatest award for gallantry is unquestionable, yet government records show that it was thought necessary to, if artificially, defend it over the last half century. I intend to examine two distinct circumstances where this has been necessary: the official replacement of the physical decoration and the use of the insignia of the VC by a commercial operation.

For as long as soldiers have been issued medals, they have lost them. Where loss has been unpreventable, the War Office (now, of course, the Ministry of Defence) has, usually, granted official replacements. The VC has been no different.

In-pensioner E R Byrne (formerly Corporal, Royal Military Police) of the Royal Hospital Chelsea made a request to the Army Medical Office (AMO) on 3 September 1975 stating that the VC awarded to his father (Trooper T Byrne, VC, 21st Lancers) was stolen after he lent his father’s medals to the Nairobi Civic Council for an exhibition. After the necessary statutory declaration was completed and forwarded to the AMO, the papers came before the Military Secretary (who had responsibility for honours within the Army), who decided that Byrne should get a ‘“normal” [replacement], i.e one made out of gun metal’ despite the limited source of this metal. The VC Committee approved his suggestion. This does not prove to be any great surprise, Byrne junior’s story carried the ‘ring of truth’ and it seemed the right thing to do. The replacement was therefore issued, and there, the AMO thought, was the end of the matter.²³

²² Brig K.A. Timbers (1998) ‘Victoria Cross: The origins of the metal used in their manufacture’, unpublished tss paper, RA Institution

²³ TNA, WO 98/11 (Replacement VC: Pte T Bryne VC)

The replacement VC was sold at Sotheby's in September 1978 for £700 (at the time a non-replacement VC would have sold for £5000-7000).²⁴

Mead suggests that The Queen's approval was needed to sanction Byrne's replacement – however that has not been traced in the file at the National Archives, the decision to replace the decoration was one made by the VC Committee at the MOD. It is not altogether unlikely that Her Majesty's informal consent was sought. The Queen reportedly took a dim view, Mead reports Sir Angus Ogilvy (Princess Alexandra of Kent's husband) saying 'If this is what people are going to do, I will never grant another replacement Victoria Cross.'²⁵

The matter of replacements came up again in 2009,²⁶ when, on 11 May 2009, the granddaughter of Private James Osborne, VC, wrote to the MOD 'to apply for an official "replacement" Victoria Cross... with which my family and I can mark and honour his gallantry and keep his memory alive.'²⁷ The original VC was lent to the Officer's Mess of the 2nd Battalion of the Northamptonshire Regiment (Osborne's old regiment) by his family; the VC, and the rest of the mess property, was 'placed in storage in Belfast... the depositing received a direct hit from a German bomb, and... the VC was destroyed.'²⁸ Colonel Jammes, Head of the Military Secretary's Honours Department, concluded that official replacements could only be issued to the 'direct Next of Kin' and that the applicant, regrettably, fell 'outside this criterion.'²⁹ The Queen kept to her word!

The physical decoration aside – and it is important to remember that Queen Victoria never wanted the VC to be about the medal itself – a complaint by a William Brown to his MP led to a fascinating series of correspondence around Whitehall. Mr Brown wrote, on 28 February 1968, to his MP, Edward Taylor, that he considered it 'sacrilege that any commercial enterprise [J B Hayward, medal dealer] should use the emblem of high honour on a correspondence note paper.' The Treasury Solicitor concluded that they knew of no law that prevented Hayward's from using the VC on their notepaper. Whitehall, however, took a dim view, indeed one official in the Treasury's honours directorate wrote that they 'come across this kind of thing from time to time and they usually find that a fairly "stuffy" letter does the trick.' Brigadier Sir John Smyth, VC, the Chairman of the VC and

²⁴ D. Pillinger & A. Staunton (2001) *Victoria Cross Presentation and Locations* (Berkshire and Australia: the Authors), pp65&70

²⁵ G. Mead (2015) *Victoria's Cross* (London: Atlantic Books), p19. Mead references the *Journal of the Victoria Cross Society*, Oct 2003, p51 as the source of Sir Angus' reporting of The Queen's comments.

²⁶ I. Stewart (2019). JAMES OSBORNE VC. [online] [Victoriacross.org.uk](http://www.victoriacross.org.uk). Available at: <http://www.victoriacross.org.uk/bbosborn.htm> [Accessed 29 Jan. 2019]; MOD FOI Request 11223, letter from MOD to Zeb Micic, 11 January 2019.

²⁷ Letter from [Mrs Rhoda Whitehouse, Osborne's granddaughter] to [Col R Jammes, MOD], 11 May 2009.

²⁸ Letter from Regimental Secretary, 2nd East Anglican Regiment to Osborne's family, 2 July 1964.

²⁹ Letter from [Col R Jammes] to [Mrs Rhodda Whitehouse], 8 June 2009.

GC Association (and the Government's *de facto* adviser on matters concerning the VC) took a similarly negative view concluding 'the less said, the better.'³⁰

The medal is intentionally un-ostentatious. Smith related the tale of the officials who were sent to find the manufacturer in 1856 without success – all the main jewellers were far more accustomed to orders in precious metal and diamonds – on the account it was to be made out of bronze. Indeed, the newly formed Hancocks were the only company willing to make an award that was to become the most important gallantry award in the world.³¹ As such, the medal has never cost very much to manufacture. In the mid 1940s, Hancocks charged £1 and ten shillings for the medal made out of 'valueless metal'.³² They currently cost around £60.³³

This idea is corroborated in the 'award' of a 'VC' (a gold replica) by the officers of the 104th Bengal Fusiliers to Mrs Webber Harris 'for her indomitable pluck during the cholera epidemic of 1869.' Mrs Webber Harris found herself at a dinner many years afterwards in 1910, where she was introduced to Lord Roberts (himself a VC), who said 'you told me there were ten V.C.'s present, but I see there are 11!' The eleventh was of course Mrs Webber Harris.³⁴

The Canadian VC

Soldiers of the dominion armies were always eligible for the VC, but it was the 'Canadization' of the Canadian honours system, commencing with the establishment of the Order of Canada in 1967, that set the wheels in motion for a separate Canadian VC. In response to increasing calls from 'the public, veterans' groups and members of Parliament', the Canadian VC was proposed and approved by The Queen, in her role as Queen of Canada, in letters patent of 31 December 1992. The award was for all intents and purposes the same, but Canadian. The inscription 'FOR VALOUR' on the 'original' VC was changed to the Latin 'PRO VALORE'. Apparently, the Canadian Government could not decide whether they wanted the inscription in French or English, so they settled on Latin!³⁵

It took a decade for the award to materialise, with preparations being led by the VC Production Planning Group (with representatives from the Governor General's office, the Department of National Defence, Veterans Affairs Canada). The Group made a number of key suggestions for the 'new' Canadian decoration: it was to be made in Canada and 'should reflect the past, the present and future of the country.' To this end a 'slice of the specific [British] gunmetal' would be combined with 'metal from a historically significant source, specifically a medal minted in 1867 in

³⁰ TNA, DEFE 13/789 (Commercial use of VC emblem)

³¹ Smith (2010) *For Valour*

³² David Callaghan (director, Hancocks and Co) quoted on 'The Victoria Cross: For Valour' (2004)

³³ Smith (2010) *For Valour*

³⁴ Sir P. Caddell (1960) 'How a lady won a "Victoria Cross" for courage', *JSAHR*, Vol 38, No 154, pp63-66

³⁵ Smith (2010) *For Valour*

commemoration of the Confederation of Canada' and 'metal from all regions of Canada'. After months of planning, the first medals were struck at the Material Technology Laboratory of National Resources Canada.³⁶

In 2006, at a special exhibition to mark the 150th anniversary of the VC at Windsor Castle, The Queen remarked to Mark Smith that she thought it 'a fantastic idea that they'd taken the idea but made it their own.'³⁷

Australia and New Zealand have followed suit.

Conclusion

The Victoria Cross is not simply a decoration 'for valour', but a national institution. Its formation, and continued evolution, demonstrates changes in national – and, of course, international – opinion and development. It has played its role in changing the public perception of soldiers, from the Duke of Wellington's 'scum' to today's opinion, where, quite rightly, our soldiers are seen as the 'best of Britain'. Our pride in them knows no bounds.

There is no other award where one can go from, simply, Lance Corporal Beharry of the Princess of Wales Royal Regiment to being 'someone as famous as David Beckham';³⁸ Queen Victoria was right when she said it was the individual and their gallantry and not the medal that mattered.

³⁶ Department of Honours and Recognition (nd) *Pro Valorie: Canada's Victoria Cross* (Ottawa: National Defence Headquarters), pp22-28

³⁷ Smith (2010) *For Valour*

³⁸ Ibid

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