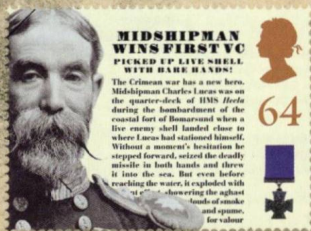
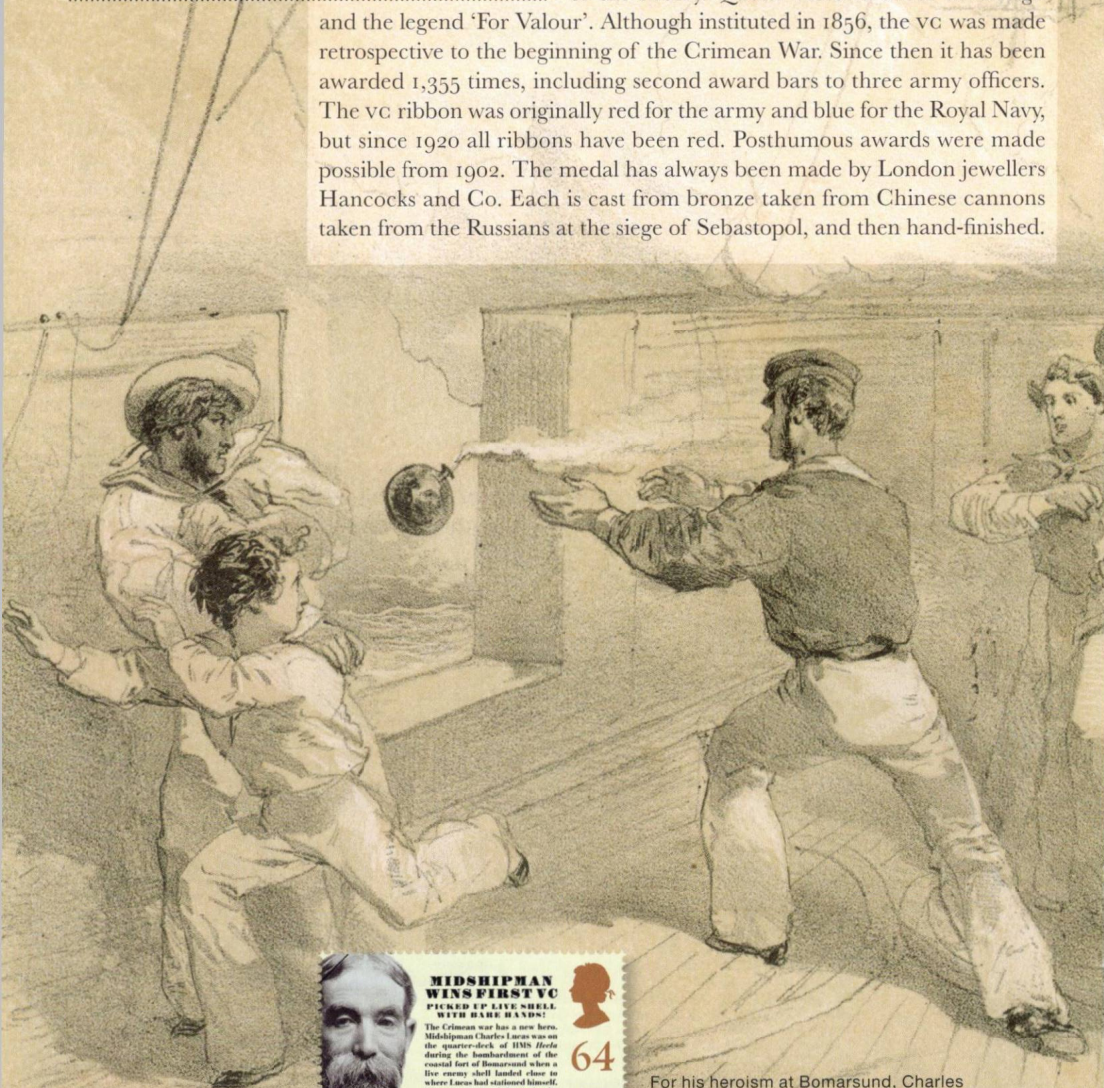


150th anniversary of the Victoria Cross

When the Crimean War had drawn attention to the inadequacies of the existing methods of rewarding bravery in action, it became clear that a new award was required; the Victoria Cross was instituted by Royal Warrant on 29 January 1856.

UNLIKE previous decorations the VC was open to all ranks – the only qualification being that they should have ‘performed some signal act of valour or devotion to their country’ in the presence of the enemy. Queen Victoria chose the design and the legend ‘For Valour’. Although instituted in 1856, the VC was made retrospective to the beginning of the Crimean War. Since then it has been awarded 1,355 times, including second award bars to three army officers. The VC ribbon was originally red for the army and blue for the Royal Navy, but since 1920 all ribbons have been red. Posthumous awards were made possible from 1902. The medal has always been made by London jewellers Hancocks and Co. Each is cast from bronze taken from Chinese cannons taken from the Russians at the siege of Sebastopol, and then hand-finished.

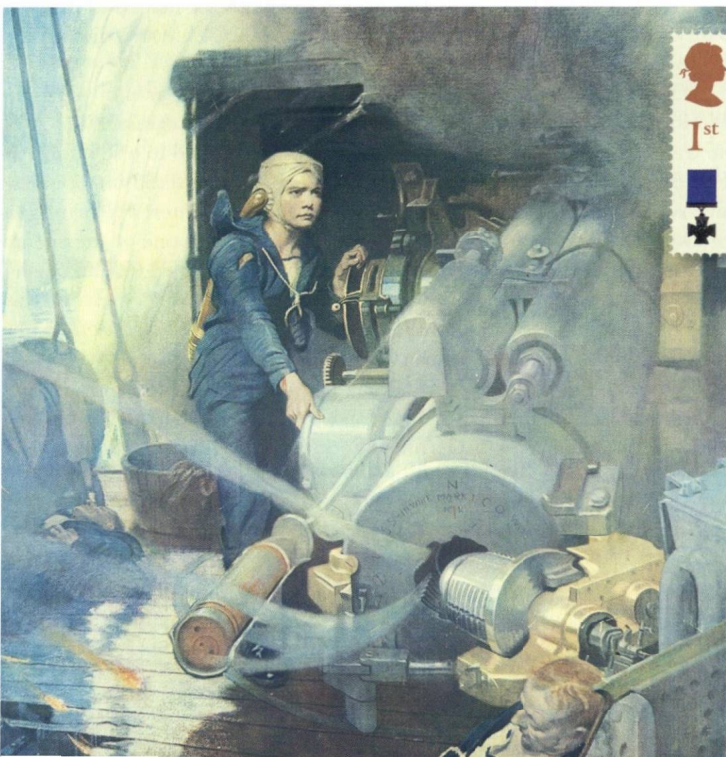


For his heroism at Bomarsund, Charles Lucas was decorated by Queen Victoria at the first VC investiture, on 26 June 1857. He retired as a Rear Admiral, and died in August 1914.

The story behind the stamps, by Derek Hunt

CHARLES LUCAS (64p) performed the earliest act of valour to be rewarded with a Victoria Cross. On 21 June 1854, during the Crimean War, the Royal Navy attacked the Russian fortifications at Bomarsund, in the Baltic Sea. Furious fire was returned by the Russian guns, and one shell landed on the deck of HMS *Hecla*, rolling to a stop near where midshipman Lucas stood directing his men. Ignoring all calls to take cover, Lucas ran forward and seized the shell, with its fuse still hissing, and threw it overboard. It exploded just before it hit the sea, without causing any casualties. For this heroic action, Lucas received immediate promotion to Lieutenant and was decorated by Queen Victoria at the first VC investiture on 26 June 1857.

JOHN TRAVERS (JACK) CORNWELL (1st) joined the Royal Navy as a Boy Seaman in July 1915 and after training joined the crew of the cruiser HMS *Chester*. His ship was part of the British fleet which met the German fleet at the Battle of Jutland on 31 May 1916. Cornwell, recently promoted to Boy First Class, was a sight-setter on one of *Chester's* guns, receiving instructions from the gunnery officer and adjusting the gun's range. *Chester* was severely damaged by gunfire early in the action and casualties were heavy. Cornwell, mortally wounded, remained standing at his gun in the most exposed position, awaiting orders which never came. Around him lay the gun's crew, all dead or wounded. With the other casualties from his ship, he was taken to Grimsby Hospital, where he died from his wounds on 2 June 1916. He was 16 years old, and one of the youngest recipients of the VC. ▶



BOY VC, 16 MORTALLY WOUNDED BUT STUCK TO HIS POST

1st



Though barely 16 years of age, Jack Cornwell - a member of a gun crew aboard HMS *Chester* - has been awarded the Victoria Cross. One of the opening salvos of the Battle of Jutland had knocked out Cornwell's gun and caused many serious casualties to its crew. Badly wounded himself, he remained at his station, awaiting orders. Young Cornwell stood firm despite heavy shelling.



Jack Cornwell's devotion to duty caught the imagination of the public, and became an inspiration to the nation. This image, by Court painter Frank Salisbury, became famous as a popular print and was to be widely reproduced for many years after the event.



NOEL CHAVASSE (64p) joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1913 with the rank of surgeon-lieutenant, and was promoted to Captain the following year. He was the only person to be awarded two vcs during the First World War. His first vc was awarded for bravery at Guillemont, France on 9 August 1916. He attended to the wounded all day whilst under heavy fire, frequently in view of the enemy, and during the night he continued searching for the wounded in front of the enemy's lines. Next day, he and a stretcher bearer carried an urgent case 500 yards to safety, and he was badly wounded during the journey. That night, with 20 volunteers, he rescued three wounded men from a shell-hole in front of the enemy trenches. The bar to the vc was awarded for outstanding service at Wieltje, Belgium during the period 31 July to 2 August 1917. Although he was wounded early in the action, whilst carrying a wounded soldier to the dressing station, he refused to leave his post, and for two days went out repeatedly under heavy fire to search for, and attend to, the wounded. During this time, although practically without food, and faint from his wounds, he helped to carry in badly wounded men, over difficult terrain. Captain Chavasse died of his wounds on 4 August 1917.

ALBERT BALL (72p) was one of the top British flying aces of the First World War. At the start of the war he enlisted in a local regiment, but later he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and was posted to a squadron in France in 1916. On 7 May 1917, whilst leading eleven aircraft on an offensive sweep over the Cambrai area, Captain Ball encountered a formation of German aircraft, and a dogfight ensued. Ball chased one of the enemy aircraft behind a cloud, never to be seen again. He crashed behind enemy lines and was given a military funeral at Annoeuillin Cemetery. His vc was announced in June 1917, a month after he had been killed in action. It was awarded for conspicuous bravery from 26 April to 6 May 1917, during which period he took part in 26 aerial combats, destroying eleven enemy aircraft and forcing many others to land. In these combats he flew alone, and often fought groups of German aircraft and, in all, destroyed 43 enemy aeroplanes and one balloon.

CHARLES UPHAM (72p) is the second of the two double vc recipients in this set. He was born in Christchurch, New Zealand and in 1939 he joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. In May 1941 Lieutenant Upham's unit was part of the Allied force defending Crete from German invasion. His first vc was awarded for his outstanding leadership and courage in close fighting during the enemy attack on Maleme airfield on 22-30 May.

Despite being wounded by mortar shells and suffering from dysentery, he refused medical attention. He led his men in attacks on two machine-gun posts, which he destroyed virtually single-handed, and he later destroyed several more enemy machine-guns. The British and Commonwealth troops were outnumbered, however, and were forced to withdraw from the island. The following year Upham was awarded the Bar to his vc. At El Ruweisat Ridge in Egypt, on 14-15 July 1942, he was in command of a company of New Zealand troops. In spite of being wounded, he insisted on staying with his men, and led them in an attack on the enemy, capturing the objective after some fierce fighting. He himself destroyed an enemy tank, four machine-guns and a number of vehicles, despite a broken arm. After being wounded in the leg he stopped to have his wounds dressed before returning to his unit, where he was wounded again. He was captured when the enemy made a counter-attack, and spent the rest of the war in POW camps. After the war he returned to New Zealand where he died in November 1994.

AGANSING RAI (1st class) was born in Nepal and enlisted in the 2nd Battalion, 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force) in 1941. He was promoted to the rank of Naik (Corporal) two years later. On 26 June 1944 his company was ordered to capture two Japanese positions, 'Water Piquet' and 'Mortar Bluff', which dominated an important supply track in Burma. Naik Agansing Rai, seeing that a delay would result in heavier casualties, led his section in a charge on 'Mortar Bluff'. He killed a machine-gun crew and, inspired by his bravery, the company surged forward and captured the entire outpost. He then led his men in a charge on a large gun which was firing on them from the nearby jungle, and afterwards the company returned to 'Mortar Bluff' for the final assault on 'Water Piquet'. Covered by his Bren gunner, Agansing Rai went forward alone and killed the gun crew. 'Water Piquet' was captured, and he was awarded the vc. After independence, he remained with the Indian Army and he died in Kathmandu in May 2000.

VC holders on stamps Many vc holders have been featured on stamps, but it would take a further article to detail them all. Just a few of these issues are shown on the following page.

Although he has not featured on a stamp, Sergeant Alfred Knight vc was the subject of a painting by Terence Cuneo, reproduced on a National Postal Museum postcard (a detail is shown on the cover of this *Bulletin*, at bottom right). Knight served in the 2/8th (City of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (Post Office Rifles), a unit recruited entirely from postal workers. On 29 September 1917 at Ypres, Belgium, when his platoon came under heavy fire from an enemy machine-gun, Sergeant Knight rushed the position and captured it single-handed. He performed several other acts of conspicuous bravery, all under heavy machine-gun fire, and was the only member of the Post Office Rifles to be awarded the vc. His vc and other medals are held by the British Postal Museum & Archive. ▶



Valour Beyond All Praise

Harry Greenwood VC



DEREK HUNT

Special offer Derek Hunt is the author of *Valour Beyond All Praise*, the biography of Harry Greenwood, awarded the VC in 1918. He is offering *Bulletin* readers copies of the 160-page book at a special price of £9.95 postpaid in UK (overseas +£3). Send orders to: Derek Hunt, 9 Harrington Close, Windsor SL4 4AD.