

## Victoria Cross Assembly

100 years ago, the First World War was in its last throes. The Western Allies were preparing to attack the Hindenburg line, land carefully chosen by the German army to enable them to halt any advance. If the Allies were to win the war, they would have to defeat the Germans by crossing the St Quentin canal and breaching the Hindenburg line.

Five days before the main battle of St Quentin, 100 years ago today, the Fifth Battalion Royal Leicestershire Regiment were stationed in front of a German trench near the village of Pontruet, a few miles from the Canal. If the attack on the canal was going to go ahead, the German trenches near Pontruet had to be cleared first. This involved a frontal assault towards several machine guns.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Leicesters had seven former pupils of Merchant Taylors' School in its ranks on that day. One of them was a young officer, Lt. John Cridland Barrett. His actions that day led to the award of the Victoria Cross, highest award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces.

### JC Barrett's story

John Barrett was the son of a Chemist and attended Merchant Taylors' between 1907 and 1916. He was a strong swimmer, in the school swimming gala of 1915 the only pupil to beat him was Ronald Cove-Smith, who went to play rugby for England 29 times and Captain the British Lions in South Africa. Barrett played rugby at a lower level, gaining Third XV colours. He was also a member of the Officers Training Corps – the forerunner of today's CCF - where he was promoted to Company Quartermaster.

A strong academic, Barrett had to put his ambitions to become a surgeon on hold as he enlisted in the British army straight from school to join the Leicestershire Regiment. At the age of 21 in 1918, he had shown leadership, as he had won promotion to the rank of Lieutenant. Nevertheless, the attack on the trenches at Pontruet must have posed a test of his courage that he would not have encountered before.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> September 1918 Barrett and his battalion were ordered to attack down a hill parallel to Forgan's Trench – Barrett was given the responsibility of capturing that trench. As he led his men towards the Trench, he came across a surprise. The regimental diary, describing what happened next was also written by an OMT, Captain J D Hills:

*Another trench had been newly dug during the night—but, as it was full of Germans, he rushed it, got inside, and turned towards Forgan's. He was hit doing so. Reaching Forgan's, this party, in which Sergeant Spencer was conspicuous, quickly disposed of three German machine gun posts and their teams, but were then themselves fired at and bombed from several directions. Undeterred, Lieut. Barrett, though again wounded, drew his revolver and with it held up one bombing party, while Sergeant Spencer dealt with another. A bomb burst close to Lieut. Barrett's pistol arm and put it out of action, and by this time, he was becoming exhausted. Calling his N.C.O.'s together, he explained what had happened and gave them careful directions as to how to get out, himself quite calm the whole time. Acting on his instructions, those of the party who were left cut their way out; Lieut. Barrett, refusing help, started to crawl through the wire, and was again wounded. He eventually reached the R.A.P. literally covered with wounds. Contrary to the Doctor's expectations, however, he not only lived to receive his Victoria Cross, but soon made a complete recovery."*

He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions – the highest award for gallantry in war. Following the war, he trained as a surgeon at St Thomas' Hospital in London. He went on to become a surgeon at the Leicester Royal Infirmary and achieved the rank of colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps in World War 2. He never lost touch with the School and, following our move to this site, raised funds for the outdoor swimming pool that was built in 1933. At the end of the war the 4 surviving officers of the Leicestershires (Godwin Edward Barnwell, John David Hills, Donald Burman Petch and John Cridland Barrett) presented a trophy to the school – The 5th Leicestershire Trophy, Inter-House Athletic Sports Championship – to commemorate this fact.

Yesterday, I attended a ceremony at Leamington Spa where John Barrett was honoured for winning the Victoria Cross. A commemorative paving slab was dedicated to him at the war memorial. Barrett is not the only former pupil of this school to win the Victoria Cross – Midshipman George Drewry and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Alfred Pollard were also recipients of the highest award for bravery. In 2015 we told the story of George Drewry's bravery at the Gallipoli landings. Whilst under heavy machine gun fire he assisted the landing of troops from the SS Clyde on to the beach at Cape Helles, by swimming between landing boats with a line. He was wounded in the head but continued to aid the landing. A painting of the episode can be seen in the Great Hall lobby alongside the SS Clyde's bell. The Drewry family donated his Victoria Cross to the School and it is now on display in the Imperial War Museum. Sadly, Drewry lost his life in August 1918 in an accident on a ship anchored at Scapa Flow.

The third former pupil to win the Victoria Cross was Captain Alfred Pollard, whose career was by any standard, quite extraordinary. Not only did he win the Victoria Cross, but he also won the Military Cross...twice... as well as the Distinguished Conduct Medal. It is extraordinary that he survived the war, given his record, but he did, and went on to become a distinguished writer of action novels, drawing on his experiences.

Pollard attended Merchant Taylors' between 1906 and 1908 before leaving to work as an insurance clerk. He enlisted four days after Britain declared war, and like so many boys from MTS, he joined the Honourable Artillery Company. We do not have time today to do full justice to his achievements – his first medal was the Distinguished Conduct Medal, after being shot in the shoulder during a bombing raid in 1915. It took two operations to remove the bullet. He won the Military Cross for the first time in the Somme in 1917 during a night raid. He took over from a commanding officer who had been wounded and captured an enemy post, despite being hit by bullets three times. He then held off two German counter attacks and held the post for 8 days. By the time his company were relieved they had 35 men left out of the original 150. A bar was added to his MC two months later when he led a raid on an enemy trench under heavy fire. When his men reached the trench they were greatly outnumbered by the Germans. Captain Pollard ordered a retreat but then realised a man was missing – so he went back to find him, running 100 meters along the trench parapet before finally escaping.

Just two weeks later, on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1917 he and four men found themselves holding the line against a German attack near Gavrelle in France. He saw the other British soldiers were in disarray or retreat, so Pollard led his four men on a counter attack with such vigour that the enemy advance collapsed and Pollard was not only able to recapture all the land lost and but then advance into enemy territory.

Alfred Pollard had the unique distinction of being presented by King George V with four medals for bravery in a single ceremony, on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1917. Incredibly, he went on to win

other awards for bravery and if you want to read his story, then please look at the display outside the staff common room next to the Main Quad.

After the War, Pollard became a writer, drawing on his own experiences to create adventure novels. By any measure, his is a remarkable story.

Whilst we have focused on three stories today, over 300 former pupils of Merchant Taylors' who fought in the First World War were honoured for their bravery. We will be remembering many of them this week – their stories are told around the School and there is an exhibition in the Chaplaincy Centre. The First World War demanded a particular sort of bravery – standing up to danger without regard for one's own life; saving the lives of others.

Their stories come from a time of extreme adversity, where soldiers lived with the prospect of death every day. We should remember that none of those young men knew what would be asked of them. They did not choose their time, or the terrors they would face. They did not sign up for inclusion on our Roll of Honour in the lobby out there. That Roll of Honour came for them, and they met its demands with bravery, endurance and determination. Who knows what the future holds for each of us. What can *we* learn from *them* about the idea of bravery today?

My first thought is that bravery is the fundamental virtue. We can have all sorts of noble or moral instincts, we can have the highest principles, but if we lack the moral and sometimes physical courage to see it through, we can achieve nothing.

Bravery can take many forms –

Feeling fear yet choosing to act is the most obvious type of bravery – we have all had to meet this challenge, and the First World War soldiers would certainly recognise this definition. Nelson Mandela, reflecting on his life, wrote: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

But what other forms of bravery are there? What about following your heart? Challenging yourself to achieve extraordinary things. By definition, if you are choosing a difficult path, perhaps one that others would not choose, you require bravery and spirit.

Perhaps you would also recognise another definition – persevering in the face of adversity, not giving up even though you know you are going to lose. We can face this in sport. When the match is lost, but there is still plenty of time on the clock. What are you going to do – give up? Or go down fighting?

All of us would agree that we should stand up for what is right – but how easy is it to do? We need to be able to see things as they are, to know our own values and to be able to shape the world to bring the two into alignment. We should be brave in pursuit of what is just and good, regardless who is watching and judging. Francois de la Rochefoucauld wrote: "True bravery is shown by performing without witness what one might be capable of doing before all the world."

A fifth definition, is expanding our horizons and letting go of the familiar. Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage. The writer Diane Mariechild said that we should trust the still, small voice that says, 'This might work and I'll try it.' It takes bravery to step beyond the bounds of the known, and into the untried, untested and unknown.

And finally, it takes bravery to face suffering with dignity or faith. Perhaps we will need this form of bravery to cope with with an illness or an injury. Perhaps again when it is *our* turn to face old age and its inevitable declines.

During this week we hope you will explore some of these definitions and reflect on what they mean to you in your life. Perhaps you will come up with your own.