



'CIRCUMSTANCES OF EXCEPTIONAL DANGER' DANGER'

MAIN:
Flt Lt
Leonard
Harrison GC.

The merits of the outstanding bravery that led to Leonard Harrison's George Cross cannot be questioned. Furthermore, argues **Lord Ashcroft**, the award can also be looked upon as the first GC despite the fact that it has not previously been recognised as such.

Leonard Harrison was a wonderfully courageous character who possibly defused more unexploded devices than any other man during the Second World War. Not only that but, unlike many other bomb disposal experts from the conflict, he lived to tell the tale. His physical courage was matched by his technical ability – for he combined defusing countless bombs with formulating detailed

suggestions for dealing with fuses in unexploded devices that were accepted by the Ministry of Home Security as the basis of their manual for use in the war. In short, Harrison was undoubtedly thoroughly deserving of the George Cross (GC) that he received from King George VI in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 8 July 1941. However, he also has every right to be regarded as 'the first GC' for reasons that I will go on to explain.

VALUABLE EXPERIMENTAL WORK

Leonard Henry Harrison was born in Devonport, south Devon, on 6 June 1906. He was the son of Leonard Stewart McKenzie Harrison, a Royal Navy recruiting officer, and his wife, Ada (née Merrett). He was educated at Devonport Secondary School and later in Lancaster, where his father was also posted.

In early 1922, Harrison enlisted in the Royal Air Force as an aircraft apprentice at RAF Halton, near Wendover, Buckinghamshire. In December 1924, he graduated from the base's School of Technical Training as a Fitter Armourer A.C.1. From 1926-8, Harrison served in Hong Kong, but he was injured in 1929 and was discharged from the RAF as a sergeant in 1934. In the same year, he became a civilian instructor for the RAF at its Armament School at RAF Eastchurch, Kent. From 1938, he served as Senior Civilian Armament Instructor at No 1 Air Armament School, RAF Manby, Lincolnshire, and it was here that he carried out such valuable experimental work with fuses that the Ministry of Home Security accepted his findings as the basis for a manual for use in the event of war. After the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, and because of his expertise in the field, Harrison was designated to carry out bomb disposal work. Most bomb disposal work took place during the Blitz – the period of strategic bombing by Nazi



Germany of the British mainland which lasted more than eight months from early September 1940 to late May 1941. Crucial, however, to the argument that Harrison is entitled to be described as the 'first GC' is the fact that he and his colleague, Flight Lieutenant John Dowland (born John Noel Dowland-Ryan), carried out their first significant bomb-disposal action seven months before the start of the Blitz. Furthermore, this action was highlighted in the confidential

recommendation that proposed that both Harrison and Dowland should be awarded the GC. Their bravery took place when, on 11 February 1940, the steamship SS *Kildare*, a grain carrier, arrived at Immingham, Lincolnshire, having been earlier attacked at sea by a German aircraft. One of the enemy bombs had exploded in its cargo but another, which had failed to detonate, had lodged in the afterdeck cabin.

MATTRESSES UNDER THE BOMB

Harrison, then aged 33, and Dowland, aged 25, who were both based at RAF Manby, some five miles from Louth, Lincolnshire, were dispatched to deal with the bomb, aided by another civil instructor, W.C. Thompson. The best description of what happened next is provided by Rose Coombs in an article for *This England* published in the autumn of 1981:

'With Flight Lieutenant J. Dowland and Mr. W. C. Thompson, another civilian instructor, as his assistants, Len Harrison left RAF Manby, calling in at his home to pick up some equipment he thought might be useful. On arrival at Immingham, Harrison and Dowland entered the cabin where they found that the crew had eased their task somewhat by placing mattresses under the bomb to stop it rolling about and to their relief they saw the fuses were uppermost. Mr. Harrison >>>

LEFT:
Leonard
Harrison
GC whilst
serving as a
RAF Bomb
Disposal
Officer.

BELOW:
Leonard
Harrison's
GC medal
group,
recently
purchased
by Lord
Ashcroft.
It includes
a clasp for
Bomb & Mine
Clearance on
the ribbon of
the General
Service
Medal.



'CIRCUMSTANCES OF EXCEPTIONAL DANGER'

The First George Cross Action: 1940



ABOVE: It was the result of air attacks against North Sea shipping that led Harrison to his first bomb disposal work. Inset: The RAF Bomb Disposal badge. (CHRIS GOSS)

then carried out the procedure he had originally laid down for dealing with fuses. By applying a volt-meter they wore down the electric charge and removed the locking and location rings which rendered the bomb harmless. Mr. Harrison, with the aid of a railway employee, lowered the bomb from the ship over the side and into the awaiting RAF vehicle for transport to Manby. There the component pieces were placed in the explosive stores and as a consequence of the incident courses in Bomb Disposal Training for senior N.C.Os were initiated.'

ORDERED HIS MEN BELOW

The joint recommendation of GCs for Harrison and Dowland mentioned three separate incidents, including the Immingham action (which was wrongly recorded as having taken place on 12 and not 11 February 1940). It read: 'On 12 February 1940, the S.S. *Kildare* arrived in Immingham Docks with a 250 Kilo German bomb wedged half-through the main deck. Flight Lieutenant Dowland inspected the bomb and realising that the fuse was of a type of which no previous knowledge was available, ordered his men below. Civilian Armament Instructor Harrison, however, remained with him while the bomb was defused and gave valuable assistance.

On 22 March and 7 June 1940, he gave similar assistance in unarming and rendering safe unexploded German bombs and a new type of German depth-charge in ships off Grimsby. On all three occasions Mr. Harrison displayed conspicuous courage and devotion to duty in circumstances of exceptional danger and difficulty. He has also through his own initiative and private study become an authority on the fuse and exploder systems in German bombs.'

It was this recommendation – kept secret until long after the war ended – that led to the GC awards for Harrison and Dowland. Harrison's award was announced in the London Gazette on 3 January 1941 when the discreet public citation simply read: 'For conspicuous courage and devotion to duty in circumstances of exceptional danger.' The report on Harrison's award in the News Chronicle the next day was headlined: 'Bomb expert wins George Cross'. Dowland's citation, which gave some basic information on his various actions, was published four days after Harrison's on 7 January 1941.

BALE-OUT AT SEA

Sadly, Dowland was killed on 13 January 1942 in the most unfortunate of circumstances. He was serving, in the rank of acting Wing Commander, IC/Armaments, Malta Airfields. While

returning to Malta from photographing an enemy convoy, his aircraft was engaged by a Luftwaffe aircraft and one enemy aircraft was claimed as shot down. Realising that his aircraft was running short of fuel, Dowland ordered his observer to bale-out at sea with the photographs. Both Dowland, aged 27, and his wireless operator/air gunner were killed as they attempted a sea landing.

Dowland's investiture had been scheduled for two months later and so, on 17 March 1942 at Buckingham Palace, George VI presented the hard-earned GC not to the recipient but instead to his father, the Reverend Frank Dowland-Ryan, who had himself been awarded the Military Cross (MC) for bravery during the Great War.

FIRING PIN HAD JAMMED

By his own admission, Harrison's most hazardous action had been on Good Friday 1940 when, while digging in his garden, he was telephoned and asked to go to Grimsby. Once there, he boarded a trawler which had limped into the Humber with a live mine lodged in its bows. According to an obituary of Harrison published in The Times, he remained cool and calm in the most dangerous of circumstances: 'The mine was of a type not seen before, a cylinder three feet long and ten inches

in diameter. On its top was an external arming mechanism set at "Feuer" (Fire). Shrugging off a powerful temptation simply to turn it to the Safe position, Harrison instead elected for a painstaking operation, carried out with tools scrounged from the trawler. After four hours he was able to get at the fuse itself and make the explosive charge safe. Only at that point did he realise that the firing pin of the mine had jammed, and that any attempt to meddle with the arming mechanism would almost certainly have released the pin and detonated the mine.'

Once again, Rose Coombs' article for This England, written for a series on 'English Heroes', adds considerable colour to the scene:

'Mr. Harrison went to Grimsby where he was allocated a rowing boat in which two airmen rowed him out to the vessel. Before despatching the airmen back to the quay he borrowed a pair of woollen gloves from one of them, as in his haste to answer the call he omitted to bring the rubber gloves he normally used.

The missile was a dustbin-shaped object which had struck the coaming on the port side of the forecastle as it landed and the parachute had carried away leaving the missile jammed against the bulkhead. Inspection proved it to be a type he had not seen before. The fuse was in the upper end of the body and his first thought was that, knowing the German for 'safe' and 'fire' he could set the pointer to the word 'blind' and all would be plain sailing. Several times he considered taking

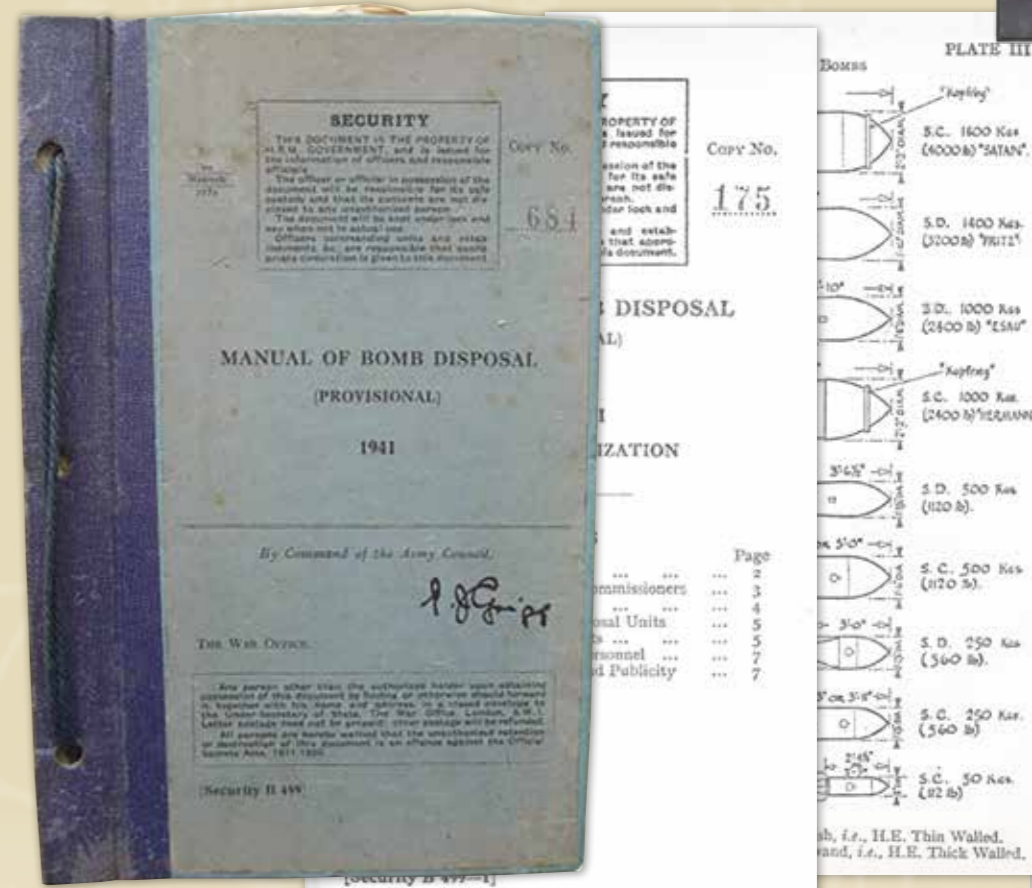
this step but each time instinct held him back. The missile body had been damaged on impact so he therefore decided to extend the fracture in the case and extract the explosive. This he did with tools he found in the boat. The explosive was a greenish powdered material in the shape of cheeses (later identified as Hexanite). He removed

these lumps carefully and dropped all but one over the side into the sea. The remaining one was taken back to Manby for further examination. The removal of the explosive revealed the fuse and detonating components, which he made safe, then he signalled for his men to row back out to collect him and his 'treasure'. >>

BELOW: It was not unheard of for ships to return with bombs or mines lodged in their hull. (CHRIS GOSS)

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The First George Cross Action: 1940



ABOVE: Harrison was heavily involved in the drafting of bomb disposal manuals.



'CIRCUMSTANCES OF EXCEPTIONAL DANGER'

The First George Cross Action: 1940



ABOVE: An artist's impression of Harrison at work defusing the 250 kg bomb on board the SS Kildare at Immingham Docks on 11 February 1940. (HMP)

BOOBY TRAPPED BOMB DUMP

On 13 May 1941, Harrison was commissioned in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and took command of the Bomb Disposal School at RAF Melksham, Wiltshire and, later, at RAF Kirkham, Lancashire. Exactly a year afterwards, on 13 May 1942, he was

posted to the Bomb Disposal Branch at the Air Ministry. Yet again Rose Coombs takes up the story:

'From then until the end of the war he continued to carry out all manner of bomb disposal work and in fact he was engaged in very dangerous disposal tasks long after then. He went to Belgium and Germany where, in

1946, he carried out the delicate job of defusing 700 tons of bombs which had been booby-trapped in a dump not far from Brussels. He and his team rendered them harmless, knowing well that the slightest slip would cause the detonation of the entire cache, resulting in major damage and heavy casualties in the city.'

Harrison was never slow to think of other ways of outfoxing the enemy. In 1943, for example, he was part of a cunning ruse – one devised over lunch with fellow members of the RAF Bomb Disposal Organisation at their Bush House headquarters in The Strand, central London. The idea was to reassemble the fuses of unexploded bombs, short circuit them and have them smuggled into enemy munitions stores. German bombers would then be blown up by their own bombs. Unfortunately, the enemy learned of the plan but, nevertheless, thousands of 'suspicious' fuses were apparently scrapped as a result.

On 1 January 1944, Harrison was promoted to Flight Lieutenant, then, later in 1944, to Wing Commander and appointed as the Head of the RAF's Bomb Disposal Organisation. After the war ended in September 1945, he carried out valuable bomb disposal work in Belgium and Germany throughout 1946. In December 1949, he was

placed on the Retired List as a Wing Commander but he remained employed at the Air Ministry (later the Ministry of Defence) in a civilian capacity until 1970, when he was finally retired.

Harrison, a Freemason who married twice and had two sons and daughter from his first marriage, spent his retirement in Bexleyheath, Kent, and from 1968-76 he served as the Honorary Treasurer of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association. He died in Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup, Kent, on 15 July 1989, aged 83, and was cremated at Eltham Crematorium, Kent, where his ashes were scattered in the Garden of Remembrance. His name is on the Roll of Honour at St Clement Danes, London, and at RAF Wittering, Cambridgeshire.

COLD COURAGE

I purchased Harrison's medal group at a Dix Noonan Webb auction in late February of this year. I was particularly drawn to the GC because of my admiration for 'cold', or premeditated, courage. I believe there are broadly two types of bravery: spur-of-the-moment courage and premeditated courage. I have huge respect for the former – perhaps an individual who goes to the aid of a wounded friend or comrade in the heat of battle. Yet, I have even more respect for the latter: members of



bomb disposal teams, like members of the Special Forces, repeatedly go into dangerous situations knowing that they must risk their lives – and thereby often display 'cold' courage time and again.

I have twice spent training days with British military bomb disposal teams and my admiration for the work

they do under the most dangerous of circumstances is endless. Most recently, in November 2012, I accepted an invitation from the Felix Fund, a charity that I support, to join Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD) operators for an exercise in a disused quarry in Somerset. >>>

ABOVE: Luftwaffe ground crew personnel chalk messages onto 250 kg bombs of the type dealt with by Harrison at Immingham.

MAIN: The Blitz nightmare tested the resolve of the British public as well as the courage of bomb disposal men like Harrison who were tasked with dealing with unexploded weapons.

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The First George Cross Action: 1940

LORD ASHCROFT

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster.

His five books on gallantry include *Victoria Cross Heroes*.

For more information, please visit: www.victoriacrossheroes.com

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at Imperial War Museum, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

My experiences that day made me incredibly aware of the life-or-death decisions that these men routinely have to take as part of their difficult and hazardous work.

The GC came into existence after George VI addressed the nation on 23 September 1940 to announce the institution of a new decoration for gallantry. It was intended as a reward for civilian bravery – for courage not in the face of the enemy – although in fact, because it was awarded so widely for bomb disposal work, 76 of the first 100 awards went to servicemen.

So how can Leonard Harrison be regarded as 'the first GC' when it is widely considered in history and medal books, including my own work *George Cross Heroes*, that Thomas Alderson was the first person to be awarded the George Cross? The fact of the matter, however, is that this accolade is based on the timing of the announcement: Alderson's GC was officially announced

in the London Gazette as one of three GC awards, in alphabetical order, on 30 September 1940.

Like Harrison, Alderson's award was for three separate acts of bravery. He had acted in his role as Detachment Leader, Air Raid Precautions, in his home town of Bridlington, Yorkshire, during the Blitz. His GC, though not owned by me, is on display at the Imperial War Museum which is understandably keen to bill it, quite accurately, as the first GC award.

However, it is on the criteria of the first GC action – rather than award – that Harrison can be regarded as 'the first GC'. As stated earlier, his first GC action took place fully seven months before Alderson's initial act of bravery.

FUSE STILL HISSING

There is a similar debate that can be held over the 'first Victoria Cross'. The earliest action to be rewarded with the VC was carried out by Charles Lucas, then a Mate but later a Rear Admiral in the Royal Navy. On 21 June 1854, during the Crimean War, a live shell landed on HMS *Hecla's* upper deck with its fuse still hissing. Lucas's response was immediate – he picked up the shell and hurled it into the sea. It exploded before it reached the water, but his courageous action ensured that no one was killed or seriously wounded.

However, his VC was one of numerous awards announced in the London Gazette on 24 February 1857, more than a year after the VC was instituted by a Royal Warrant from the Queen issued on 29 January 1856. Because these awards were once again

made in alphabetical order for the Royal Navy (the senior service), the first person to be announced as receiving the VC was Commander William Buckley for bravery on 29 May 1855. Yet the first person to be presented, or invested, with the VC, because of his senior rank in the senior service, was Commander Henry Raby who had his award pinned on him by Queen Victoria in a group ceremony in Hyde Park on 26 June 1857. Incidentally, at this splendid occasion, when the Queen, who was on horseback, invested 62 of the 111 Crimean War VC recipients, she was a little too enthusiastic: she pinned Raby's decoration on so firmly that the pin went straight into his chest. Raby is said not to have flinched as the pin went deep into his skin but, in his later years, he joked that he had survived the VC action unscathed only to be wounded by the Queen.

So which man has the best claim to be 'the first VC'? The man responsible for the first VC action, the man whose VC was first announced or the man who received his VC first from the Monarch? It is an interesting debate, and a similar one over the first GC is no less fascinating.

The short answer whether considering 'the first VC' or 'the first GC' is that all the recipients of these two wonderful awards deserve our admiration and respect. Harrison, Dowland, Alderson, Lucas, Buckley and Raby are all remarkable characters in their own right who displayed astonishing gallantry. We should simply champion and cherish the bravery of all of them for many decades and centuries to come. ☉

BELOW: Immingham Docks today, the scene of Leonard Harrison's outstanding bravery in February 1940.

