

Recommended By the Enemy by Robert J Mewett

The first soldier to win a VC in a naval action.

Sgt Thomas Frank Durrant VC

Operation 'Chariot'

St Nazaire. 27th March 1942

5 VC's won

The VCs were awarded to:

Lt Cdr Sam Beattie CO HMS Campbeltown

Lt Col Augustus Charles Newman Essex Regt No 2 Commando Military Commander

Cdr Robert Ryder Naval Commander

Sgt Tom Durrant RE attached No1 Commando Lewis Gun operator in ML 306 (Posthumous award)

A/S William Savage Gun Layer on the Pom-Pom Motor Gun Boat 314 (Posthumous award) (Buried in Falmouth)



On the evening of 27th March 1942 the German coastal defences in the French port of St Nazaire sat poised for what was now a regular probing raid by the bombers of the RAF. Little did they know that the drone of the Whitley's from 4 Group Bomber Command approaching the darkened coast line was to signal what was to become known as the 'Greatest Raid of All' by the forces of the recently formed Combined Operations Command.

The Port of St.Nazaire had been chosen as the target for several reasons. It lay only 240 miles from the British coast and not only housed several U –boat bunkers it had more being built. More importantly the Normandy Dock was the only dry dock on the Atlantic seaboard able to house the giant warship 'Tirpitz'.

The audacity and daring of the raid remains unique in military annals. The destroyer 'Campbeltown' with it's funnels cut, so its silhouette resembled a German boat, was to ram the dock and the raiding parties were to pour ashore and damage as much of the rest of the facility as possible before making their escape. The Campbeltown was to be protected by a flotilla of motor launches.

During the night's activities no less than five VCs were to be won three by Royal Naval personnel; Lt Cmdr SH Beattie, Cmdr RED Ryder and A/S WA Savage the other two being won by men serving with the commando forces Lt Cln AC Newman 2Cdo and Sgt TF (Tommy) Durrant No 1 Cdo.

Durrant's VC not only had the first and unusual circumstance of a 'soldier' being decorated for a naval action but also the distinction of being recommended by an officer of the enemy forces - so outstanding and conspicuous was his fighting spirit. Tommy Durrant's VC was not however cited until June 19th 1945 upon the recommendation of one of the other VC winners from the same action Lt Cln AC Newman.

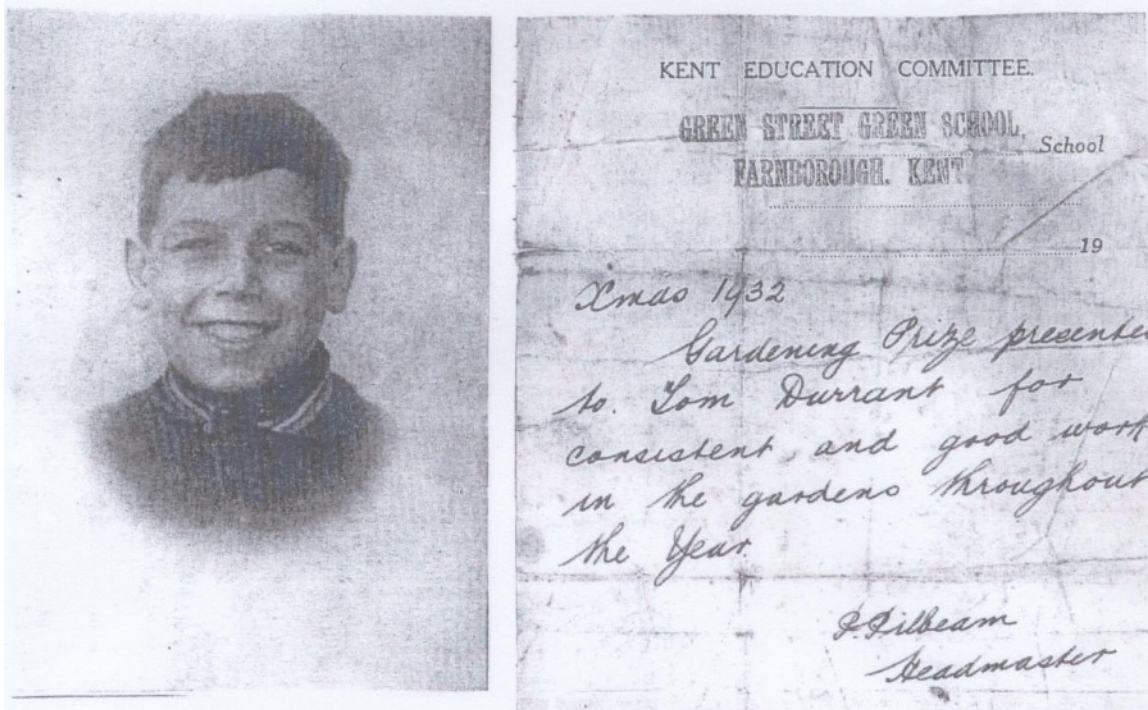
Newman had been taken prisoner and did not make his report until his repatriation in 1945.

Henry Brown OBE RQMS of No1 Cdo and a veteran from the time of the Independent Companies recalls Tommy Durrant as 'a well liked and respected troop sergeant, a fiercely loyal and thoughtful type'.

Durrant was a self determined and intense character who would burst out at anybody who did not show the same commitment to the job in hand a swarthy well set well knit individual with granite like determination and an independent streak who would answer officers as an equal. All ranks were wary of him. The sort of man it was good to have on your side.

Childhood

Born in Green St Green in Kent on 17th October 1918 Tommy was a pupil at Green St Green Primary School and then Vine Road Junior and Senior Schools.



A picture of Tommy Durrant aged 10yrs along with a typical school report for ‘Consistent and Good Work’

His main out of school interest when he wasn't helping out at a local small holding owned by a Mr. Dobson was scouting. Again his character shone through where he excelled at swimming and became a Patrol Leader.



Tommy Durrant 3rd from left after a days cycling with the local scouts

Army Life

Tommy's working life included a builder's labourer among other things before his enlistment into the Royal Engineers on 1st Feb 1937.

After basic training had been completed Durrant specialized in explosives and was transferred to Shorncliffe Barracks. Whilst at Shorncliffe Tom answered the call for volunteers for a Special Service Brigade that was being formed towards the end of 1939.

Following a posting to South Wales he was promoted to Lance Corporal. Volunteering for service in Norway on the 10th May, he found himself aboard M.V. Ulsterman heading for Narvic with the No 2 Special Service Independent Company. Promoted to Lance Sergeant on the field of battle, the force were withdrawn to Scotland on 31st May 1940. On the 11th June he was posted to No 2 Independent Company in the demolition section.

A rearrangement of the Independent Companies in March 1941 heralded the arrival of the first Army Commando units Tommy Durrant was posted to No 1 Commando and joined them in Irvine Scotland where they were stationed.



When the above picture was taken of the Warrant Officers and Sergeants of No 1 Commando in Irvine Scotland in December 1941, they did not know that one of their number was to win the highest award for bravery just over one year later. Sgt Tommy Durrant VC is pictured 3rd from the left on the back row. (photo Henry Brown)

Brothers MM

Earlier Tommy Durrant's brother Jack had been decorated with the MM in 1940 for an action not far from St Nazaire involving the sinking of the 'Lancastria' where an estimated six to nine thousand British service personnel lost their lives. Tommy had accompanied his brother to Buckingham Palace to receive the award and had prophetically stated 'Jack when we go back to St Nazaire we're going to knock seven bells out of them'. This was nearly a year and a half before the raid.

Last Letter Home

Early in 1942 Tommy and the rest of 6 Troop No 1 Commando under the command of Lt RO (Rocky) Swayne left Irvine to commence training with No 2 Commando for a raid on a French port.

Tommy Durrant being the thoughtful type wrote home to his mother on 25th March. This letter was written only two days before his heroic stand against the mighty German destroyer.

25th 3.42 *Sgt T Durrant*

Wed 25th

My Dear Mum

I have enclosed £20-10-0 as I shan't be needing it where I'm going.

I hope everything is OK at home. I can't tell you where I am. If anything happens you will be notified.

Give my love to Reg Ivy Ruth and David and take care of yourself.

Lots of love

Ever your loving son

Tom

The VC Action

The now legendary dock busting raid that took place in March 1942 at St Nazaire, operation Chariot was almost at an end. The Campbeltown lay with its fo'c'sle rammed high into the Normandie dock sinking at the stern. The main demolition parties had done their job. Fighting on the quayside was petering out and what was left of the raiding force was now trying to evade capture.

Durrant and the rest of the raiding party on HMS Motor Launch 306 had already made contact with the enemy. During a skirmish Durrant himself had taken a wound in his arm but had refused to stand down.

In darkness the launch was now silently trying to avoid the enemy and get back out of the port unseen. The twenty eight on board the ML laid low and silent all clutching their weapons. Things seem to going their way when suddenly they came upon a part of a German flotilla returning to port. The flotilla passed almost within touching distance, so close, in fact German voices could be clearly heard. Everyone on board kept their discipline and no-one stirred.

When all seemed clear one of the German flotilla the 'Jaguar', whose commander thought he had seen a shadow, suddenly came about. The giant German destroyer's spot lights suddenly illuminated ML306 and immediately let loose her guns and there commenced a David and Goliath type struggle.



The type of ML similar to which Tommy Durrant was to make his heroic stand against the might of a German Destroyer. Note the scale of the figures on board the launch.

The German destroyer ran at the ML and scraped along side trying to ram the vessel. Several men were thrown overboard and the Naval Captain lost his life when his leg was blown off. This first burst from the German destroyer caused many casualties.

Durrant was hit for a second time while answering the onslaught with his machine gun but was still undaunted and when the operator of the Twin Lewis gun was hit Durrant took that over and continued firing at the destroyer. Durrant shouted at his comrades to supply him with more ammunition and continued the fight although he had been hit by enemy fire several more times. The German skipper called out for the ML crew to surrender only to be answered by a burst from Durrant's Lewis gun.

Nearly everyone on the ML became casualties and Durrant now weakened was slumped at his gun which he had by this time strapped himself to.

The German skipper shouted across for the ML to surrender a second time only to be answered by another burst from Durrant's Lewis gun this time strafing the wheelhouse and almost hitting the German commander. As silence settled on the scene the only uninjured occupant of ML306 Lt Ronnie Swayne No1 Commando, clambered across the dead and wounded strewn on the deck and shouted across 'I'm afraid we can't go on' and the battle which had lasted almost an hour was over. Durrant was still alive at the gun he had manned but was so badly injured his wounded comrades could not manage to lift him to safety. 'Leave me' Durrant said 'I'm finished'.

Sgt Tommy Durrant was eventually taken on board the German vessel but later died of his wounds in a German military hospital. A captured officer from No12 Commando Lt Corran Purdon had the job of identifying the dead and wounded commandos and counted twenty seven bullet wounds in Durrant's body. .

Missing In Action

Charges to pay
s. d.
RECEIVED

POST OFFICE
TELEGRAM

No. OFFICE STAMP
FARNBOROUGH
KENT

Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words.

From ABHS 5.10.50 Kilnsey 04175 To 30

Mrs Durrant 9th 95th Rd
Farnborough
Deeply regret to inform you that
No 1874047 Sergeant Durrant
is reported missing in action
28 March 1942
Op/101 Commando
Irvine

For free repetition of doubtful words telephone "TELEGRAMS ENQUIRY" or call, with this form at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be accompanied by this form and, if possible, the envelope.

copy of the actual telegram received by Sgt Durrants mother informing her of Tommy 'Missing in Action' 28th March 1942

Kapitan Paul commanding the 'Jaguar' told Lt Swayne 'You had no chance' and enquired as to the name of the army sergeant who had manned the Lewis guns.

On the morning of the 29th the stricken Campletown still remained where it had come to rest and the bemused German defenders were inspecting and visiting the confusing scene. Suddenly the reason and objectives became apparent. The huge explosive cargo aboard her, that had remained undetected, detonated killing all around including nearly 40 German officers and 300 other ranks.

The cost of the raid to the British forces had been 34 officer sand 151 ratings of the Royal navy killed or missing; and 34 officers and 178 other ranks of the Commando forces. But the achievements of the raid were considered a success. The Great dry dock was out of commission for the duration of hostilities and fresh barriers had to be built to stop the area being completely in-undated.

Some weeks later an officer from the 'Jaguar' called on Lt Cln Newman, who had commanded the British operation, at Rennes prison camp. Recited the battle with ML306 to Newman and mentioned Tommy Durrant's gallant fight saying 'He should be recommended for a high decoration'.

On his return to England Lt Cln Newman was to recommend Tommy Durant for the bronze Cross that represents the highest award for bravery in the British army.

Tel. No.— ABBey 1272.

Any further communication on this subject should be addressed to:—
The Under-Secretary of State,
The War Office,
(as opposite),
and the following number quoted.



THE WAR OFFICE,
LONDON,
S.W. 1.

68.D.1813 (C.2 Investitures)

19 September, 1946.

Your reference _____

Madam,

I am directed to inform you that the announcement of The King's approval of the Posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to your son, the late Sergeant Thomas F. Durrant, Corps of Royal Engineers (attached Command), was published in the London Gazette of 19th June, 1945.

As according to the Will of your late son, you are named as the sole beneficiary and are therefore the person entitled to receive his Victoria Cross, it is hoped to arrange for the presentation at some future date, of the above-mentioned award.

Any subsequent change of address should be notified immediately to this Department.

I am, Madam,
Your obedient Servant,

[Handwritten signature]

Mrs. H. Durrant,
9, Kingsley Road,
Green Street Green,
Farnborough,
KENT.

The letter of award addressed to Tommy Durrants mother



Tommy Durrants mother Harriet pictured outside Buckingham Palace with Tommy's VC received from King George VI 29th October 1946

The bravery of all who took part in the raid on St. Nazaire was epitomized by the dogged determination of Sgt. Tom Durrant. His stoic devotion to duty, like all around him, to see the mission through, ensured the eventual positive outcome to what seemed to many an impossible task.

Sgt Thomas (Tommy) Frank Durrant VC RE Attached No1 Commando is buried in the Escoublac-La-Baule War Cemetery St. Nazaire.

Authors note

The quotations and remarks attributed to the various individuals have been gleaned from various sources and are as accurate as possible. I have only used remarks that are referred to independently in differing accounts (RJM)

My Grateful Thanks

I am indebted to Patricia Evered (Tommy Durrants niece) and his sister Ivy Evered for letting me view and reproduce items from the family archive of Tommy Durrant VC for this article.

Henry Brown OBE RQMS No1 Commando

Storming St Nazaire James G Dorian 1998

The Greatest Raid of All C.E. Phillips Lucas 1958

Symbol of Courage Max Arthur 2004

Further notes

On May 24th 1949 a memorial to Tommy Durrant VC was unveiled at Vine Rd County Primary school

In 1958 Orpington District Council honored Tommy with a street off of Farnborough Hill named 'Durrant Way'

In 1965 The Green St Green scout group named their H.Q. after Sgt Durrant 'The Durrant Scout Headquarters'

Sgt Durrants VC is held by The Royal Engineers Museum Brompton Barracks Chatham