



LORD ASHCROFT'S  
"HERO OF  
THE MONTH"

# Chief Skipper Joseph Watt

VC

## LEADERSHIP

AGGRESSION · BOLDNESS  
INITIATIVE · SACRIFICE  
SKILL · ENDURANCE

The many Victoria Crosses and George Crosses in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London are displayed under one of seven different qualities of bravery. Chief Skipper Joseph Watt's award is part of the collection and Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of leadership:

"Charismatic, strong, inspirational, the natural leader not only takes command, but also infuses all those around them with confidence and hope. They exude calm and resolve. They are a tower of strength."



TOP RIGHT:  
The vessel  
commanded  
by Joseph Watt  
during the  
enemy attack  
on the Otranto  
Barrage - HM  
Drifter Gowanlea.

JOSEPH WATT was born in the fishing village of Gardenstown, near Banff, Scotland, on 25 June 1887. One of five children, he was the son of Joseph Watt, a fisherman, and his wife Helen (née Mair), and he was educated locally at Bracoden School, Gamrie. Sadly, his father died at sea while fishing for haddock, more than twenty miles off the coast, when Joseph Jnr was just ten years old.

Although his mother soon remarried and moved to nearby

Broadsea, Watt was determined to follow his father's career and, after leaving school, he served an apprenticeship in *White Daisy*, a fishing boat. Yet, like many fishermen of his generation, Watt never learned to swim. In 1907, he left home and became part-owner of *Annie*, a Dundee-built steam drifter, and he soon earned a reputation as a daring fisherman who would go out in the wildest of storms.

After the outbreak of the Great War in the summer of 1914, Watt volunteered for the Patrol Service and was commissioned as a skipper in the Royal Naval Reserve on 11 January 1915. After a few months of patrolling the North Sea, he was posted to Italy, one of hundreds of fishermen who had volunteered for similar services to their King and country. In the meantime, Watt had married, on 5 August 1915, to Jessie Ann Noble, a fisherman's daughter.

Once in Italy, Watt was appointed to the command of HM Drifter *Gowanlea*, an 87-foot wooden vessel that had been completed the week that the war had begun. With its crew of nine, and armed with a solitary 6-pounder gun, *Gowanlea* was a member of a flotilla

of commandeered steam drifters based in the heel of Italy. As part of the so-called Otranto Barrage, the task of *Gowanlea* and her crew was to prevent enemy submarines operating out of Cattaro, 140 miles to the north, entering the Mediterranean via the straits separating Italy from Albania. No fewer than 120 drifters maintained a twenty-four-hour net barrier across forty-four miles of water, supported in their task by an Allied fleet of motor-launches, destroyers, cruisers and aircraft.

On the night of 14/15 May 1917, the Austro-Hungarian Navy launched an all-out attack on the Otranto Barrage, with the aim of wiping out so many Allied vessels that their U-boats would be able to access the Mediterranean and Allied shipping lanes. Nine enemy ships, including light cruisers, were confident of causing massive damage to the Allied flotilla because of their vastly superior size and guns.

The nine ships separated before beginning their attack on the barrage at 03.15 hours. At the time, forty-seven drifters were stretched across the straits in seven groups, with *Gowanlea* on the far western



side of the barrage. Watt was on board with a crew of eight and their dog. As soon as firing was heard, *Gowanlea* slipped her nets and made for the Italian coast. However, within minutes she ran into *Novara*, one of the light cruisers taking part in the attack. When the two vessels were only 100 yards apart, *Novara* signalled to *Gowanlea* - by dipping her flags and blowing hard on her siren - to abandon ship. Surrender was not, however, a word in Watt's personal vocabulary and the offer was refused. Instead, calling for full steam ahead, Watt encouraged his crew by shouting: 'Three cheers, lads, and let's fight to the finish!' *Gowanlea* opened fire with her tiny 6-pounder gun, but with menacing accuracy.

The enemy response was predictable: they brought their nine 3.9-inch guns to bear on *Gowanlea* and two shells caused significant damage. Two further shells landed on the drifter and Watt narrowly escaped death when one of these shells struck

the wheelhouse. But *Gowanlea* was able to limp away under her own steam. *Novara* only moved on because she was convinced that *Gowanlea* was sinking.

The raid lasted just over an hour, during which fourteen of the forty-seven drifters were sunk and several more damaged. *Gowanlea*, despite being badly damaged, even joined in the rescue effort and managed to help the wounded from the drifter *Floandi* before making for port.

Watt's VC - the only one resulting from this action - was announced on 29 August 1917. Watt, who was aged 29 at the time, was also rewarded with the Italian *Al Valore Militare* and the French *Croix de Guerre*.

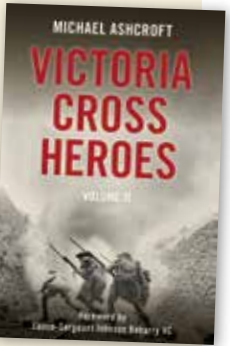
Watt fell ill shortly after his VC action and spent six weeks recuperating in hospital on Malta. After his release, he was promoted to Chief Skipper and allowed to return home. On learning of the news, Fraserburgh town council planned a hero's welcome but Watt, forever shy of publicity, travelled home secretly. His VC was presented to him by King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 6 April 1918. After the war, Watt returned to his first love - fishing at sea. His VC was kept in a small, cluttered drawer on his boat.

Watt had two children, a daughter and a son. During the Second World War, he commanded a drifter serving with the Home Fleet, with a crew that included his son, who had been invalided home in 1940 after being wounded while serving with the Gordon Highlanders.

Joseph Watt, who was known

## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES II

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II*, was published in November. For more information, please visit: [www.victoriacrossheroes2.com](http://www.victoriacrossheroes2.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](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes). For details about his VC collection, visit: [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com) For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com). Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft



locally as 'VC Joe', died from cancer at his home in Fraserburgh on 13 February 1955, aged 67. He was buried in Kirktown Cemetery, Fraserburgh, in the same plot as his wife and her parents.

I bought this wonderful character's gallantry and service medals at a Spink auction in London during 2012 and feel privileged to be the custodian of this famous medal group. ☉



TOP LEFT:  
Chief Skipper Joseph Watt can be seen on the far left in the front row of this group of naval officers

LEFT:  
Joseph Watt VC pictured after the war.



LEFT:  
Chief Skipper Joseph Watt's medal group. In addition to his unique Victoria Cross for the Otranto Barrage, Joseph Watt was also entitled to a 1914-15 Star trio; however, there is no record of him every applying for, or receiving, his Great War campaign medals.

RIGHT:  
Chief Skipper Joseph Watt VC, RNR.

