

Squadron Leader
The Reverend Herbert
Cecil Pugh GC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

PHOTO: HERBERT CECIL PUGH GC TOPFOTO

It is rare for a gallantry decoration to be announced several years after the brave deed for which it was awarded. However, the courage of Squadron Leader The Reverend Herbert Pugh had gone largely unrecognised until a letter to a national newspaper began a campaign that eventually led to the posthumous award of the George Cross. As a result of this campaign, a major wrong was righted nearly six years later.

Herbert Cecil Pugh was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, on November 2, 1898. He was the son of Harry Pugh, a builders' merchant, and his wife Jean (née Douglas). Pugh's Christian names were the responsibility of his grandmother, who wanted him named after both Lord Herbert Kitchener and Cecil Rhodes. He was usually known by his second name, Cecil, and was the second of seven children.

Educated at Jeppe High School for Boys in his home city, when World War One erupted in July 1914, Pugh was just 15. However, he later volunteered to work as a stretcher bearer.

As a private, he carried out this often difficult and dangerous work with the South African Field Ambulance/South African Medical Corps between May 1917 and July 1919 – eight months after the end of the war.

Devoted to his faith

Pugh served on the Western Front and, like many medics, stayed in France beyond the end of the war to treat seriously injured servicemen. He was a devoted Christian and had been on the front line when a visiting chaplain was killed by shellfire. It is believed this incident increased his desire to enter the Church.

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After being discharged, Pugh briefly returned to South Africa, during which time he applied for a scholarship to Oxford University. There, he studied at Mansfield College, from which he matriculated on October 12, 1920. While at university, Pugh was an enthusiastic member of the so-called Oxford Group, a non-denominational Christian fellowship that sought to change the world for the better. Founded by an American Lutheran

minister, Frank Buchman, in 1921, Pugh was one of the first men in Britain to come under its influence. Indeed, his enthusiasm for the group was endless.

Pugh obtained his BA on October 16, 1924, the same year he was ordained into the Congregational Church. He was the minister for Camberley Congregational Church in Surrey for three years before, in 1927, taking up a new role as minister of Barnet Congregational Church in Hertfordshire. He obtained an MA on May 22, 1926.

Shortly after the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939, Pugh joined the Chaplains' Branch of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. By this point, he was 40 and a family man, having married Amy Tarrant in 1926. The couple went on to have a daughter and two sons.

During the first two years of the war, Pugh was a chaplain at RAF Cranwell, Lincolnshire, and at RAF Padgate in Cheshire. He then served as padre at RAF Bridgnorth, Shropshire.

On July 1, 1941, Pugh left Britain – alongside more than 1,300 service personnel – on the troop transport *Anselm*. Bound for Takoradi, West Africa, the former passenger liner would normally have only 500 passengers aboard but was overloaded in order to get as many servicemen as possible to North Africa.



BOOTH LINE.

R.M.S. "ANSELM."

THE ILL-FATED LINER SS 'ANSELM' WAS USED AS A TROOPSHIP DURING WORLD WAR TWO CHRONICLE/ALAMY

In the early hours of July 5, 1941, when the ship was in the middle of the Atlantic close to the Canary Islands, *Anselm* was torpedoed by the U-96.

Desperate situation

It soon became clear that the steamship was sinking – and rapidly. The situation was desperate: one torpedo had hit a hold on ‘C’ deck, blocking the means of escape from below.

Pugh emerged on deck in his dressing gown and did his best to comfort the injured and those in shock. He helped some into lifeboats and then went to other parts of the ship to help. In the words of one eyewitness, “he seemed to be everywhere at once”.

When Pugh learnt that injured airmen were trapped in the damaged hold, he insisted on going to their aid. He was lowered by rope below the waterline which, with the ship already taking in water, was, at best, extremely hazardous. At worst, it was suicidal.

Once he arrived, he knelt and prayed with the men and continued to comfort them even when the water had reached his shoulders. Time and again, he had a chance to leave and save his own life. But he would have none of it and, as the ship plunged to the depths, he went with it.

Among Pugh’s last words were: “My love of God is greater than my fear of death. I must be where the men are.”

Only one man who was with him escaped to safety – and he, along with others, was able to provide a vivid description of Pugh’s courage.

Setting the record straight

Pugh was 42 when he died, alongside 253 others on the *Anselm*. Yet, despite there being more than 1,000 survivors, his bravery was overlooked for an embarrassingly long time.

It is believed a letter sent to the *News of the World* in 1946 began a process by which Pugh’s valour was finally recognised. The paper was sent a letter from a reader that staff found so moving that they turned it into a story for its news pages headlined ‘Padre Lowered To Die With Trapped Men’.

The letter was written by a Mr A Sharp, who had been a flight sergeant in the RAF and was on board *Anselm* when she was hit by two torpedoes. He wrote: “I could hear the screams of other ranks trapped below. The ship was fast going down forward, when out of the chaos, calm and collected, came a padre who summed up the situation at a glance. He ordered some Royal Marines to tie

a rope around him and lower him into the hold to ‘comfort and pray for those poor lads down below’. He knew, as did everyone else, that he would not come out alive.”

Others came forward to confirm the story and add more details to what exactly had happened five years earlier. A further letter from a bombardier in the Royal Artillery, Graeme Norwood, read: “H Cecil Pugh has given his life for his comrades, and we who knew him mourn his loss and share the grief of his sorrowing wife and children.

“I first met him while reporting for your paper in 1931. His quiet courtesy and sustained admiration for great causes made him a true servant of God. A more sincere man never lived.

“There are men living today who owe their very lives to him. They and the people of Friern Barnet [where the padre lived and worked before the war], are proud of one who, for [want] of a better name, must be called a hero.”

It also emerged that Pugh’s mother had been sent a letter from the Reverend A B Swallow, a fellow RAF chaplain who was also on the ship. Swallow said he had been walking towards the stern, expecting Pugh to be behind him: “I didn’t realise that he had not followed



THE U-96, WITH ITS DISTINCTIVE SAWFISH EMBLEM, ALONGSIDE AT ST NAZAIRE. THE U-BOAT SANK THE ‘ANSELM’ WHEN ON PATROL UNDER ITS CAPTAIN, LEHMANN-WILLENBROCK (WHITE CAP) ULLSTEINBILD/TOPIFOTO



PUGH'S GC WAS PRESENTED TO HIS WIDOW, AMY, IN 1947 TOPFOTO

me. He had apparently gone the other way until he came to the damaged foredeck; and there he saw the men's awful plight, wounded and drowning in the hold which had been converted into troop decks.

"The stairways had been destroyed by the explosion and they only had ropes thrown down to them by which to get out. [Pugh] went down to them by one of these. At this moment the ship slid into the waves nose first, stern in the air."

Best tradition of the service

A committee that met to consider the award of a posthumous gallantry medal was made aware of a series of eyewitness accounts relating to Pugh's gallantry and, on April 1, 1947, nearly six years after his death, Pugh's posthumous GC was announced in *The London Gazette*.

His citation described how he had initially arrived on deck before going to comfort his comrades. It ended: "When he learnt that a number of injured airmen were trapped in the damaged hold, he insisted on being lowered into it with a rope. Everyone demurred because the hold was below the water line and already the decks were awash and to go down was to go to certain death.

"He simply explained that he must be where his men were. The deck level was already caving in, and the hold was three parts full of water so that, when he knelt

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to pray, the water reached his shoulders. Within a few minutes the ship plunged and sank, and Mr Pugh was never seen again.

"He had every opportunity of saving his own life but, without regard to his own safety and in the best tradition of the service and of a Christian minister, he gave up his life for others."

By the time of the announcement, Pugh's son, Geoffrey, who was 13 when his father died, was serving with the Intelligence Corps in Palestine. The GC was presented to Pugh's widow and one of his sons at

an investiture in Buckingham Palace on December 2, 1947.

Pugh was lost at sea and so he has no formal grave, and I do not own Pugh's medal group, which is instead in a private collection. However, his courage is remembered on several memorials including Runnymede Memorial in Surrey; Mansfield College, Oxford; and Jeppe High School in Johannesburg.

The latter, in the form of a plaque, at Pugh's former school was only unveiled on Armistice Day, 2002. The school reported of the occasion: "It is not every day one is able to put right a historical wrong even if the wrong was unknown and unintentional. I am truly glad that we were able to do so today." **EW**

GEORGE CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *George Cross Heroes* was published in 2010 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more information, visit georgecrossheroes.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum,

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