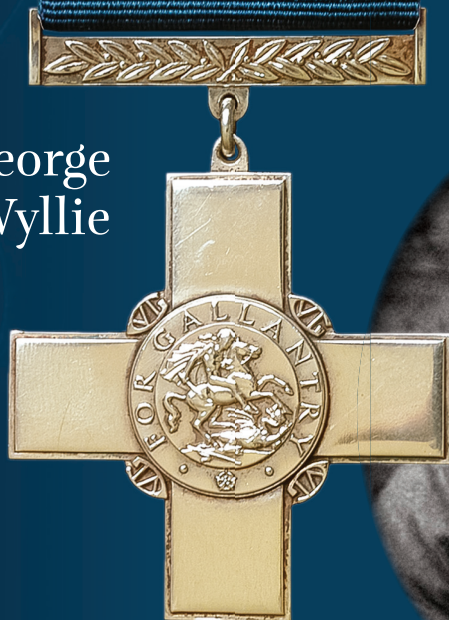


Corporal George Cameron Wyllie was awarded the George Cross for his gallantry in the face of the enemy during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. He was the only British soldier to be awarded the George Cross for his actions in the West Wall. He was killed in action on 16 December 1944.

Corporal George
Cameron Wyllie
GC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: Corporal
George Wyllie
AP/ALAMY

Corporal George Wyllie was highly decorated for an exceptional act of bravery during which he risked his life to ensure that St Paul's Cathedral was saved from being badly damaged by a wartime bomb. Like Temporary Lieutenant Robert Davies, who worked with him, he was a bomb disposal expert in the Royal Engineers. Both were richly rewarded with the George Cross.

George Cameron Wyllie was a Scot – the son of a coal miner – born in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, on Christmas Day, 1908. He was brought up in the nearby village of Hurlford. Before World War Two Wyllie worked in the Avro factory in Manchester however, after the outbreak of hostilities, he enlisted in the Royal Engineers. He underwent his training in Chatham, Kent, and later joined the 16th & 17th Bomb Disposal Company.

The Luftwaffe's aerial bombardment of London began on September 7, 1940. Known as the Blitz, it would continue for more than eight months until May 11, 1941. By this point, the Germans had lost the Battle of Britain, and they began a campaign of attacks against industrial targets, towns, and cities, beginning with raids on London. Most of these raids took place at night because the RAF had fared so well against the Luftwaffe in the day.

On September 12, 1940, less than a week into the Blitz, Wyllie, then a 31-year-old sapper, and Davies, then 39 and a temporary lieutenant, were called to deal with an unexploded bomb that had fallen close to St Paul's Cathedral.

Anything but normal

Temporary Lieutenant Davies, who was married with four children, was in charge of the bomb disposal section and Sapper Wyllie, who was unoriginally nicknamed 'Jock', was on his team. The location made an already hazardous job even more so because if the bomb had exploded then the cathedral would have been badly damaged. This, in turn, would have been dangerous to those in or close to the building – and any damage would have greatly harmed the morale of the British people.

St Paul's Cathedral is situated on Ludgate Hill, the highest point of the City of London. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren following the Great Fire of 1666 and built in the late 17th and early 18th century, it was an iconic and much-loved building. Davies, Wyllie and their support team first had to spend quite some time locating the exact position where the bomb had fallen.

It was Wyllie who eventually found the device, which had embedded itself deep into the pavement in front of the cathedral.

Some reports indicate that a fractured gas main was close-by and ablaze.

This made their work extremely difficult and both men knew they would be killed instantly if the bomb went off. Under normal circumstances, they would have detonated the bomb on the spot, but these were anything but normal circumstances. The preservation of St Paul's and the nearby underground station became their priority.

Eventually, the two men managed to ease the bomb from the pavement and at the same time they withdrew its potentially lethal 'fangs'. Davies was desperately worried for the safety of his team, so he personally chose to drive the army vehicle in which the bomb was placed. In order to steady it and prevent it from falling, Wyllie sat atop of the device with one leg on side of it.

After driving to Hackney Marshes, several miles from the scene, they safely disposed of the bomb. Again, some sources suggest that it left behind a crater 100ft deep.

On September 30, 1940, just 18 days after the incident, the two men's GCs were announced in The London Gazette. Wyllie's citation read: "Sapper Wyllie [his surname was misspelt] was a member of the Bomb Disposal Section engaged upon

"The preservation of St Paul's and the nearby underground station became their priority"

Herbert Mason's *St Paul's Survives*, an iconic depiction of the Blitz taken just weeks after Davies, Wyllie and their comrades saved the cathedral OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

the recovery of the bomb which fell in the neighbourhood of St Paul's Cathedral.

"The actual discovery and removal of the bomb fell to him. Sapper Wyllie's untiring energy, courage, and disregard for danger were an outstanding example for his colleagues."

Unremitting effort

Davies' citation was longer and gave more detail: "Lieutenant Davies was the officer in charge of the party detailed to recover the bomb which fell in the vicinity of St Paul's Cathedral. So conscious was this officer of the imminent danger to the Cathedral that regardless of personal risk he spared neither himself nor his men in their efforts to locate the bomb.

"After unremitting effort, during which all ranks knew that an explosion might occur at any moment, the bomb was successfully extricated. In order to shield his men from further danger, Lieutenant Davies himself drove the vehicle in which the bomb was removed and personally carried out its disposal."

However, it was in an interview carried out many years later that George Wyllie provided more details about exactly what had happened on that dramatic September 1940 day.

Wyllie, who was a quiet, shy man, said: "The bomb fell on the September 12 and was finally exploded on the 15th. We went to this job in lorries. Every job was the same. It left a crater. It was at the bottom, and it took two days to locate the one at St Paul's. The bomb was about 16-17ft down when I go to it. You couldn't see much, [I] just used to tap down to it. When you were getting to the loose earth all the time, you knew you were coming to something. As the bomb falls, it is followed by loose earth.

"Once we had located it, Davies went down for a look and then we got down to getting it out. I went down again and put a steel cable around the bomb to bring it out. Twice it broke. It should never have come out. It should have been blown up there because it had a special fuze in it, which we called a seventeenth fuze. The word from the War Office was 'blow them up' because there were booby traps in them. But the crater was just down the main steps from the cathedral and there would have been a great deal of damage...

"The area was cordoned off and nobody was allowed in the vicinity... There was an additional danger as it was only about 30 yards from St Paul's underground station. It was just too dangerous to blow it up where it was.

"Davies inspired his men all the time. He was a great leader. He was at the top of it all the time giving instructions to

Corporal George Wyllie's George Cross, currently on display at St Paul's Cathedral
COURTESY OF THE CHAPTER OF ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL



Members of the bomb disposal team that saved St Paul's, including Wyllie (third right). They were photographed on September 16, 1940, and their London barracks with parts of the bombs they have dealt with AP/ALAMY

"I went down and put a steel cable around the bomb to bring it out. Twice it broke. It should never have come out. It should have been blown up there because it had a special fuze"

CORPORAL GEORGE WYLLIE, GC

me as I slung the half-inch cable around it and the lorry started to drag it away. Just after putting the wire on, I would climb back up and as it broke I went back down again. It broke twice because all sorts of cables and telephone wires were tangled up underneath the bomb. You really didn't know what you were going to hit, whether it was a live cable or not. When we finally got it on to the lorry, it was estimated to weigh about 1,000lb, about five feet long and two feet across."

Mark of honour

As it happened, 1940 was a big year for Wyllie. As well as narrowly preventing irreparable damage to St Paul's, on Christmas Day – and on his 32nd birthday – he married Violet Amelia Mylrea in Hackney. The couple went on to have a son.

Wyllie received his GC from King George VI at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on June 17, 1941. Davies received his decoration four months earlier.

In 1971, Wyllie returned to St Paul's where he was presented with a gold medallion by the dean, The Very Reverend Martin Sullivan. He was not called upon to repeat his efforts, despite the presence of the (replica) bomb!
KEYSTONE/ALAMY



Both received some of the earliest awards of the George Cross and when, in fact, they carried out their brave actions outside St Paul's Cathedral, the award did not yet exist. It was only on September 23, 1940, that George VI addressed the nation to announce the institution of a new decoration for gallantry. In his broadcast, he said: "In order that they should be worthily and promptly recognised, I have decided to create, at once, a new mark of honour for men and women in all walks of civilian life. I propose to give my name to this new distinction, which will consist of the George Cross, which will rank next to the Victoria Cross, and the George Medal for wider distribution."

From the outset, the GC was intended to be a highly prestigious decoration only awarded to men and women who had shown outstanding bravery. The VC had been instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856 to recognise supreme gallantry in the presence of the enemy – most notably for

courage displayed by servicemen during the Crimean War. Although the award was a resounding success, it was eventually realised that a separate decoration was needed to acknowledge supreme courage that did not actually take place in the heat of battle.

Early in the war, Winston Churchill, the great wartime Prime Minister, shared the

King's enthusiasm for the new award. He realised that the Blitz would place great strain on the residents of London and other cities and believed that awards of the GC would be a significant morale booster for British citizens. Although the GC is sometimes described as "the civilian VC", many of its recipients served in the armed forces, usually as bomb disposal experts.

Ducking the 'diver'

Later in the conflict, George Wyllie went on to suffer from poor health due to blood poisoning which led to more than 20 operations on one of his legs. In 1943, he was discharged from the army at the rank of corporal as medically unfit. He then worked in a battery factory in Stamford Hill, northeast London.

It was while working at this factory that Wyllie, once again, nearly lost his life. He heard a 'doodlebug', a V1 flying bomb, which was heading straight for the building. Wyllie shouted for the manager to duck and threw his immediate boss, his so-called 'governor', behind a wall. The manager was killed, and the factory was destroyed, but Wyllie and his boss survived.

Davies' wartime career was, however, blighted by a criminal conviction. He was court-martialled and found guilty for stealing 500 sandbags and timber, receiving stolen clothing and obtaining £190 by false pretences. Unfortunately, Davies was ultimately sentenced to 18 months in prison for these offences.

After the war, Davies ran a successful building business, and was well liked. He died in Sydney, Australia, on September 27, 1975, six days short of his 75th birthday. His George Cross is now on permanent display at the Imperial War Museum in London.

After the war, Wyllie worked for 24 years at Ford's Dagenham automotive manufacturing plant. His main passion, however, was sports, specifically football, and he was a committed, lifelong supporter of Leyton Orient.

George Wyllie died at his home in Bow, east London, on February 1, 1987, aged 78. His George Cross is, appropriately enough, on display at the building he battled to save: St Paul's Cathedral. **BW**

GEORGE CROSS HEROES



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

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