

Lieutenant-
Commander
Dennis Arthur
Copperwheat
GC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: Dennis Copperwheat GC's actions saved considerable damage to Malta's Grand Harbour and undoubtedly saved lives
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Dennis Copperwheat was decorated for bravery on Malta at a time when the besieged island was suffering incredible hardship. During World War Two, he risked his life to save islanders and his comrades, and was duly rewarded with the George Cross, Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious award for bravery *not* in the presence of the enemy.

Dennis Arthur Copperwheat was born in Raunds, Northamptonshire, on May 23, 1914. He was the elder son of Arthur Copperwheat and his wife, Agnes (née Haxley). His father had worked in the shoe industry, which was centred on Northampton. After winning a scholarship to Kimbolton School in Cambridgeshire, he joined the Royal Navy as a boy sailor in 1929. He then served in HMS *Ganges*, HMS *Vernon* and the torpedo and mining school at Portsmouth, Hampshire, all shore-based establishments.

Copperwheat got married in August 1935 to Olive Cowley, the wedding taking place at St Mary's Church, Rushden, Northamptonshire. The couple went on to have a daughter.

A desperate island

In April 1939, Copperwheat was promoted to acting gunner and, from July 1939, served in HMS *Hero*, an H-class destroyer built for the Royal Navy in the mid-1930s. During the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, the ship sailed with the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet and participated in the non-intervention patrols that enforced the arms blockade imposed by Britain

and France on both the Republican and Nationalist factions.

Shortly after the outbreak of war in October 1939, Copperwheat was commissioned as a lieutenant, still serving in the recently refit *Hero*. During the first few months of the war, the destroyer searched for German ships that had been attacking Allied merchant vessels in the Atlantic Ocean. She also took part in the Second Battle of Narvik during the Norwegian campaign of April-June 1940.

In 1941, Copperwheat began training as a torpedo and explosives specialist and, that June, he started serving in HMS *Penelope*. The Arethusa-class light cruiser had run aground the previous year and been badly damaged, but she underwent repairs and was back operating in the Iceland/Norway areas before heading to Malta in October.

Over a period of several months, Malta became the most bombed location on earth. This was because the island was seen as a vitally important strategic location by both sides. Malta's battle for survival had begun on June 10, 1940, when Italy joined the war. In his book *Faith, Hope and Malta GC*, Tony Spooner wrote: "Until June 10, 1940, nestling quietly in the Mediterranean, [Malta] had had a quiet and not unpleasant war. It was only on that day that the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, brought his country into the war on the side of her so far victorious German ally, and so began Malta's travail from the new Axis forces. The fall of Paris just four days later, followed by the total French collapse by the 17th, further added to Malta's plight."

The situation worsened and, by late March 1942, the Allied leaders realised that the besieged island of Malta was in desperate need of supplies.

Facing fire

On March 20, 1942, one naval auxiliary and three merchantmen sailed from Alexandria, unaware that the Germans had just decided to launch an immediate and all-out air attack on Malta from Sicily and Sardinia. The four ships were given substantial protection from an escort of four cruisers and 16 destroyers, while a flotilla leader also sailed from Malta to join them.

When the four ships got to within 20 miles of Malta, one of the Merchant Navy vessels, *Clan Campbell*, was sunk by German bombers. The naval supply ship, *Breconshire*, edged to within eight miles of the island before she too was hit and disabled, before being beached and subsequently destroyed by Luftwaffe bombers. Only a small part of her valuable cargo of oil was saved.

A large part of the Maltese population lined the battlements of Valetta harbour to cheer in the two surviving merchant vessels, *Pampas* and *Talabot*. However, when only a quarter of their food and ammunition had been unloaded, both ships were hit in yet another raid. One of the ships – the one loaded with most ammunition – was just 40yds offshore when she burst into flames. Everyone present knew that if she was not scuttled quickly, the ship would explode, at the same time badly damaging Grand

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Copperwheat served aboard the cruiser *Penelope*, shown arriving in Malta's Grand Harbour in 1942 TOPFOTO



HERO OF THE MONTH

Harbour, which provided Malta's lifeline to the outside world.

Lieutenant Copperwheat, who was aboard *Penelope* and, in the area, was sent with a party to sink the ship. As Copperwheat approached the inferno on March 22, he would have been in no doubt that his task was fraught with danger. As well as the fierce blaze on board, ammunition had started to explode all around the ship. On arriving at the scene, Copperwheat quickly assessed the situation. Because of the fires, it was impossible to place scuttling charges in the holds. Instead, they had to be slung over the side of the ship. Furthermore, the electric cables for firing the charges were only just able to reach the ship from the shore.

When everything was in place, Copperwheat sent the rest of his party to shelter away from *Talabot* while he remained to detonate the charges. When the explosion occurred, he was lifted off his feet. However, a crisis had been averted, the harbour had not been damaged, and many lives had been saved.

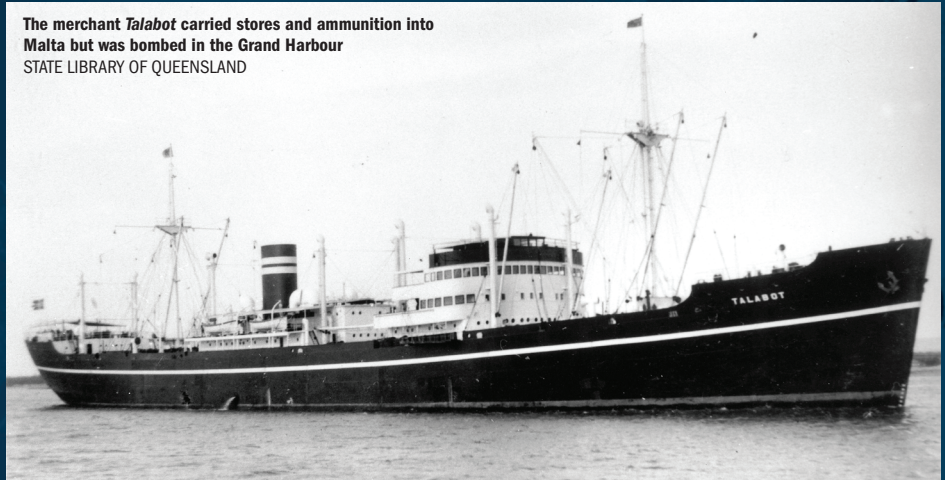
The George Cross island

Copperwheat's GC was announced on November 17, 1942, and the citation ended: "But for his brave action the ship must have blown up, and grave damage would have been done to the harbour. Moreover, much of the ammunition was saved and some very heavy bombs, part of the cargo, were soon afterwards dropped in Italy."

Shortly after receiving his award, Copperwheat told the BBC: "While we were working, there was terrific heat and ammunition was exploding all over the place, but everything was ready in a very short time. When we started off for the jetty, we found that our electric cable was too short, so we had to junction a piece more on.

"Having finally got ashore, I looked around for a sheltered place from which

The merchant *Talabot* carried stores and ammunition into Malta but was bombed in the Grand Harbour
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to fire the charge and escape the blast. The cable was rather short, but it just reached the corner of the building. Having sent the men to shelter, I touched the ends of the leads on to the battery, but nothing happened. I got from under my shelter and checked up and found that I was not holding the end of the 'earth' connection. So pleased was I to find this, that I touched

"In April 1942, while the island was still under siege, Malta became the first collective recipient of the George Cross, rather than an award to an individual"

the correct leads on the battery without getting back in the shelter. However, I got there quickly enough because the force of the explosion threw me in it!"

Subsequently, the cruiser *Penelope* was badly damaged, being holed forward and aft by Axis bombing of the Grand Harbour just four days after her rescue work involving Copperwheat. While undergoing repairs in the drydock, the ship was hit several more times and so she was unofficially christened 'HMS

Pepperpot' because she had so many holes. After undergoing extensive repairs, she became seaworthy again, but the ship was torpedoed and sunk by U-410 after leaving Naples, Italy, for Anzio on February 18, 1944: 417 of the crew, including her captain, went down with the ship, with only 206 survivors.

In April 1942, while the island was still under siege, Malta became the first collective recipient of the George Cross, rather than an award to an individual. Uniquely, the GC was not announced in *The London Gazette*.



Despite substantial losses, Operation Pedestal brought stores and fuel, including these bags of flour, into Malta to help relieve the island OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

A stick of bombs falls between the ships of a supply convoy to Malta OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



Copperwheat's medal group, comprising his GC, 1939-1945 Star, Atlantic Star (with France and Germany clasp), Africa Star (with North Africa 1942 clasp), Italy Star, War Medal 1939-45, Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal and Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal COURTESY OF C&T AUCTIONEERS

Instead, the award was a personal gesture of King George VI and not a decision of the British government nor military. The award was announced by Buckingham Palace with the publication of a citation written in the King's hand in the form of a letter sent to the island's governor, General Sir William Dobbie. It stated: "To honour her brave people I award the George Cross to the island fortress of Malta to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history."

Copperwheat received his GC from the King at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on November 24, 1942, only a week after his decoration had been announced in *The London Gazette*. He was one of three men to receive the George Cross for their bravery in relation to the Siege of Malta.

Deathwatch specialist

By the time of Copperwheat's investiture, the situation on Malta was much improved. Operation Pedestal had been launched in August 1942, with some 50 ships attempting to bring supplies to the island. More than 500 Allied sailors and airmen were killed and only five of the 14 merchant ships reached the Grand Harbour, but it was enough to relieve the island's immediate suffering.

By the end of the year, the long siege was over, having lasted for nearly two-and-a-half years.

Copperwheat remained in the Royal Navy post-war. He survived a second scare while serving as a torpedo officer in the aircraft carrier HMS *Indomitable*. A fuel leak on the vessel caused a sudden explosion that blew him off his feet but he was not seriously injured. From August 1953, he worked at the Underwater Weapon Material Department at the Admiralty in London. He retired in 1957 in the rank of lieutenant-commander.

He then embarked on a civilian career, working first for a firm of London insurance brokers and later as a specialist on the treatment of timber. In fact, he became an expert in understanding the harm caused by the deathwatch beetle. This is because the female hatches her eggs in the timber and, when the larvae hatch, they burrow into the timber and later gnaw their way out. Copperwheat was one of a specialist team that sought to eradicate the deathwatch beetle from



Canterbury Cathedral in Kent. As an aside, the insects have also posed a threat to the conservation of HMS *Victory*, the preserved ship-of-the-line, since 1932, with a research project currently underway to aid in the battle against the destructive insect.

Just like his post-military career, Copperwheat's personal life was not entirely conventional. After divorcing his first wife, Olive, he remarried and had two children with his second wife, Dorothy Croft, whom he married in 1967. However, in December 1976,

Copperwheat remarried his first wife, Olive, this time at Kettering Register Office in Northamptonshire. After her death just three years later, Copperwheat married for the fourth time, on this occasion to Joan Holmes at Weekley Parish Church, Kettering, in December 1984.

Copperwheat died on September 8, 1992, at Weekley, near Kettering, aged 78. He is buried at St Mary's the Virgin Church in the village. His name is on an honours board at Kimbolton School, where he had been a pupil. The whereabouts of his GC medal group is unclear. **BW**

Talbot burning in the Grand Harbour after being struck by bombs on March 26, 1942 ALAMY



GEORGE CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His third book on gallantry, *George Cross Heroes*, was published in hardback in 2010 and, later, paperback. For more information, visit georgecrossheroes.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public

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