

Leading Stoker
William
Johnstone VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Leading Stoker William Johnstone's VC. As an early Royal Navy VC, it featured a blue ribbon rather than the now ubiquitous crimson
VICTORIA CROSS ONLINE

There is no photograph of him in existence. His nationality is a matter of debate. Even his exact name is not known for sure. However, one thing is certain: the man decorated for the second action in the entire history of the Victoria Cross was incredibly brave, having taken part in an early special forces-style operation, one conducted more than a century before the creation of the SAS.

His decoration was awarded in the name of “William Johnstone” but for 170 years the details of this man’s background have been, at best, vague. However, earlier this year I accepted an invitation from two Scandinavian historians who had carried out research into the actions of Johnstone and his fellow VC recipient, the splendidly named John Bythesea (then a lieutenant, but later promoted to rear-admiral).

I visited the archipelago of Åland, midway between Finland and Sweden, to meet Johan Granlund and Mikael Apel at the scene of some of the earliest naval battles of the Crimean War. The two men had approached me out of the blue in the knowledge that I am the proud custodian of the VC awarded to Bythesea, who led the two-man adventure with Johnstone as his able deputy.

Friendly farmer

With the help of the two historians, I have been able to shed new light on the exact

circumstances of the VC action and, in particular, on Johnstone’s background.

The Crimean War was fought from October 1853 to February 1856 between Russia and an alliance that included Britain and France. Early in the war, the British fleet was stationed in the Baltic Sea off the coast of mainland Åland, besieging the coastal fortress of Bomarsund. Captain Hastings Yelverton, from HMS *Arrogant*, one of the larger ships in the area, paid a visit to Admiral Sir Charles Napier, the fleet’s commander.

“Bythesea and Johnstone rowed ashore, clearly with minimal planning relating to what lay ahead”

During their meeting, Napier gently reprimanded Yelverton for the fact that vital mail from the Russian Tzar was nevertheless being constantly landed on Vårdö, one of the Åland islands, and forwarded from there to the Russian commanding officer in Bomarsund. Napier’s gripe was that the British forces had taken no action to prevent this.

On returning to his ship, Yelverton mentioned this to his junior officers and one of them, Bythesea, became determined to do something to disrupt this flow of official despatches that British intelligence sources

had identified. Bythesea, then 27 and originally from Bath, devised an ambitious plan to slip on to Vårdö and to intercept the enemy mail as it was being moved across the island. He chose Johnstone to accompany him on the mission.

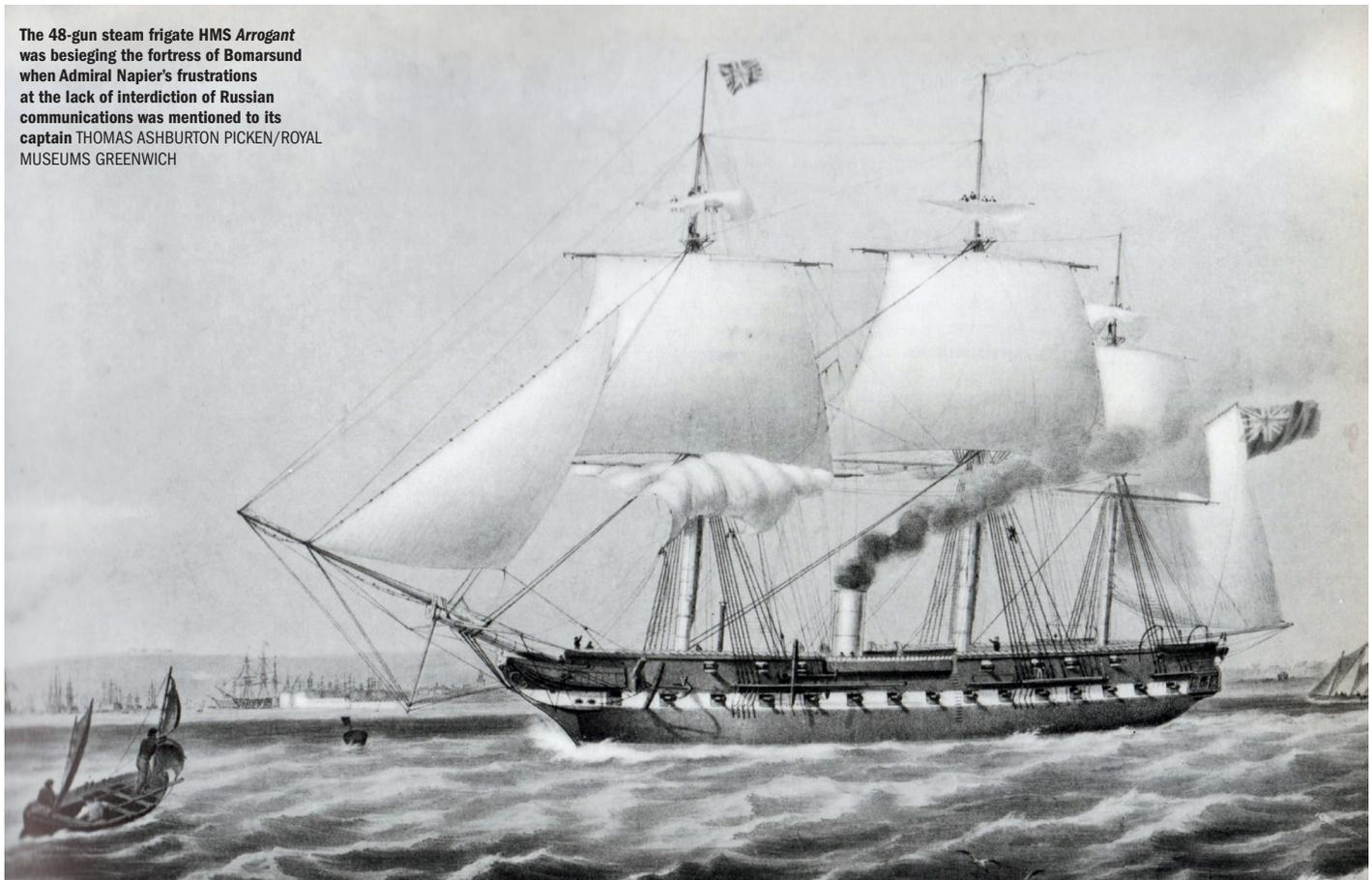
On August 9, 1854, just two days after Napier’s conversation with Yelverton, Bythesea and Johnstone rowed ashore, clearly with minimal planning relating to what lay ahead.

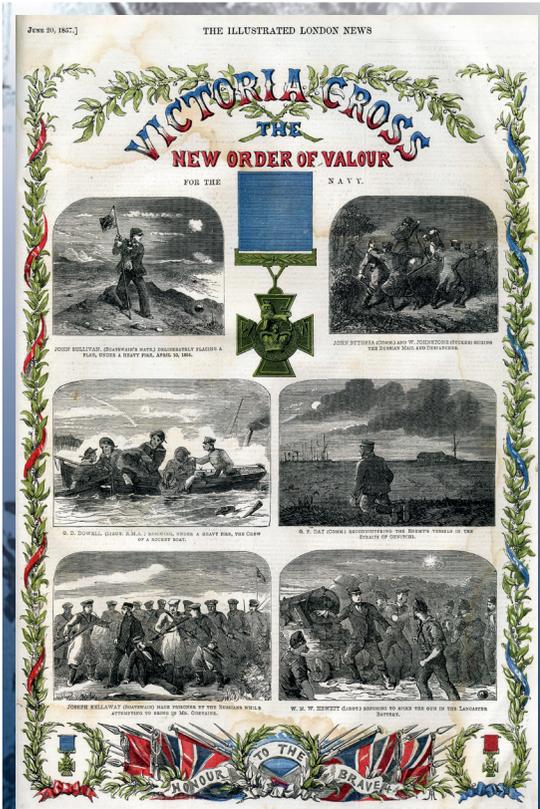
Luck was on their side. According to an account published in *The Strand Magazine* in 1896, they made their way to a local farmhouse, where the owner had been forced to hand over all his horses to the Russians. He was therefore only too willing to help them and gave them food and lodging. On August 12, having been on the island for three days, Bythesea was told by the well-informed farmer that the Russian mail boat had landed, and the despatches were to be sent down to the fortress at Bomarsund at nightfall.

That night, Bythesea and Johnstone hid in the bushes along the route close to a 15th century church on the island. Armed with a single flintlock pistol each, they ambushed the five unarmed messengers, capturing at least three along with the despatches.

Bythesea and Johnstone returned to their hidden boat and forced their captors to row out to the *Arrogant*. Johnstone steered the craft while Bythesea aimed his pistol at the prisoners. On their arrival, the prisoners

The 48-gun steam frigate HMS *Arrogant* was besieging the fortress of Bomarsund when Admiral Napier’s frustrations at the lack of interdiction of Russian communications was mentioned to its captain THOMAS ASHBURTON PICKEN/ROYAL MUSEUMS GREENWICH





JOHN BYTHSEA (COMM.) AND W. JOHNSTONE (STOKER) SEIZING THE RUSSIAN MAIL AND DESPACHES.

While no photographs of Johnstone exist, there are a handful of sketches of him and of the VC-earning raid. This image, from the Illustrated London News of June 20, 1857, shows some of the first recipients of the VC for deeds in the Crimean War, with Johnstone and Bythesea top right. ZOOM: The raid in focus SMITH ARCHIVE/CHRONICLE/ALAMY

were taken on board while the despatches were taken to Admiral Napier and General Baraguay d'Hilliers, the French commander, who were both thrilled by the success of the bold mission.

“Bythesea was the second man to have his VC pinned on him by the Queen... Johnstone was serving overseas at that time and had his VC sent out to his ship”

Mystery man

But who was Bythesea's courageous accomplice? In the official citation for the two VCs, he was identified as ship's stoker "William Johnstone". However, the man was also known as "John Johnstone" and also "John Johnson". He had worked at sea, initially on merchant ships, since the late 1830s.

Until now, it has been widely believed that Johnstone was a Swede and that, at some point, his name "Johansson" was anglicised. It was reported that he had been chosen to accompany Bythesea because he spoke Swedish. To further confuse matters, Johnstone appears to have claimed when he joined the Royal Navy that he was born in Hannover, Germany.

However, the two historians, Granlund and Apel, have now reinvestigated the incident and shed new light on the identity of Bythesea's accomplice and exactly what happened in the summer of 1854. Their findings have been published in a history journal, *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*.

Together, they unearthed a Russian police report drawn up at the time after interviewing islanders from Vårdö in late 1854, including the captured messengers carrying the despatches – who were later



Johnstone's companion on the raid and fellow VC recipient was John Bythesea, a junior officer who later rose to rear admiral IWM

released. The report provides detailed information about the event, for example that the mail captured consisted of letters that due to the naval blockade had never reached Bomarsund, but were instead about to be returned to Finland, and that the farmer, Olof Carlsson, had provided Bythesea and Johnstone with the boat they used to get back to the *Arrogant*.

Their evidence also strongly suggests that Johnstone was from Finland – not Sweden – and that he hid his birthplace because at the time Finland was part of the wider Russian Empire and he would not have wanted to suggest he had links with "the enemy".

One of the captured messengers was in no doubt that one of the sailors, clearly Johnstone, stated that he was from Kristinestad, Finland. The man added that Johnstone had lived in England "from his younger years" and that he "spoke bad Swedish".

From this, the two amateur historians concluded in their written report: "If the information is correct, one could reject the hypothesis that the man who was Bythesea's companion on Vårdö was a Swede who temporarily enlisted in the British Navy. Instead, Johnstone seems to have been a naturalised Englishman, born in Finland,

but who emigrated so long ago that he had partially forgotten his mother tongue.”

They added: “Revealing in Swedish to his Ålandic prisoners that he was born in Kristinestad, must however have seemed risk-free to Johnstone.”

Also, according to the police report, Bythesea and Johnstone returned to Vårdö a second time following their initial three-day visit for which they were awarded the VC. They went again on August 14, to search for further mail that was not in the bag seized from the messengers. It is not clear how they knew about this additional mail, but they returned to their ship with three further letters.

Unfortunate futures

It was at Queen Victoria's behest that the VC was instituted on January 29, 1856, for extreme bravery in the face of the enemy. Furthermore, the awards were made retrospective to the beginning of the Crimean War.

The first VC to have been awarded – in chronological terms – was the decoration to Mate (later Rear-Admiral) Charles Lucas, who as a young officer was serving in HMS *Hecla* at the start of the Crimean War. His VC was for his brave deed in throwing a live, unexploded shell overboard on June 21, 1854, after it had landed on the ship's deck.

However, the next actions for which two VCs were awarded were to Bythesea and Johnstone. The awards were announced in *The London Gazette* on February 24, 1857. The initial investiture took place in Hyde Park, London, on June 26 that year. On that occasion and in front of cheering crowd of some 100,000 people, 62 recipients received their decorations from the Queen, while the 31 recipients serving overseas received theirs at a later date.

Bythesea was the second man to have his VC pinned on him by the Queen, who remained mounted on her horse, Sunset, while conferring each award. Famously, she accidentally “stabbed” Bythesea in the chest while pinning his medal on him. Johnstone was serving overseas at that time and had his medal sent out for presentation aboard his ship.

However, there are sad postscripts relating to both VC recipients. As stated earlier, Bythesea rose to the rank of rear-admiral, but his career ended in disgrace when he was court martialled after his ship ran aground near Malta in 1872. It was an unfortunate end to his previously unblemished career. He died in London in August 1906, aged 79.

Bythesea's VC came up for auction in London in April 2007. By then, I had large collections of both VCs and special forces decorations. When I successfully bid for Bythesea's VC, it was, for me at least, in many ways the ultimate military decoration for this period.

Bythesea received his VC from Queen Victoria at the first investiture for the medal, which took place in Hyde Park. Johnstone was overseas, so may have received his aboard his ship GETTY



Johnstone met an untimely death in August 1857, aged just 34. After attacking another sailor with a knife on board a naval ship in the West Indies, he felt such remorse that he turned the knife on himself, slitting his own throat. He was buried at sea in St Vincent Passage. It is not known whether Johnstone's VC was ever presented to him on board his ship, HMS *Brunswick*, but it was later sent by registered post to his widow, Eliza.

Johnstone's VC was acquired by the London auction house Spink in the 1930s and sold to the wealthy American collector, Robert B Honeyman Jr. In 1957, he donated his collection into The Museum of Natural History of Los Angeles County, where the medal is kept today.

I am indebted to Mikael Apel and Johan Granlund for sharing their findings with me. I am delighted, too, that the full and

accurate story of these two famous VC actions can finally be told.

Before I left Åland, the two historians showed me the remains of Bomarsund fort, which was destroyed by the victors in September 1854, a couple of weeks after it had been conquered. They also showed me around the Bomarsund visitors' centre, which tells the story of Russia's attempts at expansion and how it was thwarted. Both the fort and the visitors' centre lie on a 2,000-acre historical site.

Finally, as I also discovered, on a low-lying grassy headland at the far east of Åland, there is a memorial dedicated to the earliest three recipients of the Victoria Cross. Inscribed “Bomarsund 1854” – the name of the island fortress – and the date of their bravery, it reads: “To commemorate the fallen of the British naval force in the Baltic and the bravery of their comrades.” **BW**

SPECIAL FORCES HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Special Forces Heroes*, was published in hardback in 2008 and, later, paperback. For more information, visit specialforcesheroes.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit iwm.org.uk/heroes and details about his VC collection may be found at

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