

Ordinary Seaman
Carless' blue-ribbon VC
WALSALL ART GALLERY

Ordinary Seaman
John Henry
Carless, VC



The portrait of John Carless
displayed at the Walsall Art
Gallery WALSALL ART GALLERY

HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft



The C-class light cruiser *Carless* served in at the Second Battle of Heligoland Bight, *Caledon*, shown in 1924 TOPFOTO

A casual conversation with a fellow sailor gave a fascinating insight into the steely character of Ordinary Seaman John Carless. As they discussed how they wished to die, Carless stated: "I wish to die standing by my gun." His friend responded: "People say a live cow is better than a dead hero." Carless then replied firmly: "Let the others be the live cows: I will be the dead hero." The conversation was to prove prophetic for within months Carless was killed in action, showing such incredible gallantry that, more than a century on, he is still championed as the hero he longed to be.

John Henry Carless was born in Frederick Street, Walsall, West Midlands, on November 11, 1896. He was one of four children born to John Thomas Carless and his wife Elizabeth (née Smith). His father's occupation was described as a "journeyman brass-cutter". The young Carless was brought up in Walsall where he attended St Mary's the Mount Roman Catholic School.

At school, he left his mark as a sportsman rather than for his academic ability. Not only was he a good footballer and strong swimmer, but he was a talented dancer too. In 1910, when just 13, he captained his school team for his age group and around the same time he represented Walsall in the English Schools Soccer Shield, receiving a gold medal for his efforts.

After leaving school, he first worked for a company called Alma Tube Works, while continuing to play football regularly. After the outbreak of World War One in summer 1914, Carless made it clear he wanted to serve his country but bizarrely given his sporting prowess, he was turned

down for military service because of poor health. Four Army medical boards ruled that he should not serve because of "heart trouble", something Carless dismissed as the imagination of the doctors who had examined him.

Bitterly disappointed at not being allowed to join up, Carless instead changed jobs, working as a currier in a local leather works, Messrs Price of South Street, Walsall. However, he refused to give up hope of serving his country and on September 1, 1915, he successfully enlisted into the Royal Navy in the rank of ordinary seaman. From November 19, a week after his 19th birthday, he served in HMS *Dido*. From December 28, 1916, he served in HMS *Victory* and from March 6, 1917, HMS *Caledon*, a newly built light cruiser.

Bravery at the Bight

During his early months as a sailor, he twice displayed bravery, first volunteering with others to save hundreds of passengers from a sinking hospital ship and, later, saving an injured stoker who had been trapped by the flames during a boiler room fire.

The Battle of Jutland, the largest naval battle of the war, was fought over two days from May 31, 1916. It involved more than 250 warships and some 100,000 men and pitted the British Royal Navy's Grand Fleet against the German Imperial Navy's High Seas Fleet in the North Sea. The battle was inconclusive, and, in its aftermath, there was something of a stalemate on the high seas. However, in November 1917, the Second Battle of Heligoland Bight took place, which was to prove to be the last major naval engagement of the war. By

this point, the British had increased their use of minefields in the North Sea that were intended both to obstruct enemy submarines and lure the German navy out to clear them.

At dawn on November 17, a force of British cruisers under Rear-Admiral Charles Napier (including the battlecruisers *Courageous*, *Glorious* and *Repulse*) attacked German minesweepers in the Heligoland Bight. Among those ships involved in the attack was *Caledon*, with young Ordinary Seaman John Carless as one of its crew.

Commodore (later Rear-Admiral Sir) Walter Cowan, commanding the 1st Light Cruiser Squadron, later painted a confused picture of that morning's fighting in his report: "At 0754hrs... it became evident that the enemy force consisted of four light cruisers accompanied by destroyers. At the same time, they altered course [and] the 1st Cruiser Squadron turned to starboard with 1st Light Cruiser Squadron formed on their starboard bow, all still firing."

Cowan continued his report detailing how the enemy then changed course again having hidden under a smokescreen. Eventually, two light cruisers emerged from the funnel smoke of the enemy ships at 0802hrs at a range of some 13,000 yards. Two minutes later, *Caledon* came under fire, but it also returned fire with Cowan reporting: "This fire appeared to be effective and caused many alterations of course on their behalf, in spite of which they appeared to be drawing away and necessitated our firing deliberately at extreme range..."

During these heavy exchanges, *Caledon* was hit twice, killing four sailors and injuring several others. One of the enemy's shells rained shrapnel down on No.2 gun, causing mayhem all around. As a result of this explosion, Carless received a horrible injury to his abdomen but refused to leave his position. Instead, he helped care for other casualties while also continuing to work the gun. His precise role was as a rammer on No.2 gun, a 6in weapon.

"For several minutes, this tall, blood-soaked figure kept himself going on guts and determination alone. No accounts tell how long he persisted, but it was long enough to affect all who saw him"

STEPHEN SNELLING, IN *VCS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR: THE NAVAL VCS*

HERO OF THE MONTH

An enhanced portrait photograph
of John Carless VC
KEY COLLECTION



Stephen Snelling, in his splendid book *VCs of the First World War: The Naval VCs*, wrote: "Carless presented a pitiful sight. His stomach had been laid bare, and he was bleeding profusely from a fatal wound to the abdomen. How he managed even to stand with such horrifying injuries was a mystery. But he did, his sole thought to keep the gun working. What torture he must have experienced can only be imagined.

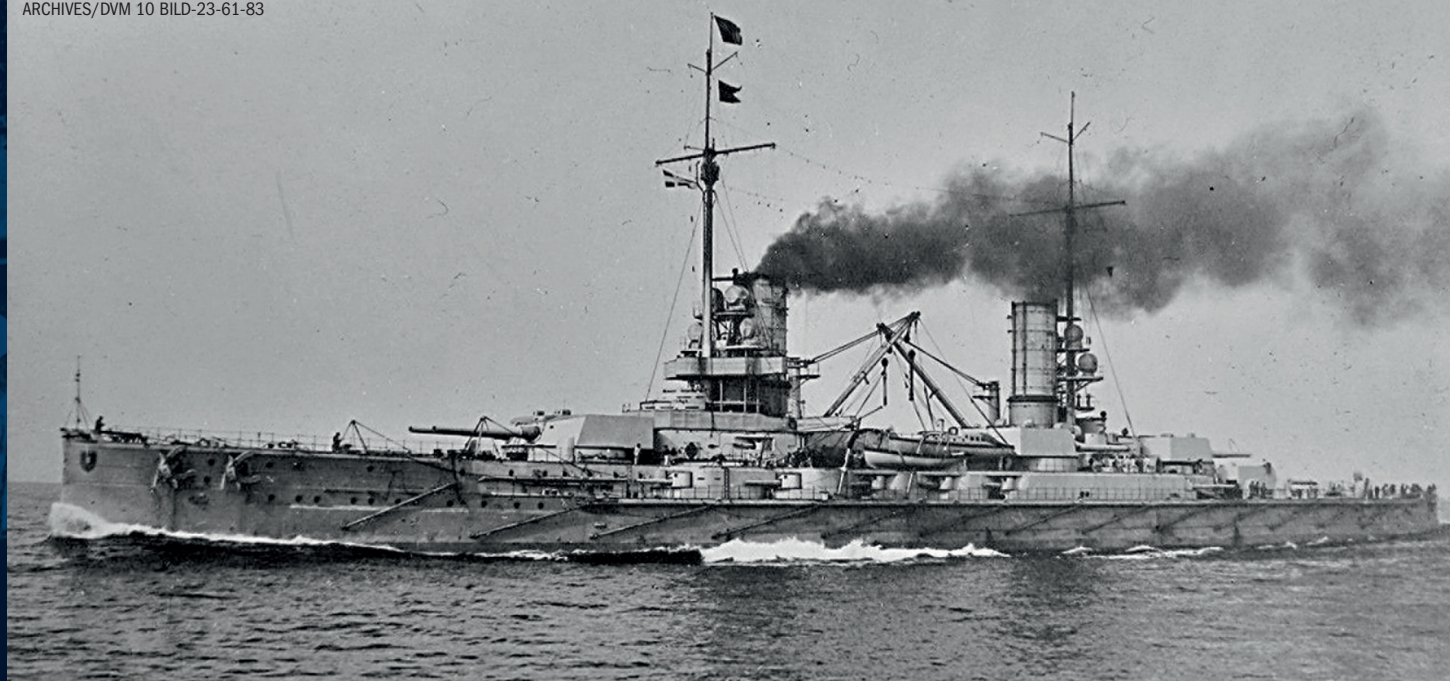
"For several minutes, this tall, blood-soaked figure kept himself going on guts and determination alone. No accounts tell how long he persisted, but it was long enough to affect all who saw him. Officers manning the lower bridge watched in awe as he lifted one shell and then helped clear away the other casualties spread around the gun."

A new gun crew came to his aid but, again, Carless refused to leave his role even though by now he was desperately weak and bleeding even more heavily. At one point, he collapsed but, apparently cheered on by his fellow sailors, he got up again. Shortly afterwards, however, he fell again, and this time he was dead. He had been killed in action just six days after his 21st birthday.

"A most gallant lad"

Caledon and other British cruisers fought back and severely damaged the enemy. Indeed, it looked as though this major battle might be won until two German battleships, *Kaiser* and *Kaiserin* appeared and so the British ships ended their pursuit. "It was no good going on," Cowan reported, adding: "It is a matter of the very greatest regret to me that the rear light cruiser escaped, as it was only a question of sea room and we must have stopped her. Her firing

The German battleship *Kaiser* hit *Caledon* with a 12in shell fired by her main batteries FEDERAL GERMAN ARCHIVES/DVM 10 BILD-23-61-83





The commemorative bust of John Carless VC outside Walsall Museum ANDY MABBETT

towards the end was very intermittent and she was hit again and again, but the appearance of the two 'Bayerns' [a class of German battleship] just saved her."

Before the battle ended after some two-and-a-quarter hours, *Caledon* was hit again by one of the two battleships, this time by a 12in shell. The damage was extensive, including tearing a huge hole just above the waterline that also wrecked the warrant officers' mess and some cabins. The following day, *Caledon's* remaining crew buried their dead, all 19 of them, including Carless, at sea.

The ship's captain, Commander Henry Harrison-Wallace, who was wounded during the battle, wrote to Carless's parents, saying: "He was a most gallant lad and very promising. We feel his loss on the ship very much and all send their sincere sympathy to you and his family in his loss... You will be very proud to have the satisfaction of knowing that he did his duty so bravely and gallantly, fighting his King and country's enemy – the finest death a man can have. I buried him at sea, and he had a very impressive funeral, attended by all his shipmates and the commander."

Other crewmen also wrote to Carless's parents. Stoker Waterfield, who like Carless came from Walsall, said: "He was

a noble lad, worthy of a hundred VCs as he stood at his post of duty with ramrod in hand. He laughed the whole time and died smiling. He was a son be proud of."

It was largely as a result of Commander Cowan's report and recommendation that Carless received Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious bravery award. The senior officer wrote of the heroic sailor: "My feeling is that his memory is worthy of the Victoria Cross as he not only showed a very bright and memorable example but he also, whilst mortally wounded, continued to do effective work against the King's enemy."

Well-remembered

On May 17, 1918, six months to the day after Carless's brave deed at the Second Battle of Heligoland Bight, his posthumous VC was announced in *The London Gazette*. His citation stated: "For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty.

"Although mortally wounded in the abdomen, he still went on serving the gun at which he was acting as rammer, lifting a projectile and helping to clear away the other casualties. He collapsed once, but got up, tried again, and cheered on the new gun's crew. He then fell and died."

"There is no doubt that the good people of Walsall have championed Carless's bravery loud and clear over past century"

The citation then almost perfectly echoed Cowan's sentiments: "He not only set a very inspiring and memorable example, but he also, whilst mortally wounded, continued to do effective work against the King's enemies."

A memorial service in honour of Carless was held at St Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Walsall just nine days after his VC was announced. Carless' VC was presented to his parents by King George V in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on June 22, 1918.

Soon there were moves in Walsall to construct a permanent memorial in his honour. In February 1920, Rear-Admiral Sir Walter Cowan unveiled a bronze bust of Carless outside Walsall's Free Library. Created by the sculptor Robert Emerson, the memorial was set on a base of Portland stone. It bore the words of Carless's VC citation along with the single word "Valour".

There is no doubt that the good people of Walsall have championed Carless's bravery loud and clear over past century for which I applaud all they have done. Two roads were named in his honour, "Carless Street" and "Caledon Street", the latter after his ship. Furthermore, the Walsall Services Memorial Club commissioned a painting of Carless, and a locomotive was also named in his honour, "John H Carless VC".

His Victoria Cross remained in his family until 1986 when it was gifted by his nephew, John Henry Carless, who had been named after his famous uncle, to Walsall Council. **BW**

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES VOL.II



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