

THE BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE

The George Cross ranks above all other awards and decorations except for the Victoria Cross which is only given for wartime acts of bravery in the face of the enemy.

It was instituted in September 1940 by King George VI. He had been impressed by heroic deeds in bomb disposal and rescue work during the blitz and wanted a special award for bravery away from the heat of the battle.

It is available to all British and Commonwealth subjects and although intended primarily as a civilian award, two thirds have in fact gone to members of the armed forces. There have only been 152 direct awards (others were given in exchange for the Empire Gallantry; Albert and Edward medals which it has replaced) and it is now rarely awarded. Of the 42 medals awarded for incidents occurring since the war 26 have been given posthumously and there has been no award for over seven years. Only 10 George Crosses have ever gone to the police.

The cross itself is made of silver and hangs on a plain blue ribbon; its centre depicts St George slaying the dragon around which it bears the simple legend: FOR GALLANTRY.

The first award to the police was won by a special constable during the night of November 14, 1940 in Coventry. In one of the worst attacks of the blitz, high explosive and incendiary bombs rained on the city all night long. In the morning German radio announced: 'Coventry, the centre of the British aircraft industry, has been obliterated.' Almost but not quite; with much of the city centre flattened, 450 killed and thousands injured, the people went to work that day undaunted and one man emerged as a shining example of their heroism.

Saving lives

Brandon Moss, aged 31, had joined the Coventry Special Constabulary at the start of the war and was on duty that night in Clay Lane at 11pm when the first bombs fell destroying most of the houses around him. He knew one of the houses demolished contained three people and led a rescue party in an attempt to save them. A tunnel was dug into the ruins and then with debris collapsing around him and poisonous gas leaking from a ruptured pipe he carried on alone; digging with his bare hands he eventually reached the three occupants who were all saved.

He could then have sought the safety of



PHOTO: Courtesy of Spink & Son's

The George Cross, above, is Britain's highest award for acts of police heroism. In the first of a three-part series, Sgt Anthony Rae, Lancashire, looks at some of that rare breed who have become its winners

a shelter with the survivors but he had seen two other houses come down burying three men who had taken shelter between them. He dug into the rubble for hours in an effort to rescue them, this time it was in vain but he did not give up until he had recovered the body of each one of them.

All were by now exhausted but Moss continued among the falling beams and debris of yet another bombed house. Another body was recovered and another survivor found, the fourth to owe his life to the special constable. Moss had laboured without a break for 7½ hours; often alone and with the bombs falling he also knew that a delayed action bomb lay in a doorway only 20 yards away. But with death staring him in the face his only thought was to save others. Brandon Moss was a worthy recipient of the first police award.

The next police George Cross went to Australia and cost the life of Constable 1st Class Eric George Bailey of the New South Wales Police. Thirty-eight years old with 17 years service he had recently been posted to the town of Blayney and hoped soon to be promoted.

About 8.30pm on January 12, 1945, Constable Bailey was on duty when he stopped a suspect in Adelaide Street. He

began to question the man who suddenly pulled a revolver from his pocket and shot Bailey in the stomach at point-blank range. Although seriously wounded, the officer grabbed the gunman and grappled with him forcing him to the ground.

The gunman fired two more shots but even though he was now mortally wounded Bailey refused to release his hold, his courage ensuring with his last breaths of life that the gunman would not be free to kill again.

Hardly conscious and bleeding heavily, he still had the struggling man on the ground and tightly in his grip when help arrived, only releasing him to the custody of his fellow officers. Soon afterwards Constable Eric Bailey died.

The George Cross went to his widow and the citation referred to 'Sergeant' Bailey who, in a unique move, had been promoted posthumously to take effect from the date of his death.

The most recent police award also went to an Australian: Michael Kenneth Pratt, a Constable in the Victoria Police, stationed at Melbourne. On the morning of June 4, 1976, he was off duty and unarmed, driving his car in Clifton Hill when he saw three masked men brandishing guns run into a bank. Determined to stop the armed robbery he drove his car towards the bank entrance, turning on his lights and sounding his horn as a warning. He mounted the kerb to block the bank doorway and told a passerby to call the police.

Fierce struggle

The gunmen were taken by surprise and, abandoning the robbery, they attempted to escape. One of them pointed his gun at Constable Pratt through the glass doors and ordered him to move the car. The officer refused, calmly removed the car keys and, picking up the car-jack handle, he stepped from the car to confront the gunmen.

The robbers smashed the glass door panels and started to climb out over the bonnet of his car. Pratt grabbed the first one out and after a fierce struggle knocked him unconscious. By now the second gunman was out and, pointing his gun directly at the officer, threatened to shoot him — but Pratt stood his ground. The first man recovered and when he was again seized by the officer he shouted at the second gunman to shoot. As Constable Pratt continued to struggle with his prisoner he was shot at close range and fell seriously wounded.

Happily Michael Pratt recovered.

Aged only 21 at the time, he was the youngest police officer to be awarded the George Cross.

Five George Crosses have gone to the Metropolitan Police, the first being to 34-year-old Detective Constable Frederick William Fairfax, stationed at Croydon in south London.

At 9.15pm on November 2, 1952, Christopher Craig, aged 16, and Derek William Bentley, aged 19, climbed onto the roof of a warehouse in Tamworth Road, Croydon, intent on burglary. Bentley was armed with a sheath knife and a spiked knuckle-duster; Craig also had a knife and the more deadly .455 Eley service revolver.

Before they could gain entry to the premises they were spotted by a neighbour and within minutes half a dozen police led by DC Fairfax had surrounded the premises. Fairfax climbed alone on to the roof which was flat apart from some skylights, a brick lift shaft and a brick stair-head which had a door leading down to the warehouse.

Bruising and shock

The detective saw two figures dart behind the lift shaft and called out: 'I'm a police officer, come out from behind that stack.' Craig shouted back with an obscenity: 'If you want us f—— well come and get us.'

Fairfax leapt forward and grabbed Bentley. Pulling him round the front of the stack he came face to face with Craig. Bentley broke free and shouted: 'Let him have it, Chris.' Craig fired and Fairfax fell hit in the shoulder.

The officer should have been badly wounded but some of Craig's bullets were too small for the gun and although one penetrated his clothing, apart from bruising and shock, he was not seriously hurt. He jumped up and struck the nearest man to him knocking him to the floor; it was Bentley. Craig again fired but missed and Fairfax retreated behind the stair-head using Bentley as a shield. He searched Bentley and took his weapons; he was then joined by PC James McDonald who, spurred on by the gunshots, had climbed a drainpipe on to the roof.

Meanwhile PC Norman Harrison, aged 24, had climbed on to adjacent premises and edged his way along a sloping glass roof behind the gunman, but Craig saw him and fired. Harrison's torch clattered down into the gutter and he froze. When he did not move Craig returned his attention to Fairfax who shouted: 'Drop your gun.' Craig replied: 'Come and get it.' With Craig distracted Harrison retreated back along the rooftop, but even as he did so Craig shot at him again and he was lucky to get off the roof alive.



STRETCHER CASE: Christopher Craig is stretchered into court after being tackled by DC Frederick Fairfax, the first Met officer to win a George Cross

Undeterred Harrison then joined up with PC Sidney Miles, a 22-year veteran of the force. Miles had obtained the warehouse keys and both officers ran up-stairs to the roof only to find the door was jammed. PC Miles kicked it open and stepped out. Immediately Craig fired and Miles fell with a bullet through his head; Fairfax and McDonald pulled him behind the stair-head but he was dead.

Craig fired again forcing Harrison to dodge back into the doorway; then in frustration and desperation PC Harrison threw first his truncheon and then a milk bottle and a brick at the gunman. In reply Craig continued firing and shouted: 'Come on, you coppers, I'm only 16. Come on, you brave coppers, think of your wives.'

The rooftop was a death trap, but still Harrison ran out to join his colleagues. Yet another officer, PC Robert Jaggs, climbed the drainpipe and ran across to help if he could. Despite the officers' courage, without a weapon they were pinned down and it was decided to get

Bentley out of the way and obtain firearms. As they went for the stairs Bentley called out: 'Look out, Chris, they're taking me down,' and Craig held his fire.

With his prisoner and colleagues safely down, Fairfax obtained a police revolver and returned to the roof. He called to Craig: 'Drop your gun, I've got a gun.' Craig's reply was defiant: 'Come on then, copper, let's have it out. Are we going to have a shooting match? It's just what I'd like.'

Fairfax ran towards him firing twice and Craig fired back. Each shot missed and as Craig backed away he pulled the trigger twice more but his gun just clicked. Craig held the gun in the air. 'See, it's empty,' he shouted and leapt from the roof falling to the ground 30 feet below. His back and arm broken he still managed to swear at his captors: 'I wish I was f—— dead. I hope I've killed the f—— lot.'

Murder conviction

Although under arrest at the time, Bentley was convicted with Craig of the murder of PC Miles. Both youths had set out armed and with a common purpose and in law they were equally guilty. What caused the uproar that overshadowed the bravery of the police was the result of the convictions. Craig, who pulled the trigger, was too young to hang and was 'detained during Her Majesty's pleasure', whereas Bentley was sentenced to death and despite massive public sympathy there was no reprieve.

PC Miles had been the sixth policeman murdered on duty in 18 months and it was generally acknowledged that an example was made of Bentley — but unjust as this seemed it was over six years before another policeman was murdered. What was certainly just was the award of the George Cross to a newly promoted Detective Sergeant Fairfax together with a posthumous QPM to PC Miles; George Medals to PCs Harrison and McDonald and a BEM to PC Jaggs. ○



MURDER CHARGE: DC Fairfax (left) with Chief D/Insp John Smith who charged Craig and Bentley with the murder of PC Sidney Miles