

Distinguished Service: Campaign and Gallantry Medals

The 450 or so campaign and gallantry medals in the NMGW collection form a small but visually attractive and historically rich element of the numismatic collections. The Museum's collection of British medals was essentially formed in the 1920s thanks to gifts from two men. In 1922, Colonel Sir William Watts, formerly Commander of the 3rd Battalion, the Welch Regiment, donated his collection of 105 British naval and military medals. This had in fact been on loan to the Museum since its foundation, having been transferred with the collections of the Museum of Welsh Antiquities, NMGW's predecessor museum in Cardiff. For several years from 1923, the Cardiff cigar importer, W. Lisle Bowles, also made generous gifts of similar medals. The Museum thereby gained a representative collection of British campaign medals, from the battle of Waterloo (1815), the first engagement for which all participating received a medal, and the Victorian retrospective awards for the Napoleonic Wars, through the colonial wars of the later nineteenth century, to the Great War of 1914-18 and beyond. However, neither was a specialist collector, so examples with Welsh associations formed only a small part, and there were few gallantry awards. In more recent years, therefore, occasional purchases and donations have concentrated on these two categories, our stated policy being to collect medals 'relating to the deeds of Welsh people'.

Important military medal groups acquired have included those of a Rorke's Drift veteran (see box); the Victoria Cross and other medals of Anglesey seaman William Williams, RNR, a 'mystery' award for service in Q-ships (disguised armed

merchantmen used as bait for enemy submarines) in the sinking of UC 29 on 7th June 1917; and the 'Battle of Britain' (1940) Distinguished Flying Medal group of fighter pilot Glyn Griffiths, from Llandudno.

The earliest military award in the collection dates from the English Civil War: the badge for the 'Forlorn Hope' (selected troops who acted as vanguards), a royalist award of 1643 introduced at the suggestion of Thomas Bushell, mining engineer and erstwhile master of the mint at Aberystwyth.

Civil gallantry, too, has an honoured place. The Albert Medal was introduced in 1866, at first awarded for gallantry at sea, but extended to the saving of life on land in 1877 to reward the heroes of Tynewydd Colliery, Rhondda, for the successful rescue of five colleagues trapped by flooding for nine days deep underground. Several Albert Medals relating to this incident are in the Museum's collection, including the gold



Silver badge 'for the Forlorn Hope', 1643. This would have been worn sewn to a sash or tunic

South Africa Medal

1877-79:

'1428 Pte E. Jones
2.24th Foot'

Sergeant Evan Jones, c.1917. He was born in Ebbw Vale in 1859 and enlisted in the Monmouth Militia in 1874, joining the 24th Foot in 1877. He served in South Africa, where on 23 January 1879 he was one of the tiny garrison that held Rorke's Drift against a massive Zulu attack. He later served in the Mediterranean, India and Burma, and remained in uniform with various units until 1920. He died in Welshpool in 1931.



Albert Medal in bronze
'Presented by His Majesty to
Walter Cleall for gallantry in
saving life at Cardiff on the
11th August 1919'

Walter Cleall (1897-1983) rescued a maid trapped by fire on the sixth floor of the Royal Hotel, Cardiff, carrying her to safety along a narrow parapet. Photographed c.1920, he is wearing the Albert Medal and three Great War service awards. On his right chest is probably the medal of the Society for the Protection of Life from Fire (Kenneth Williams Collection).



examples presented to Isaac Pride, collier, and to the engineer William Beith. When the Edward Medal was created in 1907 for gallantry in mines and quarries, one of the first two awards went to a Welshman, Henry Everson, of Penallta Colliery; the medal was donated to the Museum by his son in 1978.

In December 1971, the Albert and Edward Medals were revoked and living recipients were deemed to hold the George Cross (GC). Of those who elected to exchange awards, seven chose that their previous medals be donated to the Museum. Two of these, Gordon Bastian and Eynon Hawkins, held the Albert Medal for gallantry at sea, having rescued fellow crewmen in torpedoed merchant ships in 1943. Three 'land' Albert Medals are those of Walter Cleall (see box); Cardiff policeman Kenneth Farrow, who attempted to save a small boy from drowning; and Margaret Vaughan who as a schoolgirl saved a boy caught by the rising tide at Sully Island, near Barry, from drowning. Former miners Bert Craig (Nixon's Navigation Colliery, Mountain Ash, 1922) and Thomas Thomas (Brynamman Colliery, 1933) donated their Edward Medals and in 1988 the Museum also acquired Craig's 'replacement' GC.

In 1990, NMGW took the opportunity afforded by the sale of an important collection to acquire three George Medals, all early awards with Welsh connections. The George Cross and George Medal (GM) were created in 1940 to recognise respectively 'heroism' and 'great gallantry' other than in the face of the enemy – primarily a response to the increased exposure of civilians to great danger during the Blitz. On 19 August 1940, the Royal Naval fuel depot at Llanreath, Pembrokeshire, was bombed and burned for seventeen days, destroying over thirty million gallons of oil. Norman Groom was one of 650 firemen who fought the blaze and one of

three Cardiff men to receive the GM. John Llewellyn Davies rescued a family of four from their wrecked and dangerous house at Chingford, Essex in September 1940; and Thomas Keenan, a nightwatchman, removed an incendiary bomb from the top of a tank containing 300,000 gallons of petrol at a depot in Ferry Road, Cardiff, on 2 January 1941.

The awards highlighted here form just the tip of a historical iceberg. Unlike those of any other country, Britain's campaign medals and most gallantry awards have, since the early nineteenth century, been impressed with the name (and for military awards the number, rank and unit) of their recipients. The pride that was taken in the receipt of such awards is evident from early photographs and reflected in both the designs – often by leading artists of the day – and their production, usually by the Royal Mint, a byword for quality. Even the millions of campaign stars and medals of the Great War of 1914-18 were individually named, though those of the Second World War were issued unnamed, presumably to save costs. Most medals are, therefore, starting points for historical research into the lives and deeds of individuals. We learn, for instance, that Private Charles Symonds, South Wales Borderers, died in July 1915 defending Aden against the Turks – very much a forgotten war. Current curatorial work on the campaign medals in the NMGW collection will lead to publication of a catalogue list and some of the individual stories on the Museum's website. It is hoped that in this way, feedback from visitors to the site may expand our knowledge and understanding of these tales of 'distinguished service'.

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