

# The VICTORIA CROSS



Dale Marsh's famous painting of Tasmania's Teddy Sheean, whose bravery gave his shipmates time to get away from the sinking HMAS Armidale. A long-running campaign aims to have Sheean posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. Picture: Australian War Memorial (ART 28160)

**T**HE Victoria Cross is Australia's highest award for acts of bravery in wartime. It was created in 1856 by Queen Victoria and made retrospective to 1854 to cover the period of the Crimean War. It is possible for any serving member of the armed forces to obtain this award.

The design of the Victoria Cross features a lion standing upon a crown, with the words "For Valour" inscribed below. The medal is suspended from a crimson ribbon. The date of the act of bravery is inscribed on the back, along with the name, rank, and unit of the recipient.

Due to its status, the VC is always the first decoration worn in a row of medals. Recipients have the letters VC after their name, and these appear before any other post-nominals. Recipients are also entitled to a yearly allowance of about \$3700.

## Tasmania first

TWO Tasmanians were the first Australian-born recipients of the Victoria Cross. They were Trooper John Hutton Bisdee, of Melton Mowbray, and Hobart-born Lieutenant Guy George Wyly, who served with the 1st Tasmanian Bushmen in the Boer War. They both won the VC in the same action in the Transvaal on September 1, 1900.

## Gallipoli valour

VICTORIA Cross medals won by Australians who fought at Gallipoli toured the nation in 2010 to commemorate the 95th anniversary of the ill-fated military campaign. This company of brave men - the Gallipoli



John Bisdee VC.  
Australian War Memorial A03685



Guy Wyly VC.  
Australian War Memorial A04424



In keeping with tradition, the Victoria Cross is displayed first in John Bisdee's row of medals. Picture courtesy of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

VCs - formed part of the historic landings on that Turkish peninsula. During the eight-month-long campaign that followed, these men displayed courage, endurance, initiative, discipline and mateship. Such qualities came to be called "the Anzac spirit".

Nine Australians were awarded the VC at Gallipoli, with most of the medals given for actions performed during the battle of Lone Pine. The first of these men, Lance Corporal Albert Jacka, became a national hero. On May 19 and 20, 1915, in an almost superhuman effort, Jacka successfully and single-handedly attacked enemy soldiers who had occupied his trench. Second Lieutenant Hugo Throssell won his VC in late August, 1915, becoming the only light horseman to be so honoured.

The Battle of Lone Pine is remarkable in that seven Australians won the Victoria Cross on a small stretch of ground - with four going to a single battalion in just 24 hours. Captain Alfred Shout had been one of the heroes of the original landing at Anzac in April. At Lone Pine in August he led attacks until a grenade mortally wounded him. At one point Lieutenant Frederick Tubb and Corporals Alexander Burton and William Dunstan fought side-by-side. Tubb was wounded and Burton was killed



National hero Albert Jacka VC  
Australian War Memorial A02868A

in the savage fighting. All won the VC, as did Private John Hamilton, Lance Corporal Leonard Keysor and Lieutenant William Symons. Hamilton was just 19.

## Tasmanians in World War I

THE remainder of Tasmania's 13 VCs were all earned during World War I. The recipients were:

### Sergeant John James Dwyer, of Cygnet.

On September 26, 1917, at Zonnebeke, Belgium, he rushed an enemy gun, killed the crew, captured the gun and brought it back to Australian lines.

### Sergeant Lewis McGee, of Avoca.

He was killed in action on October 12, 1917, when leading his platoon under heavy fire.

### Sergeant Percy Clyde Statton, of Beaconsfield.

On August 12, 1918, near Proyart, France, armed with just a revolver, he rushed four enemy machine-gun posts.

**Sergeant John Woods Whittle, of Hobart.** On April 9-15, 1917, near Boursies, France, he staged a counter-attack and later killed a gun crew and brought back their machine-gun.

### Captain James Ernest Newland, born in Geelong, stationed in Tasmania.

West of Boursies, France, in April 1917, he led his company through heavy fire and repulsed repeated counter attacks.

**Captain Percy Herbert Cherry, of Cradoc.** On March 26, 1917, at Lagincourt, France, he captured enemy positions and beat off counter-attacks. Killed by an enemy shell.

### Lance-Corporal Bernard Sidney Gordon, of Launceston.

East of Bray, France, on August 26-27, 1918, he attacked a machine-gun, killed the gunner and captured the post and 11 men.

### Sergeant Stanley Robert McDougall, of Recherche Bay.

At Dernancourt, France, on March 28, 1918, McDougall killed seven enemy and captured a machine-gun. When the ammunition ran out, he killed three more with a bayonet.

### Corporal Walter Ernest Brown, of New Norfolk.

On July 6, 1918, at Villers-Bretonneux, France, Brown rushed a strongpost and called on the occupants to surrender. He knocked an attacker down with his fist and the others surrendered.

### Captain Henry William Murray, of Evandale.

North-east of Gueudecourt, France, on February 4-5, 1917, he led his company to capture a position and beat off three heavy counter-attacks.

### Lieutenant Alfred Edward Gaby, of Springfield.

On August 8, 1918, at Villers-Bretonneux, France, he used his revolver to drive off gun crews, capturing 50 men and four machine-guns. He was killed by a sniper.

## Australia's own VC

IN 2009, Trooper Mark Donaldson became the first Australian serviceman in almost 40 years to be awarded the VC, and the first recipient of the Victoria Cross for Australia, which replaced the imperial Victoria Cross.



Mark Donaldson VC.

New Zealand and Canada have also instituted their own Victoria Crosses, while the original imperial award continues to be awarded in the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth nations. Regardless of the country it is awarded by, all VCs are cast from the same Crimean War gunmetal.

Trooper Donaldson chose to share his VC with the nation, loaning both the medal and his citation to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. He received the VC following his heroic actions when his patrol was ambushed in Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan, on September 2, 2008. The citation for the medal reads, in part: "During an early stage of the enemy ambush, he deliberately exposed himself to enemy fire in order to draw attention to himself and thus away from wounded soldiers. This selfless act alone bought enough time for those wounded to be moved to relative safety."

Prior to Trooper (now Corporal) Donaldson, Australia's most recent VC recipient was Keith Payne, for gallantry in Vietnam in 1969.

## Teddy Sheean

TASMANIAN-BORN Ordinary Seaman Edward Sheean was killed during an attack by Japanese aircraft which sank HMAS Armidale in the Arafura Sea on December 1, 1942. After the order to "abandon ship", Teddy Sheean, although twice wounded, stayed at his gunner's post, bringing down an enemy aircraft. He was still firing when the ship sank. Sheean was posthumously Mentioned in Despatches "for bravery and devotion to duty when HMAS Armidale was lost." In May 1999 he was honoured when a Royal Australian Navy submarine was named HMAS Sheean - the first time a RAN vessel was named after an ordinary seaman. A long-running campaign aims to have Sheean posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery permanently displays the VC medals of Alfred Gaby, John Bisdee and Guy Wyly.

## Sources

[www.anzacday.com.au](http://www.anzacday.com.au)

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<http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/sheean.asp>