

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft

The daring 'special forces' operation... 100 years before the birth of the SAS

Having infiltrated an enemy coast, two British sailors laid up for three days then ambushed five Russian despatch riders to steal their letters, receiving the second and third ever Victoria Crosses for their heroism. Now Lord Ashcroft reveals the full story of Crimean War courage

ON A low-lying grassy headland at the far east of Åland is a memorial 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 goes on to read: "To commemorate the fallen of the British naval force in the Baltic and the bravery of their comrades."

Just a stone's throw away from the granite memorial lie the crumbling remains of a huge fort, built in the first half of the 19th century to house 2,500 soldiers as – not for the first or last time – Russia attempted to expand its borders and defend its new territories against the West. Some 170 years on, I visited the archipelago of Åland, mid-way between the mainlands of Finland and Sweden, to tell the remarkable story of the second and third VC actions in history.

With the help of two local historians, I can shed new light on the exact circumstances that led to the awards of Britain and the Commonwealth's premier decoration for valour in the presence of the enemy.

As a champion of bravery, I am the proud custodian of the medal group awarded to the splendidly-named Royal Navy officer, Rear Admiral John Bythesea.

I have long been intrigued by the bravery of Bythesea and his accomplice, Stoker William Johnstone, because it was a very early example of a Special Forces-style operation – yet it took place nearly a century before the formation of the legendary SAS.

Early in the Crimean War, the British fleet was stationed in the Baltic off the west 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. During their meeting, Napier gently reprimanded Yelverton for the fact that vital mail from the Russian Tsar was being constantly landed on Vardo one of the Åland islands, and forwarded from there to the Commanding Officer of Bomarsund.

Napier's gripe was that the British forces had taken no action to prevent this.

Upon returning to his ship, Yelverton mentioned this to his junior officers and one of them, Bythesea, then a lieutenant, immediately became determined to do something to disrupt this flow of official despatches that British intelligence sources had identified.

Then 27 and originally from Bath, he came up with an ambitious plan to slip on to Vardo and to intercept the enemy mail as it was being moved across the island.

He chose Stoker William Johnstone to accompany him on the mission. On August 9, just two days after Napier's conversation with Yelverton, Bythesea and Johnstone rowed ashore, clearly with minimal planning relating to what lay ahead.

Fortunately, 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 only too willing to help them, and gave them food and lodgings.

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 just a single flintlock pistol each, they ambushed the five unarmed messengers, capturing at least three of them along with the despatches.

Bythesea and Johnstone forced their captors to row out to the Arrogant. Johnstone steered the craft whilst Bythesea kept his pistol aimed at their prisoners. On their arrival at the ship,

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

But who was Bythesea's courageous accomplice? In the official citation for the VCs, he was identified as the ship's stoker "William Johnstone". However, the man was also known as "John Johnstone".

Until now, it has been widely believed Johnstone was Swedish 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. Now, however, two historians, Johan Granlund and Mikael Apel, have 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.

They have unearthed a Russian police report drawn up at the time after interviewing islanders from Vardo in late 1854, including the messengers who were captured and later released. The report reveals that the mail cap-

ture 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 Russian Empire.

One of the captured messengers was in no doubt that one of the British sailors, clearly Johnstone, stated that he was born in Kristinestad, Finland. The man added that Johnstone had lived in England "from his younger years" and "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 Vardo 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." The historians added: "Revealing in Swedish to his

Alandic prisoners that he was born in Kristinestad, must however have seemed risk-free to Johnstone."

According to the police report, Bythesea and Johnstone returned to Vardo a second time following their initial three-day visit from August 9 to 12 for which they were awarded the VC. They went again on August 14, to search for further mail which was not in the mail bag seized from the messengers. It is not clear how they knew about this additional mail but they returned with three further letters.

Meanwhile, British and French forces were attacking the Russian fort.

The defenders held out for several days until finally surrendering. The next actions for which two VCs were awarded were to

clash, later known as the Battle of Bomarsund, cost 85 killed and wounded but saw some 2,000 enemy combatants captured.

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 for brave actions – was the decoration to Mate (later Rear Admiral) Charles Lucas, who as a young officer was serving in HMS Hecla.

His VC was for his brave deed in throwing a live 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. They were announced in The London Gazette on February 24, 1857. The initial investiture, intended for the first 93 recipients of the medal took place in Hyde Park, London on June 26 1857. On that occasion, 62 servicemen 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. She accidentally "stabbed" Bythesea in the chest while pinning his medal on him.

Johnstone was serving overseas and had his VC sent out for presentation aboard his ship.

There are sad postscripts, however, relating to both VC recipients. Bythesea rose to the rank of Rear Admiral but his career ended in disgrace when he was court martialed after his ship ran aground near Malta in 1872.

It was an unfortunate end to a previously distinguished and unblemished career. Banned from commanding another ship, he died in London in August 1906, aged 79.

He is buried in Bath Abbey cemetery in his

home city, while a memorial was erected for him and his brothers at his father's old church in Freshford.

His 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.

HOWEVER, my delight was tempered slightly by the fact that Bythesea's other medals had been stolen some 30 years earlier and were never recovered.

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. It is not known whether Johnstone's VC was ever presented to him on board his ship, HMS Brunswick.

It was later given to his widow, Eliza. Johnstone's VC was acquired by the London

auction house Spink in the 1930s and sold to the wealthy US collector, Robert B Honeyman Jr. In 1957, he donated his collection to The Museum of Natural History of Los Angeles County, where the medal remains today.

I'm indebted to Mikael Apel and Johan Granlund for sharing their findings with me.

They contacted me because I own the world's largest collection of VCs and because I own the Bythesea decoration. Before I left Åland, the two historians showed me the remains of Bomarsund fort, which was destroyed by the victors in September 1854.

Both fort and its visitors' centre lie on a 2,000-acre site now being preserved for future generations. I'm delighted that now – the best part of two centuries later – the full and accurate story of these two famous VC actions can finally be told. Both Bythesea and Johnstone are thoroughly deserving of their place in history as "the bravest of the brave".

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft



POIGNANT: Lord Ashcroft with cannons at remains of Bomarsund Fort on Åland



FIREPOWER:The run-up to the Battle of Bomarsund, 1854, main, saw the second and third VCs ever awarded



HIGHLY DECORATED: Rear Admiral John Bythesea wearing his VC, now, inset, part of Lord Ashcroft's collection

SCANNERS
please **LOSE** the ribbon outlined in yellow from behind the medal. ta



HISTORY SEEKERS: Johan Granlund and Mikael Apel, right

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