

Victoria Cross Assembly

100 years ago, the First World War was in its last throes. The Western Allies were preparing to attack the Hindenburg line, land carefully chosen by the German army to enable them to halt any advance. If the Allies were to win the war, they would have to defeat the Germans by crossing the St Quentin canal and breaching the Hindenburg line.

Five days before the main battle of St Quentin, 100 years ago today, the Fifth Battalion Royal Leicestershire Regiment were stationed in front of a German trench near the village of Pontruet, a few miles from the Canal. If the attack on the canal was going to go ahead, the German trenches near Pontruet had to be cleared first. This involved a frontal assault towards several machine guns.

The 5th Leicesters had seven former pupils of Merchant Taylors' School in its ranks on that day. One of them was a young officer, Lt. John Cridland Barrett. His actions that day led to the award of the Victoria Cross, highest award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces.

John Barrett was the son of a Chemist and attended Merchant Taylors' between 1907 and 1916. He was a strong swimmer, in the school swimming gala of 1915 the only pupil to beat him was Ronald Cove-Smith, who went to play rugby for England 29 times and Captain the British Lions in South Africa. Barrett played rugby at a lower level, gaining Third XV colours. He was also a member of the Officers Training Corps – the forerunner of today's CCF - where he was promoted to Company Quartermaster.

A strong academic, Barrett had to pCnp(.)JTJ.BTF2 12 Tf1 0 0 1 385.87 3(e)-5(tt)e6au(33005200510e)6(re92

He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions – the highest award for gallantry in war. Following the war, he trained as a surgeon at St Thomas' Hospital in London. He went on to become a surgeon at the Leicester Royal Infirmary and achieved the rank of colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps in World War 2. He never lost touch with the School and, following our move to this site, raised funds for the outdoor swimming pool that was built in 1933. At the end of the war the 4 surviving officers of the Leicestershires (Godwin Edward Barnwell, John David Hills, Donald Burman Petch and John Cridland Barrett) presented a trophy to the school – The 5th Leicestershire Trophy, Inter-House Athletic Sports Championship – to commemorate this fact.

Yesterday, I attended a ceremony at Leamington Spa where John Barrett was honoured for winning the Victoria Cross. A commemorative paving slab was dedicated to him at the war

other awards for bravery and if you want to read his story, then please look at the display outside the staff common room next to the Main Quad.

After the War, Pollard became a writer, drawing on his own experiences to create adventure novels. By any measure, his is a remarkable story.

Whilst we have focused on three stories today, over 300 former pupils of Merchant Taylors' who fought in the First World War were honoured for their bravery. We will be remembering many of them this week – their stories are told around the School and there is an exhibition in the Chaplaincy Centre. The First World War demanded a particular sort of bravery – standing up to danger without regard for one's own life; saving the lives of others.

Their stories come from a time of extreme adversity, where soldiers lived with the prospect of death every day. We should remember that none of those young men knew what would be asked of them. They did not choose their time, or the terrors they would face. They did not sign up for inclusion on our Roll of Honour in the lobby out there. That Roll of Honour came for them, and they met its demands with bravery, endurance and determination. Who knows what the future holds for each of us. What can *we* learn from *them* about the idea of bravery today?

My first thought is that bravery is the fundamental virtue. We can have all sorts of noble or moral instincts, we can have the highest principles, but if we lack the moral and sometimes physic

And finally, it takes bravery to face suffering with dignity or faith. Perhaps we will need this form of bravery to cope with with an illness or an injury. Perhaps again when it is *our* turn to face old age and its inevitable declines.

During this week we hope you will explore some of these definitions and reflect on what they mean to you in your life. Perhaps you will come up with your own.