



Heroism Remembered From
The Union Jack Club
Victoria Cross
Roll of Honour



John Alexander Cruickshank VC

D.O.B: 20th May, 1920, D.O.A: 18th Jul, 1944

Occupation at time of action: Flying Officer, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve,
No. 210 Squadron.

John Alexander Cruickshank (1920-), the last living recipient to have been awarded the VC during the Second World War, was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, and was a pupil of Aberdeen Grammar School and later, Daniel Stewart's College, in Edinburgh. In 1938 he gained employment with the Commercial Bank of Scotland, but in May 1939, a few days before his 19th birthday, he enlisted in the Royal Regiment of Artillery, Territorial Army.

On the outbreak of war, Cruickshank was called for service and continued to serve with the Royal Artillery until early 1941, when he applied for a transfer to the RAF for training as aircrew. In July 1941 Cruickshank began basic training at No 11 Initial Training Wing and from Leading Aircraftman, he underwent further training in Canada and the USA, eventually to be commissioned as a Pilot Officer, RAFVR. Finally, fully-qualified as a flying boat pilot and with his crew, he joined his first operational unit, 210 Squadron, on 25th March 1943.

Flying the squadron's Consolidated Catalina flying boats, Cruickshank soon adapted to the unit's routine of operations, he had completed 24 full operational sorties, apart from many other "non-operational" flights, but – in common with many of his fellow "boat" skippers – had seen little excitement or direct offensive action against the enemy. On 17 July 1944 an RAF Catalina flying-boat with a ten-man crew took off from Sullom Voe in the Shetland Islands. Its role was to assist in providing anti-submarine cover for ships involved in Operation Mascot, an unsuccessful attempt by carrier-based aircraft to destroy the German battleship Tirpitz moored in the Altafjord near Norway's North Cape.

Citation

“This officer was the captain and pilot of a Catalina flying boat which was recently engaged on an anti-submarine patrol over northern waters. When a U-boat was sighted on the surface, Flying Officer Cruickshank at once turned to the attack. In the face of fierce anti-aircraft fire he manoeuvred into position and ran in to release his depth charges. Unfortunately, they failed to

drop. Flying Officer Cruickshank knew that the failure of this attack had deprived him of the advantage of surprise and that his aircraft offered a good target to the enemy's determined and now heartened gunners. Without hesitation, he climbed and turned to come in again. The Catalina was met by intense and accurate fire and was repeatedly hit. The navigator/bomb aimer was killed. The second pilot and two other members of the crew were injured. Flying Officer Cruickshank was struck in seventy-two places, receiving two serious wounds in the lungs and ten penetrating wounds in the lower limbs. His aircraft was badly damaged and filled with the fumes of exploding shells. But he did not falter. He pressed home his attack, and released the depth charges himself, straddling the submarine perfectly. The U-boat was sunk. He then collapsed and the second pilot took over the controls. He recovered shortly afterwards and, though bleeding profusely, insisted on resuming command and retaining it until he was satisfied that the damaged aircraft was under control, that a course had been set for base and that all the necessary signals had been sent.

Only then would he consent to receive medical aid and have his wounds attended to. He refused morphia in case it might prevent him from carrying on. During the next five and half hours of the return flight he several times lapsed into unconsciousness owing to loss of blood. When he came to, his first thought on each occasion was for the safety of his aircraft and crew. The damaged aircraft eventually reached base, but it was clear that an immediate landing would be a hazardous task for the wounded and less experienced second pilot. Although able to breathe only with the greatest difficulty, Flying Officer Cruickshank insisted on being carried forward and propped up in the second pilot's seat. For a full hour, in spite of his agony and ever-increasing weakness, he gave orders as necessary, refusing to allow the aircraft to be brought down until the conditions of light and sea made this possible without undue risk.

With his assistance the aircraft was safely landed on the water. He then directed the taxiing and beaching of the aircraft so that it could easily be salvaged. When the medical officer went on board, Flying Officer Cruickshank collapsed, and he had to be given a blood transfusion before he could be removed to hospital. By pressing home the second attack in his gravely wounded condition and continuing his exertions on the return journey with his strength failing all the time, he seriously prejudiced his chance of survival even if the aircraft safely reached its base. Throughout, he set an example of determination, fortitude and devotion to duty in keeping with the highest traditions of the Service."

Cruickshank's injuries were so severe that he never returned to operational flying, being posted to HQ Coastal Command in 1944. He eventually left the RAF in September 1946 to resume his "interrupted" banking career. In early 1977, after a successful career in international finance, Cruickshank returned home to Edinburgh to retire. Cruickshank is currently the only living recipient of the Victoria Cross from World War II, and lives in a nursing home in Scotland.

Although rarely seen in public these days, due to his age, Members will be very pleased to hear that we contacted The VC and GC Association this week to enquire after him, on this anniversary, and they informed us that 'John is now 102 years old and in amazingly good form!', which is excellent and welcome news.

Lest We Forget