The medal made more famous by a film star

As a Norfolk war hero's Victoria Cross goes up for sale, **STEVE SNELLING** tells the extraordinary story behind the medal that became one of the most celebrated film props in cinema history and the remarkable man who earned it.

IT WAS THE MEDAL THAT FOUND FILM FAME and inspired an emotional Norfolk family reunion. Not that Harry Cross had any inkling of all that when he turned up at a newspaper office one day in 1954, clutching a battered suitcase containing his most precious possession: the Victoria Cross he had won on a French battlefield 36 years earlier.

He was answering an appeal by movie star David Niven who wanted a genuine medal to wear in the title role of his new movie, a courtroom drama called Carrington VC. And his generous loan not only provided Hollywood's favourite Englishman with one of the most extraordinary props in cinema history but sparked a wave of publicity that resulted in him renewing contact with a long-lost sister who had given him up for dead.

Now, almost 60 years on, memories of his behind-the-scenes part in a British film classic and its astonishing consequences are being stirred all over again by his family's decision to sell the outstanding, celebrity-linked medal group.

Tomorrow, at Spink's plush Bloomsbury auction rooms in the heart of London, the 'Carrington VC' is expected to make a small fortune when it goes under the hammer along with five other medals, including a second award for gallantry.

One of the most famous and widely viewed Victoria Crosses in the history of the award is estimated to fetch between £110,000 and £130,000, although Spink's medal expert Oliver Pepys would not be surprised to see the final figure go much higher. "It is a splendid set of medals with a terrific story attached to the VC," he said, "and while our estimate is sensible it is slightly on the conservative side and I think there's every possibility of it being exceeded on the day."

As the only Victoria Cross-Military Medal combination to a member of the short-lived Machine Gun Corps, a unit known as 'the Suicide Club', the group was always bound to attract considerable interest from the medal-collecting fraternity, but it is its unique association with a Hollywood superstar which is liable to set pulses racing and bids soaring. Indeed, the strange saga behind the 'Carrington VC' has a romance all of its own. It is a story of triumph against the odds and of heart-breaking tragedy that culminates in a tantalising brush with fame and a tear-jerking reunion. All the ingredients, in fact, for a hit movie.

But when Harry met David in the summer of 1954 not even the movie's grateful publicists were aware of the VC-holder's incredible 'back story', nor how it would all play out.

On the face of it, they simply had on their hands one of the oddest of odd couples and most unlikely of movie 'double acts': a real-life, straight-talking, working-class war hero and the ultimate charmer who had made his name playing suave and sophisticated upper-crust heroes on the big screen.

In almost every way, they were like chalk and cheese. Where the debonair Niven was rich beyond most people's dreams, Harry, or Crossy as he was known to his pals, had known little other than hard times, scraping a precarious living in London's dockland and working as a messenger to pay the rent in a shabby tenement block in one of the capital's poorest boroughs. And yet, for all their differences, they were alike in one respect: both shared a similar passion for wine, women and song!

All of this emerged some years ago when I met Harry's grandson, Roy Allen. "They were his favourites in life," he told me, a knowing smile spreading across his face. "He lived life to the full and you could say he flaunted what he had."

Only trouble was, what he had didn't amount to very much. At least not in the material sense. But what Harry did possess was character and courage in abundance as would be repeatedly shown during a life far more remarkable than many a cinematic fiction.

He was born, Arthur Henry Cross, a humble carpenter's son, in Shipdham, near Dereham, on December 13, 1884, one of five children to William and Emma Cross (née Spelman). His education was perfunctory and undistinguished. He worked for a time as a butcher's boy, but the prospects of a life on the land held no appeal and he chose instead to leave village life behind.

Already a strapping six-footer with a countryman's lolling gait that he never lost, Harry was just 15 when, in a scene straight out of a silent movie plot, he set out to seek his fortune in the great metropolis. Quite what his ambitions were are uncertain. There was speculation in the family that he might have sought in vain to enlist under-age in the army to fight in the Boer War. All that is known is that he took a variety of humdrum, labouring jobs, none of which was likely to make him rich: at the Great Eastern Railway's Bishopgate goods station and in the Woolwich Dockyard.

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Amid scenes of grinding poverty, he grafted hard and grew up fast. By 17, he was married to a local Camberwell girl and by 19 had become a father for the first time. What followed was a roller-coaster of a life crammed full of hardship and joy and spliced with enough tragedy to fill a half-dozen or more Catherine Cookson novels.

In a bible presented to him by the Congregational Sunday School in Shipham a couple of years before he headed off to London, Harry listed his family's rapid growth and wretched misfortune. Over the course of 35 years and two marriages, he fathered nine children, only three of whom survived into adulthood. In the space of three painful years, between May 1914 and April 1917, he lost two sons and two daughters, the youngest an infant of 15 months.

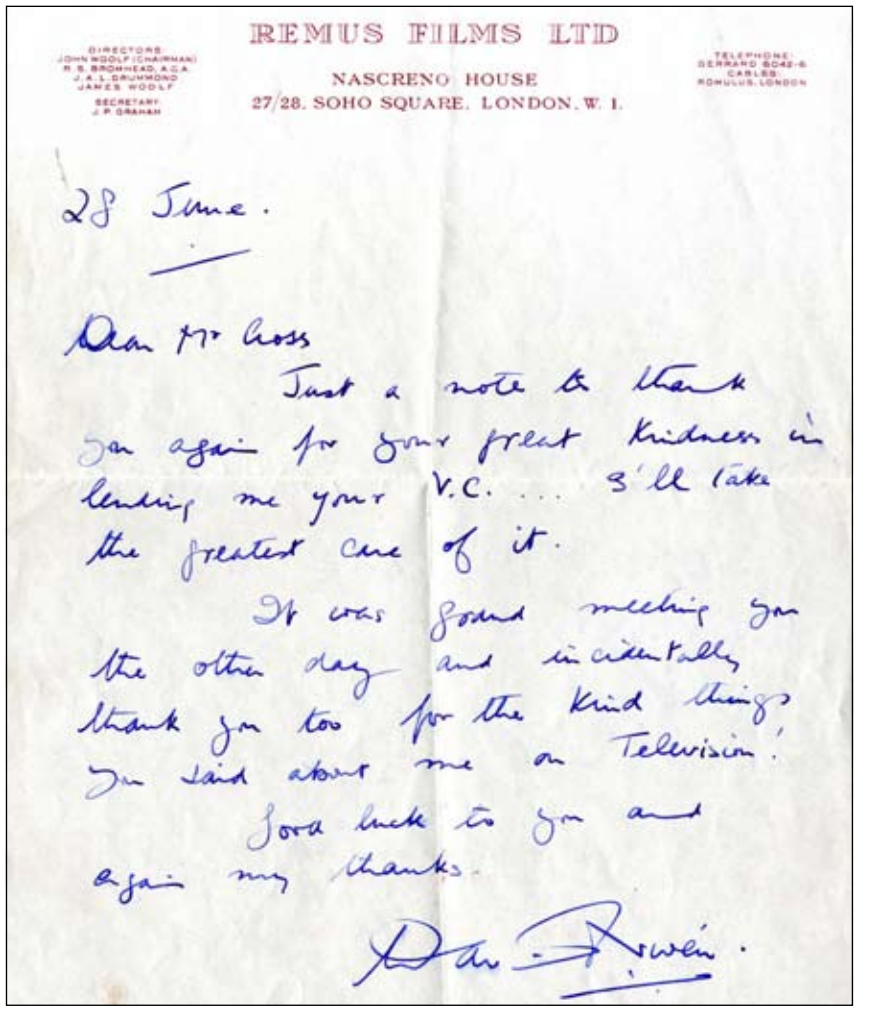
The eldest victim was 11-year-old Frances Grace, who was the first of four members of his family to succumb to air raids on London during two world wars.

For as well as losing Frances while serving abroad, Harry endured the agony of having his second family, his wife Minnie, along with his children, Terry and Mary, aged four and three, wiped out by a bomb during one of the heaviest blitzes on London on May 10/11, 1941.

"He hardly ever talked about that night," his grandson told me. "It was something of a taboo subject. But just once, when he was a bit low, he did tell me something about it, of how, during an air raid, Min turned to him and said she was going to take the children down to the shelter in the square below. But he wouldn't go. He said 'I lived through the first war. If they are going to get me now, it'll be in my own home'."

And so he stayed and survived unscathed, while a bomb scored a direct hit on the shelter where his wife and children had sought protection. "There was nothing left except a pair of shoes and the odd bit of clothing," said Roy.

Yet if war brought Harry a double helping of tragedy, it also gave him the opportunity to shine. The strength of character displayed as a teenager exchanging village life for the big city made him a formidable front-line soldier



REMUS FILMS LTD

NASCRENO HOUSE
27/28. SOHO SQUARE. LONDON. W. 1.

28 June.

Dear Mr Cross

Just a note to thank you again for your great kindness in lending me your V.C. ... I'll take the greatest care of it.

It was good meeting you the other day and incidentally thank you too for the kind things you said about me on Television!

Good luck to you and again my thanks.

Yours Sincerely
David Niven.

whose record of gallantry catapulted him into the ranks of the bravest of the brave.

One of Norfolk's most highly decorated heroes of the first world war, he joined the 21st London Regiment in May 1916, 10 weeks after the death of his youngest son, and later transferred to the newly-raised Machine Gun Corps with whom he earned the VC and MM for two death-defying acts of bravery performed in two months' grim fighting during the spring of 1918.

By then an acting corporal serving in C Company, 40th Battalion MGC, Harry was in charge of two Vickers machine-guns, attempting to stem a massive German breakthrough that threatened to smash the Allies' grip on the western front.

In the course of five days of ceaseless fighting, the unit suffered more than 150 casualties during which the commanding officer reckoned "all ranks fought with the greatest gallantry and tenacity and with absolute disregard of danger". None more so than Harry Cross.

On March 24, near the ruins of Ervillers on the Somme, Harry and his sub-section were surrounded and rushed by the enemy. Somehow, he managed to get away and succeeded in reaching the rest of his section, where he might reasonably have remained, thanking his lucky stars at his marvellous escape.

But next morning, still smarting from the loss of his guns, Harry hatched a plan to get them back. It involved no one but himself and a service revolver.

Making the most of the carnage and confusion all around, he crept back to his old position which he found occupied by enemy soldiers. He counted at least seven, sufficient to deter all but the most determined of men. Harry, however, did not hesitate.

Trusting in speed and surprise to balance the unequal odds, he leapt up, pointing his revolver straight at them. Incredibly, the threat proved enough to cow them into submission. The startled Germans threw down their rifles and moments later they were being marched back across no-man's-land at gunpoint, carrying the two Vickers machine guns together with their tripods and ammunition to their rightful owners!

Within hours, Harry's recaptured guns were in action again, destroying wave after wave of attacks as the Germans fought to maintain the momentum of the assault. The subsequent award of a Victoria Cross, the country's highest award for valour, recognised his "extreme gallantry, initiative and dash", but by then Harry had been in the thick of it again, holding a bridge against a German attack. The result was a Military Medal to add to his VC – an award he always maintained was harder earned than his more prized decoration.

Suddenly, Harry was headline news. He was feted in his adopted home of Southwark and his home village of Shipdham, where he was given a hero's reception and an engraved gold watch.

Like many thrust ill-prepared into the spotlight, Harry enjoyed his new-found celebrity a little too much. Arrested by military police for overstaying his leave, he faced an absentees' court. And as he was being led away, he complained to a watching journalist: "This is what I get for winning the VC for the Machine Gun Corps!" Discharged after the war, he slipped back into obscurity. By the second world war, then on his second marriage with two more young children to support, his visits back to Norfolk had become fewer and fewer – and then came the shattering news of the devastating blitz in 1941.

MOVIE MEMORIES: Main picture, Harry Cross meets David Niven on the set of Carrington VC in 1954, and, right,) the letter he received from the actor following the loan of his Victoria Cross. Left, with family and friends, he leaves Buckingham Palace after receiving his award. Above, the collection of medals including the Victoria Cross which could sell for at least £110,000 tomorrow.

According to the story that reached his only surviving sister in Wymondham the whole family, Harry included, had been killed. For 13 years Diana Halford continued to believe her brave brother was dead until, out of the blue, one day in 1954, she saw a picture of him in a newspaper, presenting David Niven with his Victoria Cross.

"Dear Brother Arthur," she wrote, scribbling a quick letter off to the newspaper, "I was surprised to see your name in the paper last week. We thought you were killed with your wife and family when Jerry bombed London."

Harry was overjoyed. Having lost touch with his sister some years earlier, he had thought himself the last of his generation. "I don't mind telling you I dropped a few tears reading that letter," he told a reporter. "To find you have a sister alive after all these years is a wonderful thing." A few days later, brother and sister met in Norfolk in what Harry described as "the most wonderful family reunion of my life".

As for the VC that had helped end years of separation, David Niven kept his promise to "take the greatest care of it" and, filming complete, returned it to Harry who continued to wear it with pride at veterans' gatherings until he died in 1965. In the fullness of time, a road in his home village would be named in his honour, but almost half a century after his death it seems ironic that the great honour he risked his life to win should be best remembered being worn not by him but by a Hollywood legend. Not that Harry ever minded.

For as his grandson told me: "There was a special press photograph done of the presentation and Crossy always used to laugh about it. He reckoned they had to stand Niven on a box because he was so much shorter than him." It was, by all accounts, an anecdote which he loved to recount about an unlikely cinematic supporting role that now looks likely to pay unexpected dividends for his family.

GRACE CORNE
IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Sisland, April 17

Fragile flower manages to cope with the spring winds

As may be expected from the English weather, the spring flowers, deceived into an unusually early blooming time, are now tossing in torrential rain and something almost approaching a gale.

The little snake's-head fritillaries have only just begun to flower but although they appear to be extremely delicate they are coping very well with the wind. They are growing in a small raised flower bed and at the minute there are nine purplish flowers and three white, not planted as individual colours, but occurring quite naturally.

It seems extraordinary that such a fragile and fascinating flower was until quite recent times gathered by the armful from the wild.

The flowers are strangely beautiful, but thought by some to be sinister. In some counties they may even be known as 'Death Bells'' 'Weeping Widows,' or the 'Solemn Bells of Sodom.' Before the buds open they most certainly do resemble the bowed head of a mottled snake about to strike, and it must be mentioned that the plants are, indeed, poisonous.

At first sight it might be difficult to justify the claims that some of the fritillaries are native flowers. They do now grow wild in quantity in areas close to Oxford University but no mention of them was made until the late 1600s, when it was noted they were growing near Ruislip.

The herbalist Gerard wrote that "nothing is set downe hereof by the antient Writers, nor any thing observed by the modderne, only they are maintained and cherished in gardens for the beautie and rarenesse of the floures".

It has therefore been suggested that they are escapes from some of the early important gardens of plant collectors. However it is only correct to mention that there is the possibility that the absence of the plant in the wild was due to the constant and drastic loss of wet woodland, apparently the preferred habitat of the fritillary.

The unusual appearance of the flower caused it to be given even more local names. For some it called to mind the unusual checked and spotted plumage of the guinea fowl, hence the name 'Ginny-hen Floure,' or perhaps 'Turky-hen' and the Latin name meleagris. Gerard described it as 'the Chequered Daffodill,' of which he felt sure there were two varieties.

However the name by which the plant finally became known was Fritillaria and, like the plant itself, the origin of this is uncertain. It is thought that an early observer by the name of de l'Obel compared the unusual check patterning of the flower to a games board with its alternating black and white squares.

A fritillus was not the board but the dice box with which the games were played, but which games were played with a dice on a chess board?