

Voices of War Life Story

Robert Henry Cain VC
1909 - 1974





Name: Robert Henry Cain VC TD

Other names/aliases:

Date of birth: 2 January 1909

Place of birth: Isle of Man

Nationality: British

Date of death: 2 May 1974

Place of death: Crowborough, Sussex

Service No: 129484

Unit(s): Honourable Artillery Company, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, 2nd Battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment

Rank: Major

Burial: Braddan Cemetery on the Isle of Man.

Memorials: Robert Cain VC Memorial Chapel, St Bridget's Hospice, Kensington Rd, Douglas, Isle of Man; bursary at King William's College, Isle of Man; plaque in Bedford School Memorial Hall; plaque in Garrison Church, Whittington Barracks, Lichfield, Staffordshire; memorial plaque Somerset Light Infantry Museum, Taunton, Somerset.

Medals and awards: Victoria Cross (VC), Territorial Decoration (TD) 1939-45 Star; Italy Star; France and Germany Star; Defence Medal 1939-45; War Medal 1939-45; Coronation Medal 1953;

Education, Employment and Clubs: King William's College; Shell Oil Company.



Life Story

Robert Henry Cain VC TD was a British Army officer who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions during the Battle of Arnhem in September 1944. He was the only recipient of the Victoria Cross from the battle to survive, and his unit was the only one to win two VCs during the battle.

Born in Shanghai to Manx parents, Robert's family—Robert James Cain and Emily Elizabeth (née Lewin)—returned to the Isle of Man while he was still a child. He was raised and educated there, attending King William's College in Castletown. He later joined the Shell Oil Company, which took him to work in Thailand and Malaya.

Military Career

With the outbreak of the Second World War, he received an emergency commission into the British Army in 1940, joining the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. In 1942, he was seconded to the 2nd Battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment, a unit of the elite 1st Airlanding Brigade, which was part of the 1st Airborne Division. He was temporarily promoted to major in 1943.

Cain's first combat experience with airborne forces came during the Allied invasion of Sicily in July 1943. He participated in Operation Ladbroke, a glider assault aimed at securing key objectives on the island. After this campaign, he was given command of B Company of the 2nd Battalion. His most famous period of service, however, was during Operation Market Garden in September 1944.

The Battle of Arnhem

Major Cain's extraordinary heroism during the Battle of Arnhem took place over a brutal six-day period from September 19th to 25th, 1944. As the commander of B Company, 2nd Battalion,

South Staffordshire Regiment, his mission was to hold a key sector near the St. Elizabeth Hospital in Oosterbeek. Unbeknownst to the Allied planners, two SS Panzer divisions were present in the area, turning the expected swift operation into a desperate siege.

On the 19th of September, his company found itself completely cut off from the rest of the British 1st Airborne Division, surrounded by superior German forces equipped with tanks, self-propelled guns, and infantry. The situation was dire, and the Germans were making repeated, concerted attempts to overrun the British position.

Cain's actions on September 21st became the centerpiece of his Victoria Cross citation. After a German StuG III self-propelled gun approached his company's position, he went out alone, armed with only a PIAT. Lying in a trench, he waited until the vehicle was just 20 yards away before firing. The StuG returned fire, its machine-gun rounds and the resulting debris from a nearby building wounding Cain and temporarily blinding him. Despite this, he continued to fire his PIAT until he had scored several direct hits, immobilizing the vehicle. He then directed a 75mm howitzer to finish it off.

The next morning, he drove off three more German tanks using his PIAT, on each occasion leaving the relative safety of cover to engage the enemy from open ground. Over the following days, he was constantly on the move, inspiring his men and directing the defense. He sustained multiple wounds, including a perforated eardrum that severely impaired his hearing, but he refused rest or medical attention, famously bandaging his own ears and continuing to fight.

On September 25th, the Germans launched a major attack with self-propelled guns, flamethrowers, and infantry. By this point, all the PIATs in his company were out of action. Armed with only a light 2-inch mortar, Cain skillfully used the weapon to engage the enemy. His daring leadership of the few men still under his command demoralized the German attack, which, after an engagement lasting more than three hours, withdrew in disorder.

Throughout the entire battle, Cain's actions were legendary among his fellow troops. His *"coolness and courage under incessant fire could not be surpassed,"* and his *"powers of endurance and leadership were the admiration of all."* He was personally credited with destroying or disabling a total of six tanks and several self-propelled guns. He was one of the last men to cross the Rhine during the evacuation, having famously taken the time to shave before doing so. He was the only Victoria Cross recipient from the battle to survive.

Post-War Life

After the Battle of Arnhem, Cain and the 1st Airborne Division were sent to Norway in May 1945 as part of Operation Domsday, with the task of overseeing the peaceful surrender of German forces there. Cain travelled to Oslo with the 1st Airlanding Brigade on 11 May 1945. Working alongside the Norwegian resistance, the British took the surrender of German troops in Norway without incident, before returning to the UK on 25 August 1945. Having remained in the service of the South Staffordshire Regiment, he officially relinquished his wartime commission in December 1945 and was granted the honorary rank of major. He was also awarded the Territorial Decoration (TD) for his service.

After the war, Cain returned to his pre-war job with Shell, living and working in East Asia and West Africa. In 1951, he was elected to the Nigerian House of Representatives. He and his wife, Pamela, went on to have four children: Finlo, Rosemary, Helena, and Frances. Frances was married to Jeremy Clarkson between 1993 and 2014. He continued to work for Shell until his retirement in 1965 and returned to the Isle of Man, where he lived out the remainder of his life with his family.

In a poignant detail, his daughter, Frances Cain, has mentioned that she was unaware of her father's Victoria Cross until after his death. This suggests that like many heroes of his generation, he was humble about his wartime service and did not speak about his extraordinary actions. He died of cancer in 1974 at the age of 65. His ashes were interred in the family grave at Braddan Cemetery on the Isle of Man.

VC Citation:

War Office, 2nd November, 1944.

“The KING has been graciously pleased to approve awards of the VICTORIA CROSS to: —

Captain (temporary Major) Robert Henry Cain (129484), The Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, (attd. The South Staffordshire Regiment) (I Airborne Division) (Salcombe, Devon).

In Holland on 19th September, 1944, Major Cain was commanding a rifle company of the South Staffordshire Regiment during the Battle of Arnhem when his company was cut off from the rest of the battalion and during the next six days was closely engaged with enemy tanks, self-propelled guns and infantry. The Germans made repeated attempts to break into the company position by infiltration and had they succeeded in doing so the whole situation of the Airborne Troops would have been jeopardised.

Major Cain, by his outstanding devotion to duty and remarkable powers of leadership, was to a large extent personally responsible for saving a vital sector from falling into the hands of the enemy.

On 20th September a Tiger tank approached the area held by his company and Major Cain went out alone to deal with it armed with a P.I.A.T.. Taking up a position he held his fire until the tank was only 20 yards away when he opened up. The tank immediately halted and turned its guns on him, shooting away a corner of the house near where this officer was lying. Although wounded by machine gun bullets and falling masonry, Major Cain continued firing until he had scored several direct hits, immobilised the tank and supervised the bringing up of a 75mm. howitzer which completely destroyed it. Only then would he consent to have his wounds dressed.

In the next morning this officer drove off three more tanks by the fearless use of his P.I.A.T., on each occasion leaving cover and taking up position in open ground with complete disregard for his

personal safety.

During the following days, Major Cain was everywhere where danger threatened, moving amongst his men and encouraging them by his fearless example to hold out. He refused rest and medical attention in spite of the fact that his hearing had been seriously impaired because of a perforated eardrum and he was suffering from multiple wounds.

On 25 September the enemy made a concerted attack on Major Cain's position, using self-propelled guns, flame throwers and infantry. By this time the last P.I.A.T. had been put out of action and Major Cain was armed with only a light 2" mortar. However, by a skilful use of this weapon and his daring leadership of the few men still under his command, he completely demoralized the enemy who, after an engagement lasting more than three hours, withdrew in disorder.

Throughout the whole course of the Battle of Arnhem, Major Cain showed superb gallantry. His powers of endurance and leadership were the admiration of all his fellow officers and stories of his valour were being constantly exchanged amongst the troops. His coolness and courage under incessant fire could not be surpassed."

There are some errors in Cain's citation.

The action described as occurring on the 20th actually took place on the 21st (identified as this is the day on which Lieutenant Meikle—his spotter in the building above—was killed), and the Tiger tank he engaged was in fact a StuG III.

Robert Henry Cain VC taken at Buckingham Palace after his investiture.



Credit: Christie (Sgt), War Office official photographer - This photograph H 40971 comes from the collections of the Imperial War Museums (collection no. 4700-37)

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