

A Cambridge chemist – and a war hero

A request for information to the academic secretary's office led Howard Jones on a trail of discovery that led to a story of extreme bravery during the Second World War. Howard tells us more

Periodically, we receive requests for historical information about the department or its former members. Most enquiries relate to events or people from the past 30 years or so, where we have reasonable archived records, or can rely on the memories of our older members of staff. But when Susan Cowen received an enquiry in April about a chemistry undergraduate from the 1930s, we held out little hope of finding anything useful.

We were asked if we could confirm that Flying Officer Kenneth Campbell, believed to have been a member of the University Air Squadron and killed in action in April 1941, was a chemistry student at Clare College in the 1930s. No pre-war paper records remain in the department, and there is certainly nobody from that time still in the department to consult.

I have a subscription to a genealogy website, and so first I used it to check World War II death records, and found that a K. Campbell of 22 Squadron was, indeed, killed in action in April 1941.

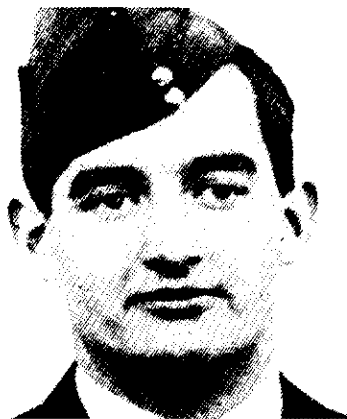
I then searched the internet for information on 22 Squadron. I thought I would find his name on the squadron's roll of honour but, to my amazement, I unearthed the story of how he was awarded the Victoria Cross for single-handedly attacking and severely damaging the battleship *Gneisenau* in Brest harbour on 6 April 1941.

SOLO RAID

A planned attack on the harbour by a group of aircraft had been hampered by bad weather. Setting out from St Eval in Cornwall, Kenneth was the only airman to arrive on schedule at Brest and, rather than return home without engaging the enemy, he launched a solo raid.

Unfortunately, the flight path he had to take when delivering the crucial strike gave German defences a clear view of his aircraft, and he was shot down, crashing into the harbour. All four crew were killed, and were buried in Brest by the Germans with full military honours. He was two weeks short of his 24th birthday.

His efforts were recognised with the award of the Victoria Cross. His act of heroism was judged so important to the course of the war that the VC was awarded within a year – VCs are not usually awarded until hostilities have



Although he was killed in action in 1941 at the age of just 23, Campbell's heroism played a vital role in the Allied victory

ceased in order to get a full picture of the context of the bravery.

In fact, his attack on Brest harbour is seen by military historians as one of the defining moments of the war in Europe. In spring 1941, it was a generally held view that Germany had the upper hand: the UK may have won the Battle of Britain in 1940 and survived the worst of the Blitz, but the time the spring came around the UK was virtually on its knees, thanks to attacks on merchant shipping in the Atlantic bringing vital supplies to Britain.

Brest was the German base for launching many of those attacks, led by the two battleships *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*. Kenneth's action left the Germans without one of its key attack ships. It took more than six months for the German Navy to recover its strength, by which time the Americans had joined the conflict, and Hitler had turned his attention to the invasion of Russia. The rest, as they say, is history.

But the original query remained unanswered. A little more detective work looking up official class lists from the 1930s revealed that K. Campbell from Clare College gained a Class II in Part I Natural Sciences in 1938, and graduated in 1939 after obtaining a II.2 in Part II Natural Sciences (Chemistry).

So a Cambridge chemist really did single-handedly influence the outcome of the war with Germany.

Another Cambridge link: Campbell's 22 Squadron was disbanded at the end of World War II. Part of the modern day 22 Squadron is based in Anglesey, where none other than Prince William – the new Duke of Cambridge – is a serving officer.

Campbell's VC citation

In recognition of most conspicuous bravery. This officer was the pilot of a Beaufort aircraft of Coastal Command which was detailed to attack an enemy battle cruiser in Brest Harbour at first light on the morning of 6th April 1941. The aircraft did not return but it is known that a torpedo attack was carried out with the utmost daring.

The battle cruiser was secured alongside the wall on the north shore of the harbour, protected by a stone mole bending around it from the west. On rising ground behind the ship stood protective batteries of guns. Other batteries were clustered thickly round the two arms of land which encircle the outer harbour. In this outer harbour near the mole were moored three heavily-armed anti-aircraft ships, guarding the battle cruiser. Even if an aircraft succeeded in penetrating these formidable defences, it would be almost impossible, after delivering a low-level attack, to avoid crashing into the rising ground beyond.

This was well known to Flying Officer Campbell who, despising the heavy odds, went cheerfully and resolutely to the task. He ran the gauntlet of the defences. Coming in at almost sea level, he passed the anti-aircraft ships at less than mast-height in the very mouths of their guns and skimming over the mole launched a torpedo at point-blank range.

The battle cruiser was severely damaged below the water-line and was obliged to return to the dock whence she had come only the day before. By pressing home his attack at close quarters in the face of withering fire on a course fraught with extreme peril, Flying Officer Campbell displayed valour of the highest order.