

Collier's

January 27, 1945

THE HEROES

ENGLAND might well be called the Land of Many Medals, for over there they honor the heroism of the home front no less than the courage of the firing lines. Not only fighting men figure in the lists that come down yearly from the throne, but men and women in every walk of civilian life, singled out for distinction by some particularly thrilling deed. As a usual thing, the decorations are pinned over proudly beating hearts, but in many cases they go to a grieving wife or mother.

Reading these lists—who the people are and what they did—amply proves the right of the English to call themselves the “bulldog breed.” It also makes clear why Hitler lost the Battle of Britain, and how it is that the Tight Little Isle has come through five years of hell with unbroken spirit. They tell the stories of simple, everyday souls, all without pride of noble name, and the telling paints an unforgettable picture of a whole people's stand against a rain of bombs from the skies during those terrible years.

Josephine Woolmer, aged twenty-six: A 500-pound bomb crashed through the roof of a casualty headquarters and came to rest in the room where she sat at her telephone. Not knowing what second it might explode, the indomitable girl kept on answering calls for ambulances, not even looking around when men rushed in to remove the detonator.

Albert Dolphin, aged forty: A bomb fell on a hospital, killing four nurses and pinning others under timbers. Crawling through the wreckage, he worked to release them and would not stop when firemen called to him that the walls were about to fall. They found him crushed to death, but in the last second of life, he had saved a nurse by covering her with his own body.

Joan Pearson, aged nineteen: A plane crashed near her home, killing all save the pilot. The gasoline tank caught fire, and the flames leaped nearer and nearer to the bomb rack, but she climbed through the blaze and dragged the unconscious man out of the cockpit. Unable to carry him to a safe distance, she laid herself across him when the explosions began, saving him from injury.

The Reverend John Newton Sykes, aged fifty-six: Every air-raid warning sent this elderly cleric out into the streets on his bicycle, and as long as bombs fell he fought fires, helped to rescue trapped people, gave first aid or knelt beside the dying. In one year he had three bicycles blown from under him, but was always back on his errands of mercy before his wounds were healed.

The story of **Donald Owen Clarke**, however, best expresses the soul of England. Not one medal but two were won by this youngster who did not have even fuzz on his upper lip.



DONALD OWEN CLARKE

Enlisting as a ship apprentice at seventeen, he earned the first decoration during a night blitz in Liverpool, when he raced through a wall of fire to cut his vessel away from the dock.

The second came to him while he served on a slow old tub that tried to cross the Atlantic without a convoy. A gallant attempt, but, on the first day out, a German submarine surfaced and sent torpedoes ripping through the hull, setting the ship on fire from bridge to poop.

Caught below, escaping death by a miracle, Donald climbed a red-hot accommodation ladder to the deck, where he found eight others—all of the crew left alive. Scorched and broken, they were a pitiful, helpless lot, and the young apprentice was the only man left who had the strength to lower the lifeboat. A high wind fanned the flames, and he was burned again and again as he tugged at the ropes, but at last he got the boat and his comrades over the side and down to water.

Now came the job of getting away from the blazing vessel, and keeping away. With some unconscious and others babbling in delirium, not one of the others could be counted on, and Donald, carefully fitting his raw hands to the oars, began to row. The seconds must have been months, and each hour a century, for the roaring flames seared him, and his burns were a torment. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the boy gained clearance, but not until the boat was well out of the inferno did he stop pulling.

A scouting plane spotted the drifting boat two days later, and soon a destroyer sped to the rescue. Carefully, tenderly, the corpselike bodies were lifted out, but that of the young apprentice offered difficulty. Both hands were stuck to the oars. His furious rowing had stripped charred flesh from the bones, and his hands had to be cut away. Donald fought for life as he had fought the fire and waves, but there was no strength left in him, and he died before land was reached.

The George Cross, England's top decoration for civilian valor, was awarded posthumously, and this was the citation that accompanied it: "By his supreme effort, undertaken without thought of self, and in spite of terrible agony, Apprentice Clarke assured the safety of his comrades in the boat. His great heroism and selfless devotion were in keeping with the best traditions of the Merchant Marine."

When the Donald Clarkes, the Josephine Woolmers and the Joan Pearsons are not exceptions, but the *rule*, who dares to doubt when Britons sing that there will always be an England? . . .

GEORGE CREEL