

‘Ministrare Non Ministrari’

Padre Stanley William Harrison

George Medal Citation 1941

One night in November, 1940, an aircraft crashed and burst into flames about three miles from the aerodrome and, although it was not his duty to do so, Mr. Harrison boarded the ambulance which was proceeding to the scene. On arrival, he immediately plunged into the wreckage and despite the scorching heat and exploding machine gun bullets, commenced to drag a member of the crew from the burning debris. He then supervised the work and led the fire picket, himself extricating a second member of the crew and assisting to remove a third. Further efforts were unavailing, however, as the remaining members of the crew were completely buried under the wreckage. Throughout he displayed the utmost courage and an entire disregard for his own safety.

OBE Citation 1957

On 5th March, 1957, a Royal Air Force Beverley transport aircraft carrying R.A.F. personnel and police dogs crashed on the village of Sutton Wick, Drayton, Berkshire. The aircraft, which had a large quantity of petrol on board, immediately caught fire and a major conflagration ensued. Wing Commander Harrison, Station Chaplain, and Flying Officer Evans, a Medical Officer from Royal Air Force Station, Abingdon, were soon on the scene of the crash and for three hours they worked together to rescue the occupants of the aircraft. They extricated fourteen bodies from the wreckage and displayed courage and resourcefulness of a high order, refusing to give up while there was hope of finding survivors among the wreckage. Some 1½ hours after the crash, Wing Commander Harrison rescued a police dog alive. At one stage a Calor gas cylinder bottle exploded near these officers and the fire thereupon began to gain ground. Undeterred by this, they continued their search of the wreckage until it was clear that there could be no survivors. Whilst Wing Commander Harrison was undoubtedly the leader in the rescue operations, Flying Officer Evans was conspicuous in always being with him in the most dangerous places.



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The Revd Geoffrey Clarence Harding

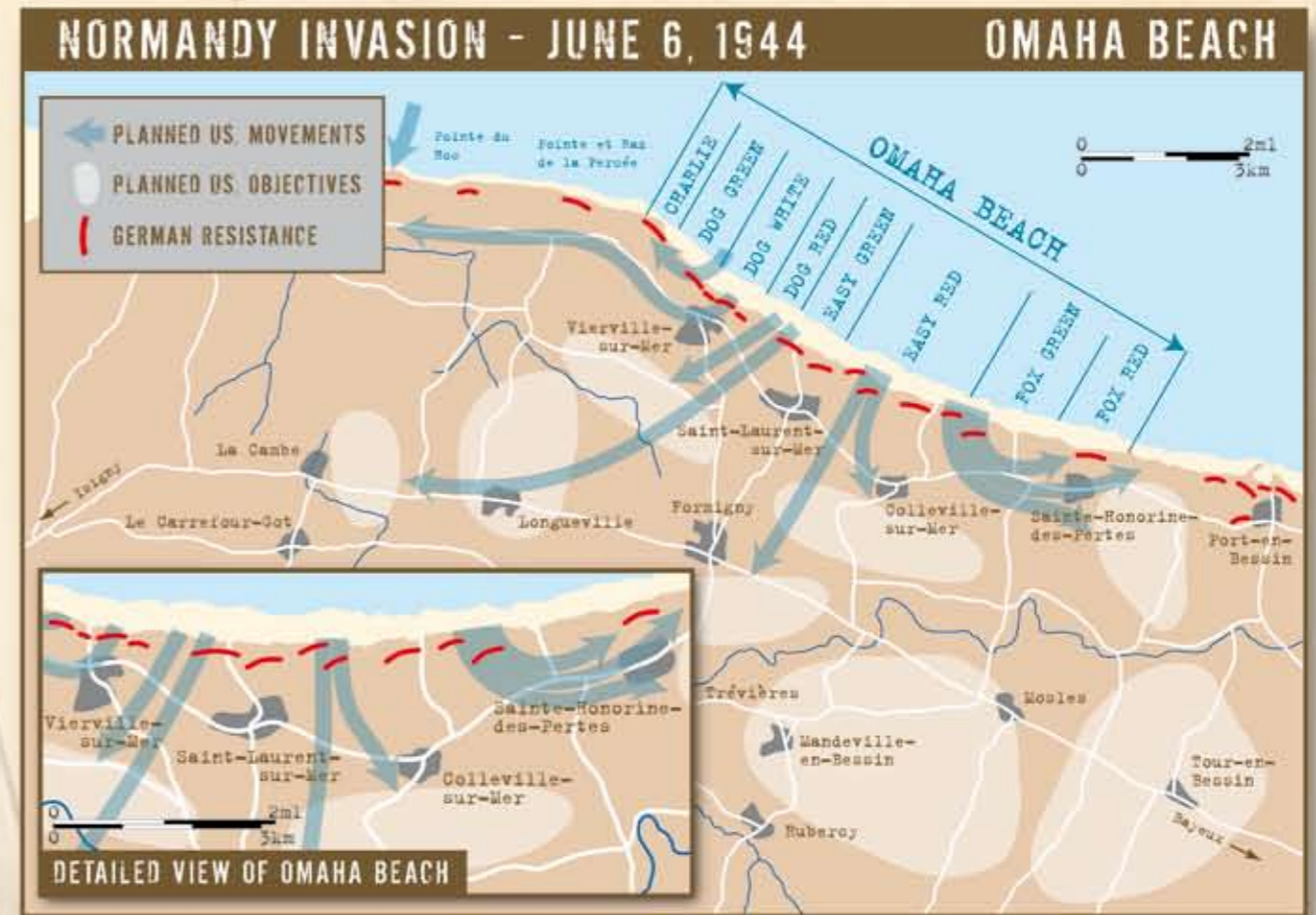
Padre Harding joined the Royal Air Force Chaplains’ Branch in 1943. Attached to a Mobile Radar Unit in 1944, he is believed to be the first RAF chaplain to land on the Normandy beaches during D-Day.

Military Cross Citation

‘This chaplain landed with a unit on the beaches of Normandy on “D” day. The beach was under intense bombardment and was strewn with dead and wounded. Mr Harding worked for 36 hours, most of the time under direct fire, giving help to the wounded and burying the dead. He set an inspiring example and was responsible for saving many lives. During the evening of “D” day he walked along a road, which was under fire, into a village in enemy hands. He entered a house in which were many snipers and obtained water which he took back to the wounded. His gallantry and disregard for his own safety were worthy of high praise.’

‘Well, we were plagued by that beastly 88 millimetre. In fact in the end we had 25% casualties. We rushed up and down the beach one way or the other but we couldn’t get out of the range of the beastly thing. I thought we really had had it, I was giving myself up to an early grave and I must admit that most of my remarks on the previous Sunday to the congregation now felt rather thin. But it came to me very, very strongly indeed, almost as though a voice spoke in my ear that we must get off that beach at all costs and take refuge under the shadow of the cliffs. So I went forward, found a suitable site in the 3rd house up on the left where there was an open courtyard. The few Germans ran away and apparently hid themselves in the house next door thus proving no trouble to us. And I then waved forward everybody I knew to get off that blasted beach - I use the word in its proper sense - as fast as we could. Technically I think I committed mutiny, though technically I think I made the proper choice. But somehow we got off the beach and got our wounded off too.’

‘Somebody told me at the time I walked up and down the beach as calmly as if I were walking up and down an aisle in the church, but that was simply due to the fact that I’m constitutionally lazy and entirely refuse to be hurried, least of all by the enemy.’



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The Revd J T Wanless - Prisoner of War

There were 5 RAF chaplains who became Prisoners of War at the hands of the Japanese. Most, if not all, of these men ended up in Javanese camps. During their time in the camps the chaplains continued to minister to those among whom they lived, taking services, giving sermons, and marking significant occasions such as Armistice Day, Christmas and Easter. While four of the RAF chaplains survived their time of imprisonment one, Padre John Thirlwell Wanless, suffered a very different fate.

Padre Wanless was part of the group of POWs who made the 'Death March' from Sandakhan to Ranau in Borneo in the spring of 1945. This march took almost 2500 prisoners to their deaths. 641 of the prisoners were British, Padre Wanless among them. The rest of the prisoners were Australian. 6 Australians were able to escape and were the sole survivors. Those who managed to complete the death march found themselves at Ranau, where they either died from illness, exhaustion or starvation. The very few who survived were executed just before the end of the war. Padre Wanless died of enteritis on 30th June 1945 having managed to make the march, carrying baggage like a mule, with no food. His body has no identified grave. His name is found on the Singapore memorial.

Padre Wanless was mentioned in a Dispatch for Distinguished Service in October 1946.



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The Reverend Dermot McKavanagh MA BD AKC

Padre McKavanagh received an urgent message from his Station Commander asking him to report to an aircraft hangar on his unit.

An airman working in the hangar had climbed into the cockpit of a jet aircraft and removed the safety pins from the ejector seat. The man was unable to cope with a deteriorating marital problem and was sitting in the aircraft threatening to pull the handle of the now live seat. He warned everyone to keep away; he would allow only Padre Dermot to come near. Padre McKavanagh visited the section regularly and was well known to the airman.

Dermot called out to the man that he was climbing the cockpit ladder to talk with him, and having mounted the steps, he was obliged to lean over the side of the cockpit to talk to the man confidentially. At any moment the man could have pulled the handle and decapitated the chaplain.

After a long time in conversation, Padre McKavanagh persuaded the airman to replace the safety pins and leave the aircraft. They both returned to the church for further discussion, which resulted in a reconciliation of the man with his wife. In due course they had a child who was christened Dermot.

For this pastoral care Padre McKavanagh was awarded
The Queen’s Commendation for Brave Conduct.



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Padre Giles

The Fall of Singapore and imprisonment

'...the senior chaplain out there at the time was Alan Giles and, obviously the Air Force was having to get out, he decided that the chaplains who would go first would be the ones who were married, and then next the ones who were engaged and that left me - because I was neither married nor engaged - and himself. Of course, he was married, he had his own family out there but of course he stayed behind.'

Padre Giles could have left Singapore with his family, but, having seen them safely onto the ship, he went back to his post. He and Padre Goss, who is quoted above, along with Padres Rorke, Wanless and Tucker became prisoners of the Japanese.

Speaking of their time as prisoners, Padre Goss recalls an episode when Padre Giles was put into solitary confinement:

'Yes, Alan Giles was suddenly hauled in and we all got very frightened and I'm sure he did too. He really didn't know what it was for and I don't think we've discovered even to this day. But I think it was something to do with, possibly, preaching at one of these services. They may have thought he said something which he shouldn't have said. Anyway they hauled him in. Rather sensibly he put his cassock on before he went to the head office and I don't think they hit him at all-surprisingly. They shouted at him a good deal, shouted at him and then put him in prison, right underneath one of these sentry points in the wall. They had a little box under there and he was locked in. But there was a tiny little flap in the door and fortunately just near to it there was a loo. So we used to go to the loo and then slip round the corner, hoping we wouldn't be spotted and we could talk to him through there. He was all by himself more or less in the dark and we'd pass him little bits of things to eat and so forth. And I remember one day I asked him was there anything special he wanted. He said 'Yes, I want my prayer book.' So next time we went to the loo we took a prayer book with us and passed it through. He was in there about 4 or 5 days but I don't think anybody knows why to this day.'



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Padre A M Ross

From an account written by Padre Brigg

‘During my posting to Singapore as Assistant Principal Chaplain a very nasty but hardly remembered little war broke out between Indonesia and our small forces in North Borneo. Very rapidly as the battles developed, the original small garrisons were supplemented by units from the UK and our station at Labuan became a very busy and hard-pressed centre for both army and RAF personnel. So much so that it quickly became obvious that a full-time chaplain (RAF) was needed.’

Padre Brigg made use of a visit to the UK for the annual conference to press for a chaplain to be nominated by the Branch. It was felt no-one should be made to go into such a dangerous setting, but the Chaplain-in-Chief asked if anyone wished to volunteer. Padre Alec Ross said he would go, despite being told that at ‘his age (50 or so) he would find the rough field conditions very taxing.’

‘I thereafter returned to Singapore, and shortly before Christmas Alec Ross reported to FEAF HQ for duty in Labuan. Within a single week, I had to go to the Changi airport to receive Alec back from the front - in a coffin! An incredible story was told me by accompanying officers. Apparently, Alec had insisted on being taken straight away to the centre of the fighting so that ‘the lads’ might know that there was a padre close at hand and also so that he might take to them something of the Christmas message and a few simple seasonal gifts. The fact that a padre had come among them seems to have travelled like a bushfire among the forward troops, and signals for him to fly hither and around. It was on such an errand of mercy, when flying in a light spotter aircraft near the enemy lines with an Army Sgt-pilot that an enemy shot entered the craft, passed through the leg of the pilot and into the heart of the padre sitting alongside.

So ended the tragically short ‘active service’ ministry of one of our most beloved chaplains....The influence for good which his enthusiastic determination to see as many troops as he could before that fateful Christmas dawned was quite



immeasurable, and it is no exaggeration to say that his image left such an impression out there that the way was wide open to the next chaplain who was subsequently sent out to try and replace him.



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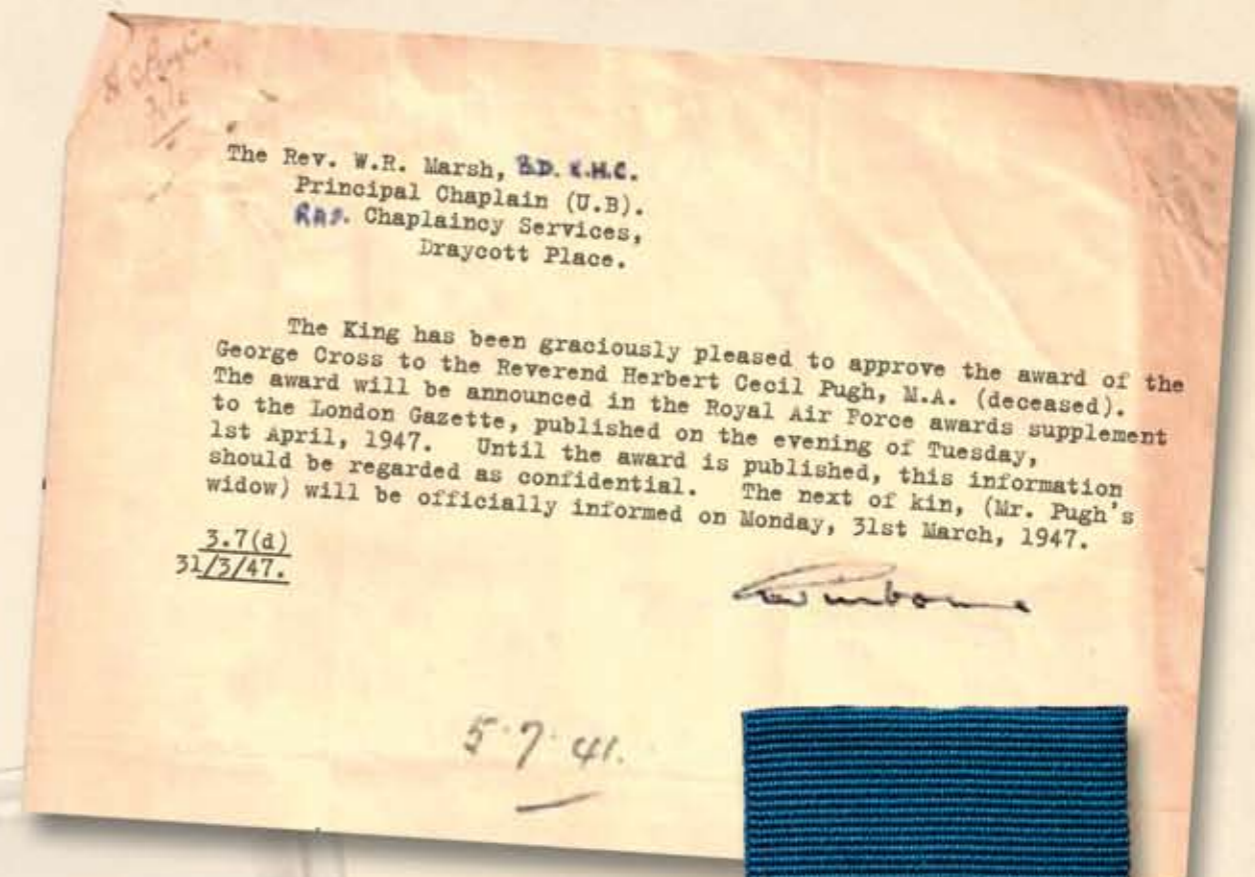
Padre Cecil Pugh

Padre Pugh was posthumously awarded the GC in 1947. If the letters we have in our archive are anything to go by, he may never have been honoured at all, were it not for The News of the World. In October 1946 a Flt Sgt Sharp wrote to the paper asking why Padre Pugh had never been acknowledged. This letter caused many others to write adding their support, and the Air Ministry looked into the case. From one of the letters sent in 1946:

‘I was one of the more fortunate members of the troops on board, and in actual fact came out the same hold as the one the RAF Padre entered. I didn’t see him enter, although while in the lifeboat waiting to be picked up by the escorting Corvette I heard several members of the boat remark to the effect that they did see the Padre enter the hold containing the trapped personnel, he must have known full well that it was impossible to come out again alive, in view of the fact that the hold when I left was covered in at least five feet of water and was still gushing in, only a few moments after I left the Anselm it gave one definite plunge and passed below the water out of sight in few seconds, in view of this I doubt very much if the Padre could have survived more than a few moments in that hold of death. Whilst I was scrambling out I passed literally dozens of screaming men with their heads fastened between the rungs of the connecting ladder, it was horrible to hear their screams and to pass them by, knowing full well that it was absolutely hopeless for them to get out alive.’

GC Citation:

‘The Reverend H. C. Pugh, after seeing service in this country, was posted to Takoradi and embarked on H.M.T. Anselm, carrying over 1,300 passengers, for West Africa at the end of June, 1941. She was torpedoed in the Atlantic in the early hours of the 5th July, 1941. One torpedo hit a hold on Deck C, destroying the normal means of escape. Mr. Pugh came up on deck in a dressing gown and gave all the help he could. He seemed to be everywhere at once, doing his best to comfort the injured, helping with the boats and rafts (two of these were rendered unserviceable as a result of the explosion) and visiting the different lower sections where the men were quartered. When he learned that a number of injured airmen were trapped in the damaged hold, he insisted on being lowered into it with a rope. Everyone demurred because the hold was below the water line and already the decks were awash and to go down was to go to certain death. He simply explained that he must be where his men were. The deck level was already caving in and the hold was three parts full of water so that, when he knelt to pray, the water reached his shoulders. Within a few minutes the ship plunged and sank and Mr. Pugh was never seen again. He had every opportunity of saving his own life but, without regard to his own safety and in the best tradition of the Service and of a Christian Minister, he gave up his life for others.’



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‘In all that he has done, he has been the epitome of a successful station padre, caring for those who seek his support and counsel in an unobtrusive but extremely effective manner. His hallmark is his strength of character which has been so vital in his meeting the many demands placed upon him.’

‘Although largely invisible in the UK, the tempo of ops throughout his tour has been exceedingly high, and this has placed a tremendous burden on the personnel here. Add to this the relentless loss of life, punctuated by numerous Repatriation Ceremonies, the terrible injuries we have seen and the hostile deployed environment, and one can begin to appreciate the incredible emotional strain our people are living with. It is not overstating the issue to say that this chaplain has been the outstanding shining light of understanding, compassion and humour for all those he has met; his altruism and resolve are inspirational and I consider him the finest padre I have seen in 15 years of ops.’

‘There can be few ministers of the Church who compare with him. I have no doubt he is one of the best, and most effective, padres it has ever been my pleasure to work with.’

‘Our Padre carries out all his duties with the highest degree of professionalism, and is equally at home in the classroom, visiting sections on the unit, or offering pastoral counselling. Typically, much of this work goes on out of the public gaze, but it is there in abundance.’

‘The Padre does not shy away from a challenge and I was touched recently by the sensitive, caring and highly professional manner in which he dealt with a particularly tragic death of a young girl. He has a delightfully deft touch, is the soul of discretion and has elicited nothing but praise from the families who have benefited from his support.’

‘Finally, he has been a good friend and provided wise counsel. He has enjoyed my complete trust and features high on my ‘must take on ops’ list.’

