

Navy hero's bravery inspires new award for outstanding player



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Exclusive

The connection between generations of players who have seen service with England has been one Stuart Lancaster has been keen to re-establish. One of his desires is for individuals to appreciate who has gone before and what it means to wear the shirt and to sacrifice yourself for a cause. It is about ethos, values and tradition and creating a history and a heritage. From this autumn within the England camp a new award is

being handed out after each game, to the player or players who demonstrate unswerving loyalty, commitment and bravery in three categories. The winners will have their names inscribed on an honours board.

It is named after Arthur Harrison, an England international who won two caps before the First World War, and who remains the only England player to be awarded the Victoria Cross, in his case for gallantry in the Royal Navy's raid on Zeebrugge in 1917. Harrison exemplifies the characteristics that Lancaster deems vitally -important.

So who was he? Harrison was career naval officer who was renowned for his fitness, who committed himself to the Senior Service and to rugby with zeal. He was described as "strong and tireless", with his game of the "sturdy, bustling type". His accolades did not stop at winning two caps, the first against Ireland on Valentine's Day in 1914, when, according to a report in *The Times*, "he stiffened the English scrummage", the second in Paris.

The course of his life changed when he answered a call for volunteers for a "show" that specified all who did must be single and athletic. The 1,000-plus volunteers called themselves, in typically morbid humour, the "Suicide Club" or the "Death or Glory Boys". Their mission was an assault on Zeebrugge to counter the threat posed by German U-boats in their pens in Bruges; the plan was to lock the entrance by scuttling ships laden with concrete.

To succeed meant first taking a two-mile long and heavily fortified jetty. To provide cover Wing Commander Frank Brock, scion of the eponymous fireworks family, was asked to create a smokescreen. However, as the Allied force approached, a gust of wind cleared the smoke, exposing them to withering gunfire and bombardment.

One senior officer, Engineer Commander William Bury, described the scene as a "bloody massacre". He referred to the length of time that "several lived who had had large pieces of their heads blown away". The men struggled desperately to climb up on to the jetty to charge the gun emplacements. Harrison, who had been hit in the jaw, rounded up several of his men and, at their head, charged along the parapet only to be cut down by a machinegun. Despite attempts to rescue his

body, he was never seen again. Captain Alfred Carpenter, the commander of the cruiser, HMS Vindictive, wrote in 1921: “Harrison’s charge down the narrow gangway of death was a worthy finale to the large number of charges, which, as a forward of the first rank, he had led down many a rugby football ground. He played the game to the end.”