

‘My Hero’: defining and constructing non-military heroism

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Presentation by Dick Wilkinson – Secretary of the Royal Humane Society

The Royal Humane Society gives awards to those who put their lives into danger to save, or attempt to save, someone else.

It also gives awards to those who effect a successful resuscitation of someone whose heart and breathing have stopped.

It has been doing so since 1774 and we have now dealt with almost 86,000 cases. This has probably resulted in over 150,000 awards.

Potted History of the Royal Humane Society

Two medical men, Dr William Hawes and Dr Thomas Coggan set out to advance the science of resuscitation and to identify what constituted point of death. They formed the Institution for Affording Immediate Relief to Persons Apparently Dead from Drowning. Two years later it became the Humane Society and received Royal patronage in 1787. The founders included Oliver Goldsmith and the physician John Lettsom. David Garrick was also a generous supporter.

As pioneers they needed people to work on who were on the point of death so they set up receiving houses where those people likely to be: on the Serpentine where over 8000 people swam and washed daily and beside the Thames which was still a large and busy port. Life saving equipment was also distributed around London at strategic points by rivers and lakes. One of the stations was the pier below Waterloo Bridge which we shared with the Metropolitan Police until 1877. It is now occupied by the RNLI.

The Serpentine receiving house was originally an old farm house but this became so dilapidated that a new receiving house was built in 1835 which remained until 1953.

Medical attendants were rewarded for successful resuscitations. It soon became apparent that those employed by the Society and others were putting their own lives at risk to rescue people from the water. They too were rewarded (one guinea), until it became apparent that many

rescues were set up solely for the reward. Rewards for bravery were, therefore, replaced by awards.

As time progressed the science of resuscitation was improved and the medical assistants were no longer rewarded but those who put their lives at risk to save another life continued to be recognised, as they are today.

In 1869 Queen Victoria decreed that the Royal Humane Society medals should be worn on the right breast by armed forces personnel when in uniform. This privilege was later extended to the civilian uniformed services.

Medals have also been given in the past for academic essays and there was even a swimming medal between 1882 and 1948 which was competed for by pupils at certain public schools and a number of HM Training Ships.

The Royal Humane Society today

The Society receives no Government help and is supported entirely by public subscription and by our own fundraising efforts.

Applications for awards come in from anyone, members of the public or of the emergency services, but most (approximately 80%) come in from the police, because the police are usually involved in some way with incidents where lives are saved. Many police are also recipients of our awards.

Nominations are investigated where necessary and put into the most straightforward statements of fact. They are then put before our Committee, who are people from all walks of life, including the military and a serving police representative, to decide the level of award.

Until last year we provided:

- a research service for family historians and
- a source of information for academics, and students

However, we have now relocated our archives to the London Metropolitan Archives where they are properly looked after and are still be available to researchers.

About 400 case recommendations a year are considered by the Committee.

Types of rescues vary from:

- Burning houses
- Burning cars
- Sea, river, canals, extreme sports
- Major disasters: rail crashes, tsunami, 7 July London bombings

Notwithstanding types of rescue, there are common elements in most:

- Spontaneity
- level headedness
- higher than average sense of responsibility
- physical discomfort
- always an element of trauma
- and of course humanity and courage

Our awards are as follows:

- The Stanhope Gold Medal awarded since 1873 in memory of Chandos Scudamore x 2 Stanhope for the case exhibiting the greatest gallantry in the past year. Open to all Commonwealth Societies since 1962. (1st to Capt Webb)
- Silver Medal for rescue in circumstances of very great danger
- Bronze Medal for rescue in circumstances of very great danger
- Vellum for rescue in circumstances of considerable personal risk
- Parchment for rescue in circumstances of some personal risk
- Certificate of Commendation for praiseworthy action (1976)
- In Memoriam
- Resuscitation Cert
- Police Medal (2000)

Criteria for granting awards

- The degree of danger
- The distance swum
- The water conditions, tide, current, waves, temperature
- The nature of the bank, the river bed, other danger e.g. barges
- The kit available
- The numbers involved
- The extent of smoke and flames
- The injuries to rescuer
- The weight of saved
- The height of any parapet
- The Position of bodies
- Acts undertaken from deliberate choice
- The apparent degree of risk
- The relationship between rescuer and saved
- The level of professional knowledge
- The duty of the rescuer