

## Information sheet no 089

### John Bythesea VC

John Bythesea was born at Freshford in Somerset on 15 June 1827. He had four brothers, all of them older and had seen service in the Army. John broke with family tradition by joining the Navy as a Volunteer First Class in 1841.

On 12 June 1849, he was promoted to Lieutenant and was appointed to HMS *Arrogant*. The ship was part of the fleet under Admiral Charles Napier's command in the Baltic during the Crimean War. There was a problem in getting enough men to man the ships and eventually, Napier was able to recruit foreign nationals from Stockholm for the ships.

On 7 August 1854, Captain Hastings Yelverton, commanding HMS *Arrogant*, visited Admiral Napier and the Admiral mentioned that important dispatches from the Russian Tsar were being dropped off at Waldo Island for delivery to Bomarsand and it would be useful for them to be intercepted if anyone had the enterprise to do so.

Bythesea discovered one of the Stokers in HMS *Arrogant* could speak Swedish. His background, however, is shrouded in mystery. Although he was gazetted as William Johnstone, there was no-one of this name on the ship's muster list at the time of these events. There was a Leading Stoker John Johnstone who was born in Hanover in Germany serving on the ship at this time. It is possible that his name was really Johanssen but had been anglicised by the ship's clerk and it is probably this man that teamed up with Bythesea.

Bythesea then approached Captain Yelverton for permission for himself and Johnstone to land and intercept the dispatches. Yelverton expressed his opinion that it may be better for a larger party to undertake such an expedition but after persuasion, agreed with Bythesea that just two men would attract less attention.

On 9 August, the two men rowed ashore and landed in a remote bay on the island. They found a small farm nearby whose owner was eager to help the two men as he had recently lost horses to the Russians. They discovered the Russians had made a great effort to repair a long stretch of road to ensure the safe and speedy delivery of the dispatches. While they waited, they spent their time learning their way around the local area and succeeded in evading a Russian search party by dressing as local peasants.

On 12 August, receiving a tip-off that the dispatches were due to arrive, the two men hid along the roadside. The Russians provided a military escort to a certain point of the route. Once the escort had turned back, leaving only the five couriers, Bythesea and Johnstone jumped out and challenged them with pistols. Two of the couriers instantly dropped their dispatch bags and ran into the night. The remaining three surrendered, thinking the two men before them were part of a much larger surrounding force. Avoiding a Russian patrol, the couriers were then forced to row the two British men back to HMS *Arrogant*.

Bythesea and Johnstone were among the first published winners of the newly instituted Victoria Cross, being gazetted on 24 February 1857. Bythesea attended the ceremonial presentation by the Queen but Johnstone was serving overseas and was presented his medal abroad.

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Bythesea continued in the Navy and after the exploit on Waldo Island was appointed Lieutenant in Charge of the 3 gun ship HMS *Locust*. He was promoted Commander in May 1856. Two years later, he was appointed as Captain of HMS *Cruizer*, serving on the SE American station, but joined the operations against China in 1859-60. He was promoted to Captain on 15 May 1861 and was a member of the commission examining Canadian defences. He was later appointed to a sloop, HMS *Archer*, but was invalided home in 1864. After recovery, he was the Naval Attaché in Washington and his next sea-going appointment was in HMS *Phoebe* from May 1867, serving with the Flying Squadron sailing round the world under the command of Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hornby until 1870. His next appointment was in the battleship HMS *Lord Clyde*.

Unfortunately, this was to be his last sea-going command. The ship was not easy to handle and was prone to accidents. In March 1872, the ship went to aid a paddle steamer that had run aground on the island of Pantelleria, west of Malta. While doing so, the *Lord Clyde* also ran aground and had to be towed off by her sister ship, HMS *Lord Warden*. Bythesea and the Navigating Officer severely reprimanded and dismissed from their ship following a court-martial. Neither officer was employed at sea again.

In 1874 he was appointed as Consulting Naval Officer to the Indian Government and in the following year, he married Fanny Prior. Bythesea retired as Rear Admiral on 5 August 1877. In 1878, he was awarded the Companion of the Bath and Companion of the Indian Empire.

During his retirement, he lived in South Kensington and died at home on 18 May 1906. He was buried in Bath Abbey cemetery on the 23 May. A guard of honour made up of Petty Officers from HMS *Victory* was mounted at the funeral. He died childless and his widow died in August 1926. A memorial to all the Bythesea brothers was erected in the church at Freshford.