

## Information sheet no 058

### Arthur Wilson VC

Wilson was born on 4th March 1842 at Swaffham, Norfolk. After attending school at Eton, he entered the Navy in 1855. As a Midshipman, he served on HMS *Algiers* during the Crimean War. The ship served in the Black Sea, near Sebastopol and was involved in the bombardment of the Kinburn forts. Wilson transferred to HMS *Colossus* when *Algiers* went for a refit in Malta. While serving on this ship, he was sent ashore to search for an army Captain's dog that had got lost near Balaclava. By the time he returned, the ship had sailed for Britain and he was forced to use another ship to return home. He was then posted to HMS *Raleigh* which was to serve on the China station. In March 1857, the ship ran aground on a submerged rock and was lost. The officers and men were landed and Wilson was then transferred to HMS *Calcutta*, the flagship. He was serving on this ship when it was involved in the expedition to Canton and the capture of the Peiho forts.

In 1861 he was promoted Lieutenant and in 1866 qualified as a Gunnery Lieutenant. The following year Wilson was one of the British naval officers sent to Japan to set up a school for naval officers at Yedo and take up the post of Instructor. However, political disputes in Japan led to the closure of the school in 1868 and Wilson returned home. He was posted to the training ship HMS *Britannia* and introduced the "Habitual Offenders List" in the already strict disciplinary environment. He was later transferred to the gunnery school HMS *Excellent* at Portsmouth.

In 1870, while at HMS *Excellent*, he became a member of the committee appointed to inquire into the capacity of the Whitehead torpedo. After extensive research and the successful firing of a torpedo in a specially designed tube, the committee's recommendations of the weapon were to have great impact on the future of naval weaponry. Wilson was then appointed to HMS *Caledonia* and later HMS *Narcissus* before gaining promotion to Commander in September 1873. He was appointed as Executive Officer for HMS *Raleigh*, a new frigate built in iron and sheathed in wood.

In 1876, he became Commander at HMS *Vernon*, the newly established torpedo school at Portsmouth in recognition of his previous experience in torpedo research. While he was there, he was promoted to Captain in April 1880 and asked to re-write the navy's torpedo manuals. He also invented aiming apparatus for the torpedo and worked out a method of submarine mining and countermining adapted to naval requirements. In 1882, Wilson was appointed to command HMS *Hecla*, a torpedo depot ship. Before the Arab War broke out, he had taken the ship to the Whitehead factory at Fiume.

The Arab War broke out when tribes in the Sudan revolted against the ruling Madhi and the rebellion spread to the Red Sea. The tribes had early successes around Khartoum and El Tab over the forces of the Pashas. Naval and army forces were sent to the area, including HMS *Hecla* which was used as a transport ship. The ship contributed a small detachment as a naval bridge for El Tab. The second battle of El Tab took place on 29th February 1884. Although Wilson was not actually part of the brigade, he went along to see how the battle was going, as it was within walking distance of where the ship was. During the advance on the Arab troops, the naval brigades received some losses, including a Lieutenant from HMS *Carysfort* who was too badly wounded to continue and eventually died. Wilson

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stepped in to take his place. When the Arabs began to charge at the detachment, Wilson engaged in hand to hand combat to defend the Brigade's gun, even when he was wounded himself, until some army regiments were able to come to their assistance. He was nominated for the Victoria Cross by General Redvers Buller and was gazetted on 21 May 1884. He received the award at a special ceremony on Southsea Common on 6th June. (His VC is now in the medal collection at the RNM.)

In 1889, he was again appointed to command HMS *Vernon*. While he was here, he improved the submerged torpedo tube and invented the "Pioneer" instrument which enabled torpedoes to cut through protective wire nets. In 1893, he was appointed to HMS *Sans Pareil* and witnessed the collision of HMSs *Camperdown* and *Victoria*, which led to the sinking of the *Camperdown* with severe loss of life, including Admiral Sir George Tryon.

Wilson was promoted Rear Admiral in 1895. He was appointed as Controller of the Navy and Third Sea Lord. Four years later, in 1901, he was promoted again to Vice Admiral and made Commander in Chief of the Channel Squadron. During his period in this position, he improved and brought in modern methods of tactics in view of the technical advances in battleships. These were used to good effect in the Battle of Jutland in 1916 by Admiral Jellicoe. In 1907, he was made Admiral of the Fleet by a special Order in Council, after successfully commanding the Channel and Home fleets. In 1910, he was appointed First Sea Lord. He did not favour the use of submarines as a means of firing torpedoes, calling them "a damned un-English weapon". After two years, he retired after differences of opinion in regard to administration and policy with the First Lord of the Admiralty (his Parliamentary counterpart), Winston Churchill. He was made a member of the Order of Merit in 1912. However, in 1914, at the invitation of Churchill, he returned in a voluntary capacity to assist the First Sea Lord, at that time Lord Fisher, and continued until the end of the war. When his brother died in 1919, he became the 3rd Baronet. Wilson never married and on the 25th May 1921, died at his home in Swaffham after a short illness.