

## John Cruickshank VC

John Alexander Cruickshank was a High Scholar from 1930 until 1933 or 1934, when he transferred for his last 2 or 3 senior years (for an unknown reason) to Daniel Stewarts. As a consequence, we share his allegiance.

After leaving school, he was apprenticed to the Commercial Bank in Edinburgh. He initially joined the Army in 1939, but transferred to the RAF in 1942 where he underwent flight training in Canada and the United States, earning his wings in July 1942. After further training, he was assigned to No. 210 Squadron in March 1943, piloting Consolidated PBY Catalina flying boats, flying from RAF Sullom Voe in Shetland. Flying Officer Cruickshank was twenty-four years old when he piloted a Consolidated Catalina anti-submarine flying boat from Sullom Voe on 17 July 1944 on a patrol north into the Norwegian Sea. The objective was to protect the British Home Fleet as it returned from the unsuccessful Operation Mascot raid on the German battleship *Tirpitz*. There the "Cat" caught a German Type VIIC U-boat on the surface. The VC citation which follows explains what followed:



The King has been graciously pleased to confer the Victoria Cross on the undermentioned officer in recognition of most conspicuous bravery: —

*Flying Officer John Alexander Cruickshank (126700), Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. No. 210 Squadron.*

*This officer was the captain and pilot of a Catalina flying boat which was recently engaged on an anti-submarine patrol over northern waters. When a U-boat was sighted on the surface, Flying Officer Cruickshank at once turned to the attack. In the face of fierce anti-aircraft fire he manoeuvred into position and ran in to release his depth charges. Unfortunately they failed to drop. Flying Officer Cruickshank knew that the failure of this attack had deprived him of the advantage of surprise and that his aircraft offered a good target to the enemy's determined and now heartened gunners.*

*Without hesitation, he climbed and turned to come in again. The Catalina was met by intense and accurate fire and was repeatedly hit. The navigator/bomb aimer, was killed. The second pilot and two other members of the crew were injured. Flying Officer Cruickshank was struck in seventy-two places, receiving two serious wounds in the lungs and ten penetrating wounds in the lower limbs. His aircraft was badly damaged and filled with the fumes of exploding shells. But he did not falter. He pressed home his attack, and released the depth charges himself, straddling the submarine perfectly. The U-boat was sunk. He then collapsed and the second pilot took over the controls. He recovered shortly afterwards and, though bleeding profusely, insisted on resuming command and retaining it until he was satisfied that the damaged aircraft was under control, that a course had been set for base and that all the necessary signals had been sent. Only then would he consent to receive medical aid and have his wounds attended to. He refused morphia in case it might prevent him from carrying on.*

*During the next five and a half hours of the return flight he several times lapsed into unconsciousness owing to loss of blood. When he came to his first thought on each occasion was for the safety of his aircraft and crew. The damaged aircraft eventually reached base but it was clear that an immediate landing would be a hazardous task for the wounded and less experienced second pilot. Although able to breathe only with the greatest difficulty, Flying Officer Cruickshank insisted on being carried forward and propped up in the second pilot's seat. For a full hour, in spite of his agony and ever-increasing weakness, he gave orders as necessary, refusing to allow the aircraft to be brought down until the conditions of light and sea made this possible without undue risk.*

*With his assistance the aircraft was safely landed on the water. He then directed the taxiing and beaching of the aircraft so that it could easily be salvaged. When the medical officer went on board, Flying Officer Cruickshank collapsed and he had to be given a blood transfusion before he could be removed to hospital.*

*By pressing home the second attack in his gravely wounded condition and continuing his exertions on the return journey with his strength failing all the time, he seriously prejudiced his chance of survival even if the aircraft safely reached its base. Throughout, he set an example of determination, fortitude and devotion to duty in keeping with the highest traditions of the Service*

The BBC commissioned a documentary which recreated the events – watch it [here](#).

John never returned to active service, mainly due to his wounds, leaving the RAF in September 1946 to return to his career in banking, from which he retired in 1977. His story was told to RHS pupils at the Remembrance service on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2019. He is now the oldest surviving VC holder, and the first to reach the age of 100.

The RHS Club recorded a video tribute to John which was viewed by him at his Aberdeen home on his birthday.