

Hero on the Wing of a Plane

In the summer of 1941, Sgt. James Allen Ward of New Zealand was awarded the Victoria Cross for climbing out onto the wing of his Wellington bomber at 13,000 feet above ground to extinguish a fire in the starboard engine.

The Victoria Cross is the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces. Ward was a teacher when World War II began, and he immediately volunteered for the Royal New Zealand Air Force. After completing flight training in New Zealand, he traveled to England to join No. 75 Squadron, which operated Vickers Wellington bombers.

During the last of his first few bombing missions as a co-pilot, his plane was attacked by a German fighter, resulting in a fire around the rear of the starboard engine. When efforts to extinguish it failed, the crew was ordered to bail out. Ward, however, proposed that he climb out and try and smother the fire using an engine cover.

He crawled out through the astrodome on top of the fuselage, wearing a parachute and secured by a rope, and made his way down the side and along the wing of the aircraft, kicking or tearing holes in the fuselage's covering fabric with a fire axe to give himself hand-and-foot holes. After reaching the engine and putting the fire out, Ward gingerly made his way back to the astrodome and into the aircraft with the help of the navigator, Sgt. Joe Lawson. The aircraft made an emergency landing, without flaps or brakes, at Newmarket, north of London.

Ward described his experience on the wing of the aircraft, exposed to the slipstream, as "being in a terrific gale, only worse than any gale I've ever known."

Winston Churchill, an admirer as well as a performer of swashbuckling exploits, summoned the shy New Zealander to 10 Downing Street. Ward, struck dumb with awe in Churchill's presence, was unable to answer the prime minister's questions. Churchill surveyed the unhappy hero with some compassion.

"You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence," Churchill said.



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“Yes, Sir,” Ward replied.

“Then can you imagine how humble and awkward I feel in yours,” Churchill responded.

Churchill knew he was in the presence of a real hero.

We have heroes in Life Care buildings, and they prove it by their actions every day. Whether they work in the laundry room, in the kitchen, in the maintenance area, at the bedside of residents, leading in activities or in the business office, these are men and women who surrender their time, their talents and their compassion to make life better for those they serve.

And make no mistake: Residents, patients and families know them as heroes.

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up (Romans 15:1-2 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter