

THE SEA GALLANTRY MEDAL (FOREIGN SERVICES) OF THE BOARD OF TRADE OF GREAT BRITAIN

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In 1841, William Wyon, Chief Engraver to the British Royal Mint, was commissioned to design a medal to be awarded "... when assistance has been afforded by Foreigners to subjects of Her Majesty who have been in danger, in consequence of disasters at sea, or otherwise ... to Foreigners who have particularly distinguished themselves on such occasions ..."

The medal was approved by Queen Victoria later that year, initially being in a large 1.78 inch diameter, without suspension and not intended for wear. In 1854 the medal was reduced to a diameter of 1.27 inches and a suspender was added for wear from a 1.25 inch wide light red ribbon. In 1922 the ribbon was changed to that in current use, 1.25 inches wide, in light red with 1/8th inch white stripes near each edge. Many recipients of the earlier large size medal had suspensions fitted privately.

The obverse of the Sea Gallantry Medal (Foreign Services) has always borne the head of the current sovereign surrounded by the appropriate inscription.

During the period of its issue, the original large medal had five types of reverse design. Each had a wreath, tied at the bottom, with a crown at the top. The medals actually issued for gallantry had the words PRESENTED/BY THE/BRITISH/GOVERNMENT in the center, and one of the following four inscriptions around the outside of the wreath:

- An individually struck inscription giving details of the specific incident resulting in the award of the medal.
- FOR SAVING THE LIFE OF A BRITISH SUBJECT (introduced in 1849).
- FOR ASSISTING A BRITISH VESSEL IN DISTRESS (introduced in 1849).
- FOR SAVING THE LIVES OF BRITISH SUBJECTS (introduced in 1850).

For the latter three, the name of the recipient, date, place, etc. were engraved on the edge. In addition there was a fifth version used for specimen medals that had the inscription VICTORIA REGINA CUDI JUSSIT MDCCCXLI inside the wreath and crown.

The smaller, wearable medals have four standard types of reverse, although for a time medals were issued with specially struck inscriptions on the reverse. All versions had the wreath and crown reverse with PRESENTED/BY THE/BRITISH/GOVERNMENT in the center. There was no special specimen version. The four standard versions had the following inscriptions around the outside of the wreath:

- FOR SAVING THE LIFE OF A BRITISH SUBJECT.

- FOR ASSISTING A BRITISH VESSEL IN DISTRESS.
- FOR SAVING THE LIVES OF BRITISH SUBJECTS.
- FOR GALLANTRY AND HUMANITY.

Bars are approved for the medal, but in fact, only one bar has ever been awarded. The medals were, and are, issued in either gold or silver.



Figure 1. Obverse of QEII Sea Gallantry Medal (Foreign Services).

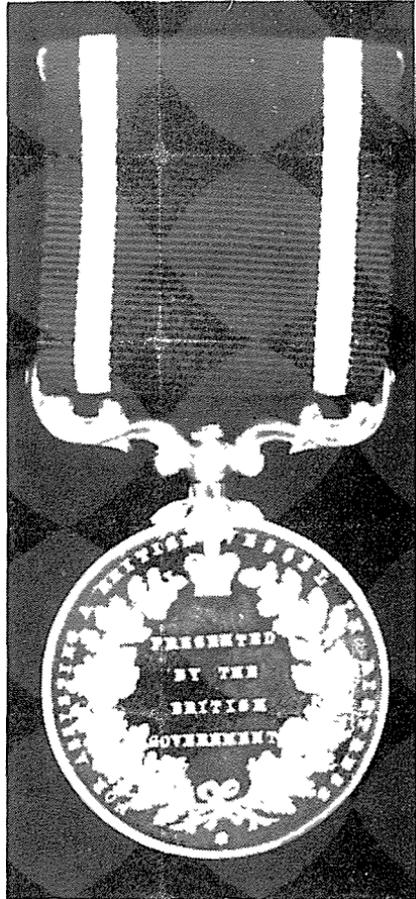


Figure 2. Reverse of the QEII medal showing a standard reverse "For Assisting a British Vessel in Distress."

In 1850 the British Board of Trade began making recommendations for the award of the Sea Gallantry Medal (Foreign Services) to the Foreign Office for cases involving services at sea, a process which was continued until 1905, when King Edward VII decreed that all recommendations should henceforth be submitted to the Sovereign, a procedure which is still in effect.



Figure 4. Obverse of Victoria version of the Sea Gallantry Medal.

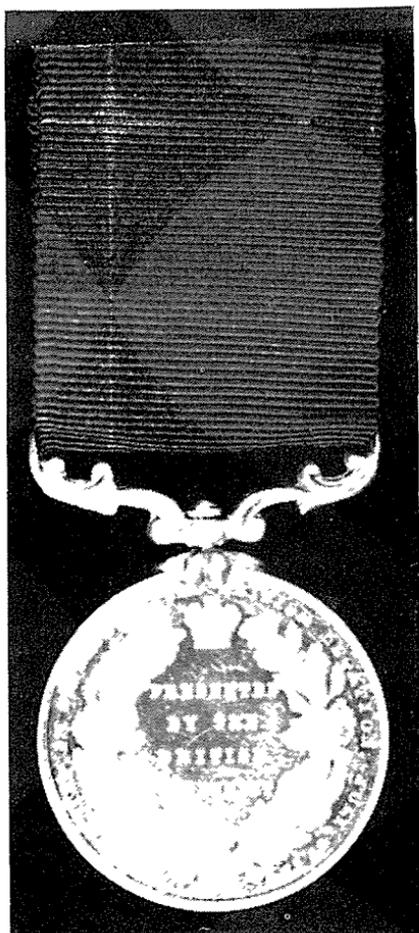


Figure 4. Reverse of the Victoria medal with with a special striking.

Illustrated are the Queen Elizabeth Sea Gallantry Medal (Foreign Services) with the reverse FOR ASSISTING A BRITISH VESSEL IN DISTRESS and a special striking FOR GALLANTRY IN DEFENCE OF THE BRITISH LEGATION, JULY 6, 1861 (see *JOMSA*, April 1972, page 3).

For additional information and a comprehensive selection of illustrations, Chapter 42 of Abbott and Tamplin's *British Gallantry Awards* is recommended.

The Public Records Office (PRO) in Kew, England is the repository for many of the records of the Sea Gallantry Medal (Foreign Services), but it requires the wisdom and perseverance of a Houdini to extract them. Bill Fevyer is an expert at this type of extraction and his fine articles on the awards of these medals (and others of the Board of Trade) are highly recommended. These include the following article and a companion article published in the December 1990 *JOMSA*.