BRITISH ANIMAL LIFE-SAVING MEDALS

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This article is derived from a seminar topic of the same title presented at the 2008 Convention. My intention here is to share this information with those who were not able to attend the seminar, and to encourage further interest in, and, especially, research on, this topic.

For the purposes of this article British animal life saving medals are defined as medals awarded to humans for rescuing animals. Medals awarded to animals for saving or protecting humans is a separate topic, although the awarding organizations are often the same. While other nations may have such medals, the British developed and awarded such a significant range and number of such medals in the first half of the 20th Century so that a fertile field exists for the collector. Where the details are known, these medals recognize deeds of daring, selfless risk-taking and mostly happy endings.

Animal rescues seem to fall into several broad categories: horses from burning stables, dogs from disused mine shafts, cats from rooftops, and sheep from ledges. Having previously been a horseman for several years, I know that a stable fire is the horseman’s worst nightmare. For this reason, I find myself identifying with some of these medal recipients.

There are primarily four organizations which award, or have awarded, animal life-saving medals, the:

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (founded 1824) awards the Margaret Wheatley Cross and the Gallantry Medal in silver and bronze.

National Canine Defence League (founded 1891 and now known as Dogs Trust) awarded the Silver Medal.

Peoples Dispensary for Sick Animals (founded 1917) awarded the White Cross of St. Giles.

Our Dumb Friends League (founded in 1896 and now known as The Blue Cross) awarded Gold, Silver and Bronze Medals.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ Margaret Wheatley Cross is clearly the “Victoria Cross” of animal life-saving medals. Established in 1936 and still available for award today (although it has not been awarded since 1996), the Margaret Wheatley Cross is named for a girl of 16 who lost her life rescuing a dog on a railway track in Lancashire on June 4, 1936. John Wilson has provided us with a wealth of information about the Margaret Wheatley Cross in an article in the Journal of The Life Saving Awards Research Society. During the period 1936 – 1997, 70 crosses were awarded, but only 57 of the recipients are known and 30 of those were posthumous awards. In the 14 years I have been collecting animal life-saving medals, I have not seen a single Margaret Wheatley Cross offered for sale in any auction catalogue or dealer’s list. The example in my collection (Figure 1) is marked SPECIMEN.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ Gallantry Medal in silver was established in 1909 and the bronze medal in 1913. Both medals have the same obverse and reverse, and both are issued with a top, pin-back suspension brooch of the same metal, with the words FOR HUMANITY. The medals are invariably named in engraved block letters on the rim with the name of the recipient and the year of the rescue, and ranks are usually included for armed forces, fire services, police

Figure 1: Obverse of the Margaret Wheatley Cross awarded by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
and inspectors of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The medals were presented in cases of varying design, and with scrolls, few of which have survived.

The silver medal shown in Figure 2 was awarded to Police Sergeant G. Kerslake for rescuing horses from a burning stable in Winchester in 1919. Police Constables Hall and Coppard also received silver medals for this rescue. Earlier silver medals were hallmarked. All of the silver medals in my collection with award dates earlier than 1925 are hallmarked; however, I have one 1964 award which is hallmarked. Initially both the silver and bronze medals were issued with the same ribbon. Apparently around 1935, two red stripes were added to bronze medal ribbon. Additionally, the bronze medal was changed from a decorative scroll suspender to a ring suspension around 1985. Subsequent awards of the same medal are indicated by a slide-on ribbon bar with a year date either engraved or die cast. Individuals may be awarded both silver and bronze medals for separate incidents, and multiple individuals may be awarded medals for the same incident.

The bronze medal (Figure 3) was awarded to Senior Inspector Maurice Harland of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for rescuing a lamb from a pipe near Kirby Lonsdale, Westmoreland, in 1954. This figure illustrates the current bronze medal ribbon with two red stripes as well as two subsequent award bars. In 1956, Inspector Harland received a bar for rescuing sheep from a quarry ledge near Appleby, Westmoreland, and the following year he received a second bar for rescuing three sheep from a mountain ledge near Kendal, Westmoreland. In addition to these three awards, during 21 years of service, which began at age 45, Inspector Harland also received the Gallantry Medal in silver, two certificates and four commendations (the equivalent of Mentions in Dispatches) for animal rescues.

Using data from several Annual Reports of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, I would estimate that, until the 1970s, the average annual award numbers for life saving awards were: crosses two, silver medals 16 and bronze medals 42. Therefore, these awards should not be considered common. The numbers awarded have declined in recent years. Apparently a rescuer is nominated by a member of the local branch of the Royal

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Figure 2: Obverse of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Gallantry Medal in silver.

Figure 3: Obverse of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Gallantry Medal in bronze.
Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and an award is approved by a committee at headquarters who also determine the appropriate level of award. Award authority was delegated to the five local regions of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1985, and both the Silver and the Bronze Gallantry Medals are available for award today.\(^3\)

The National Canine Defence League established a Silver Medal in 1912 to recognize rescues involving dogs. A bronze medal with like obverse and reverse was also established for award to dogs for aiding humans. It appears that these medals are no longer awarded today.\(^4\) These medals do appear on the market occasionally but numbers issued have not been estimated.

The Peoples' Dispensary for Sick Animals' White Cross of St. Giles is believed to have been established soon after the organization was founded in 1917 but is no longer awarded today.\(^5\) The cross illustrated in Figure 5 was awarded to Police Constable Robert Frederick William Lewin for rescuing ponies from a burning stable in London in January, 1950. Numbers awarded are unknown but these crosses very seldom appear on the market.

The Peoples’ Dispensary for Sick Animals is better known for its award of the Dickin Medal, the so-called “animal’s Victoria Cross.” The Dickin Medal, named for Mrs. Maria Dickin CBE, founder of the organization, is intended as an award for animal bravery in combat situations; the organization also has a Gold Medal which is awarded to animals for “non-combat” bravery.\(^6\)

The animal life saving medals of the Our Dumb Friends League, now known as Blue Cross, have the most distinctive design, being a rather large heart-shaped disk suspended from a narrow red ribbon. The medals are presented in a fitted case. The recipient’s name, details of the rescue and the date of the rescue are engraved in block letters on the plain reverse. The medal was instituted in 1906 but is no longer awarded. The Blue Cross states that the medal was issued in gold, silver and bronze.\(^7\) It is doubtful that any gold medals exist, and silver and bronze medals rarely appear on the market.

The silver medals were invariably engraved on the reverse in block letters giving the recipient’s name, year of the rescue and a few additional words, such as FOR SAVING A DOG or FOR BRAVERY. The medal shown in Figure 4 was awarded to Chief Officer Frederick John Husted, Eton Fire Brigade, for rescuing, together with his brother Albert Benjamin Husted, two dogs from a flooded river at Windsor, 1927. Chief Husted also received the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Gallantry Medal in silver for the same rescue.